ABSTRACT

Title of Document:	THE SOCIAL COAST GUARD: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXAMINATION OF THE INTERSECTION OF RISK COMMUNICATION, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND GOVERNMENT PUBLIC RELATIONS
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The contemporary communication context includes heightened risk, increasing the need for dialogic or relational risk communication with key stakeholders. Scholars have identified social media's potential to improve dialogic communication, yet governments may face challenges when using social media, particularly in a risk communication context. This study explored social media use in "the complex communication context of risk communication" (Sellnow et al., 2009, p. 53) within the under-studied U.S. public sector and applied a complexity and relational theoretical framework to explore the intersection of government public relations, risk communication, and social media. Questions focused on how government communicators in high-risk environments perceived the public sector context influences their risk communication and social media communication; how they viewed social media's role in risk communication; the extent to which they engaged in social-mediated relational risk communication; and, how

they planned and executed social media communication. An ethnographic case study of the U.S. Coast Guard's social media program was conducted, including analysis of 205.25 participant observation hours at the headquarters social media office, 10 interviews, and 49 documents.

Findings suggest that organizations with risk-related missions or responsibilities may have a "risk communication mindset" that spurs and constrains social media communication and integrates social-mediated risk communication into ongoing public affairs. Intersecting, overlapping influences within public sector contexts also influenced social media strategies and tactics. Data suggest a continuum exists between organizations participating in and hosting social media engagement. Findings suggest moving toward a multivocal conversational relational communication model that encompasses the distributed public relations model (Kelleher, 2009). The dissertation adds depth to the human conversational voice construct (e.g., Bruning, et al., 2004; Kelleher, 2009; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007) and online relational maintenance strategies by offering a behind-the-scenes understanding of why and how government organizations can be engaging and conversational hosts via social media by inviting audiences to engage without organizations having to maintain conversations. The study offers practical recommendations such as reducing blog content to increase efforts using more engaging platforms like Facebook; increasing use of visually-rich and engaging content; cultivating internal relationships to improve personnel compliance and participation; and, improving strategic integration and evaluation.

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"Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."

- Rainer Maria Rilke

I dedicate this dissertation to all those who have helped me *love* the questions and *live* into the answers. To Jonathan, my hero of a husband, who juggled everything else in our lives so I could complete this dissertation. And to our daughters – the one who waited for me at home while I wrote and the one who grew within me while I wrote. To my parents and family, especially my mother and father who nurtured my spirit and my love of questions. And, finally, I dedicate this dissertation to the women and men of the United States Coast Guard whose work makes us safer and better – and to the Coast Guard social media team and public affairs directorate who tell the stories every day. Bravo zulu!

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Hurricanes, boating accidents, cancerous chemicals, terrorist plots, avian flu, food
contamination, identity theft, childhood obesity, economic recession. Society is full of
risk. While risks have always been part of human society, its current version may be
more risk aware (e.g., Douglas, 1992; Palenchar, 2010). Organizations today operate in
an increasingly complex, connected environment that includes ever-expanding
technologies, globalization, and communication advances as well as more informed and
active stakeholders (e.g., Palenchar, 2010; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2001; Sellnow,
Ulmer, Seeger, & Littlefield, 2009). The "levels of risk continue to expand in complexity
and intensity" (Sellnow et al., 2009, p. 3). These factors have increased risk and the need
for risk communication and research on risk communication (Palenchar, 2010). Seeger,
Sellnow, and Ulmer (2003) suggested that crisis management is becoming a key
managerial competency critical to organizational success in today's increasingly risky
operating environment. This risk management competency could become even more
important within the government sector given its evolving threats (e.g., terrorism) and
growing potential consequences (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2010). Practitioners, public
relations researchers, and students need to focus on risk communication because publics
often address their responses to risk at organizations, particularly government ones, that
instigate risk or fail to protect publics from risk (Douglas, 1992).

The contemporary communication context brings heightened uncertainty and risk
that have accelerated the need for applied risk communication (Seeger et al., 2010) and
helped evolve risk communication to the present normative view of dialogic risk

communication. Dialogic risk communication acknowledges stakeholders' role in risk communication and risk management and embraces the need for risk communication as ongoing "consensus building through dialogue" (Palenchar, 2010, p. 448). Dialogic perspectives see risk communication and risk management as ongoing activities rather than relegated to the pre-crisis planning function as it is within the traditional crisis management worldview (Coombs, 2012). Palenchar (2010) argued that the evolvement and advancement of risk communication is one of the "stronger contributions to the public relations body of knowledge" (p. 448). However, there are still several significant gaps in the knowledge base about risk communication, especially in terms of how government organizations view and use social media, particularly in a risk communication context. The purpose of this study is to explore government social media use, especially "the complex communication context of risk communication" (Sellnow et al., 2009, p. 53). Before describing the problem and rationale for this purpose, I first offer conceptualizations for core concepts in the dissertation.

Key Conceptualizations

This research considers areas such as complexity, government public relations, organization-public relationships, risk communication, and social media. Existing research and understanding of these concepts are detailed in the literature review; however, brief conceptualizations are offered here to ground and bound core concepts.

Complexity. This dissertation uses a complexity and relational theoretical framework. Complexity theory has been defined as "the study of many individual actors who interact locally in an effort to adapt to their immediate situation" where "these local adaptations…accumulate to form large-scale patterns that affect the greater society, often

in ways that could not have been anticipated" (Murphy, 2000, p. 450). Closely linked to complexity theory is chaos theory. Chaos theory can provide a richer view of organizations and crises, particularly by attending to a more holistic view of crises and crisis communication that accounts for complexity and sensitivity beyond merely crisis responses (Seeger et al., 2001). While the theories share a postmodern worldview and overlapping characteristics, they take different approaches to strategic management and communication. Unlike chaos theory's view of the system as a whole, complexity views the system from the individual agents outward (Seeger et al., 2010). The complexity-based perspective provides a useful lens for studying organizations and their communication and interactions (Murphy, 2000). Complexity theory sees organizations as complex adaptive systems made up of individual agents whose local interactions fundamentally change the system over time and have indistinct, permeable boundaries that make it hard to separate systems from surrounding environments (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a). This dissertation employs a complexity-based view by looking at a government organization's social media program in a risk communication context from the social media team and the individual agents who perform roles and responsibilities within it.

Government public relations. Government communication research in general has been hampered by lack of clear conceptualization (Sanders, 2011). This dissertation uses a definition of government public relations that includes civic functions. Stromback and Kiousis (2011a) defined political public relations as:

the management process by which an organization or individual actor for political purposes, through purposeful communication and action, seeks to influence and to

establish, build, and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with its key publics to help support its mission and achieve its goals. (p. 8)

Like Sanders (2011), this dissertation uses an expanded definition that would add "civic purposes as well as political ones" to reflect government communication management (p. 266). The dissertation uses government public relations interchangeably with government communication and government strategic communication. The term is also used interchangeably with public affairs since it is sometimes used as a synonym for public relations (e.g., Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, & Toth, 2008; M. Lee, 2012; Sanders, 2011; Taylor, 2012).

Because this study is specific to a U.S. government context, government communicators are defined as employees or professional consultants at the city, county, state, or federal level whose primary responsibilities are communicating internally or externally with various publics regarding government policies, decisions, or actions and/or guiding communication strategy (Liu, Levenshus, & Horsley, forthcoming). Other terms used synonymously in this dissertation to describe government communicators and public relations practitioners include public information officers and public affairs officers (Lattimore et al., 2012).

Organization-public relationships. The dissertation uses Hung's (2005) definition that organization-public relationships (OPRs) "arise when organizations and their strategic publics are interdependent and this interdependence results in consequences to each other that organizations need to manage constantly" (p. 396). The definition recognizes the constant fluctuation of relationships and interdependence between organizations and publics while stressing that organizations seek to manage or

guide relationships. Relationship management theory states: "Effectively managing organizational relationships around common interests and shared goals, over time, results in mutual understanding and benefit for interacting organizations and publics" (Ledingham, 2003, p. 190). Public relations research focused on relationship management within an online context has stressed the Internet's potential for improving dialogic communication between organizations and publics and its relationship-building potential (e.g., Hallahan, 2008; Kelleher, 2009; Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002).

Kent and Taylor (1998) defined dialogic communication as "any negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions" (p. 325). The authors view dialogue as centering on discussion versus agreement. Dialogic theory shifted the emphasis from communication management to communication as negotiated engaged conversation. Kent and Taylor (2002) viewed dialogic communication as critical to using the Internet effectively and ethically within public relations and to creating dynamic, enduring relationships with publics. Despite this potential, practitioners and organizations often do not use dialogic communication tools to their full relationship-building potential (e.g., Capriotti & Moreno, 2007; Esrock & Leichty, 1998; Hill & White, 2000; Kent, 2010; Kent et al., 2003).

Risk communication. This study uses Palenchar's (2005) often-cited definition that risk communication "provides the opportunity to understand and appreciate stakeholders' concerns related to risks generated by organizations, engage in dialogue to address differences and concerns, carry out appropriate actions that can reduce perceived risks, and create a climate of participatory and effective discourse to reduce friction and increase harmony and mutuality" (para. 1). Palenchar's definition is rooted in a process-

oriented, two-way communication approach that reflects recent relational and social context understandings and conceptualizations of risk communication by and between stakeholders and organizations (e.g., Gurabardhi, Gutteling, & Kuttschreuter, 2005; Heath, 1995; Leiss, 1996). Some scholars consider risk communication to be a type of crisis communication (Zaremba, 2010) or have lumped together risk communication and crisis communication as a more comprehensive approach to studying crisis management (e.g., Coombs, 2010b; Seeger et al., 2001). This dissertation sees risk communication and crisis communication as related but distinct concepts.

Crisis communication "can be broadly defined as the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation" (Coombs, 2010a, p. 20). Risk communication shares a reciprocal relationship with crisis communication because (1) risks can morph into crises; (2) proper risk management can prevent crises; and (3) risk communication can also be critical to effective crisis preparation and response (Coombs, 2010b). Using appropriate, audience-centered risk communication programs, organizations can better prepare and plan, avoid and more easily navigate and resolve crises (Seeger et al., 2001). While risk communication is essentially risk centered (i.e., projection about harm at future date), crisis communication is event centered (i.e., specific incident has taken place and produced harm) (Seeger et al., 2003).

Social media. Defining new technologies is challenging because, like technologies, definitions continue to shift (Johnson, 1997). The term social media has commonly referred to blogs and social network sites online and also describe the online practices that use web-based technology to enable people to share content, opinions, experiences, and ideas themselves (Lariscy, Avery, Sweetser, & Howes, 2009). Social

media then can refer to tools, platforms, and sites (e.g., blogs, social networking sites, photo- and video-sharing platforms) and channels of communication.

Kent (2010) offered some defining features of most social media including interactivity, responsiveness, and dialogue. Interactivity, as also pointed out by Johnson (1997) and Levinson (2009), has long been a feature of more traditional forms of social media (e.g., letters to the editor). However, more modern social media offer real-time interactivity and are capable of supporting interactions across social networks (Kent, 2010). Responsiveness is most often displayed through threaded dialogue of comments that relate to one another. Finally, "social media revolve around what is essentially a central tenet of dialogue: the value of the individual" (Kent, 2010, p. 649).

Having offered brief conceptualizations to define and delimit key concepts in the dissertation, I now identify the problem and rationale for the dissertation.

Problem and Rationale for Study

Government communication with citizens, other governments, and other nations' citizens is critically important, especially given today's high-stakes risk and crisis context (e.g., Avery & Lariscy, 2010; Stromback & Kiousis, 2011b). Various government agencies at the local, state, and federal level are tasked with communicating about risks anecdotally listed at the start of this chapter. When not able to be prevented or mitigated, risks like those can manifest into deadly and devastating crises (Coombs, 2012). Yet, crisis communication research has emphasized corporate entities in crisis and their crisis responses designed to protect their reputation and image (e.g., An & Cheng, 2010; Avery & Lariscy, 2010; Seeger & Reynolds, 2008). This is problematic because the public sector communication environment is unique from the private sector's (e.g., M. Lee,

2008; Liu & Horsley, 2007; Liu, Horsley, & Levenshus, 2010). Challenges in the U.S. include increased legal constraints, complexities of federalism, and diverse publics (Liu et al., 2010). Decreasing public trust is also concerning (e.g., Dardis, Shen, & Edwards, 2008; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). An August 2011 national survey reported that the public is "profoundly discontented" with its government (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2011, para. 1). The report found that 79% of respondents were dissatisfied with the direction of the country, and 86% reported being angry or frustrated with the federal government. Given that trust is a critical factor in effective risk, crisis, and relationship management (e.g., Corman, Trethewey, & Goodall, 2008; Palenchar, 2010; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006), this distrust and cynicism may also influence government risk and crisis communication.

Scholars have identified potential unique factors that can inform risk and crisis communication within the public sector (e.g., Avery & Lariscy, 2010; Horsley, 2010; K. Lee, 2009). For example, crisis research has identified distinctions between crisis communication and crisis management in the government versus private sector. Governments are also more likely than are private sector organizations to be responsible for ensuring citizens' preparation and safety in the face of risk and crisis (e.g., Avery & Lariscy, 2010; Horsley, 2010). Despite unique challenges and high stakes for government communication, minimal research has focused specifically on government public relations (e.g., Fairbanks, Plowman, & Rawlins, 2007; M. Lee, 2008; Liu & Horsley, 2007; Stromback & Kiousis, 2011a), particularly within a civic government risk and crisis communication context (e.g., Avery & Lariscy, 2010; Horsley, 2010; K. Lee, 2009).

The communication landscape in which governments are communicating about risks has grown more complex. In particular, Internet-based communication has been heralded for its potential to increase participatory, transparent communication and engagement between government organizations and their constituents (e.g., Gilpin, Palazzolo, & Brody, 2010; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006; Welch & Fulla, 2005; West, 2004, 2011). Participatory social media communication may help organizations follow risk communication best practices that focus on the importance of listening, understanding, responding to, empathizing, and partnering with stakeholders (e.g., Palenchar, 2005, 2010; Sellnow et al., 2009). Social media also have the potential to increase public trust in government (e.g., Fairbanks et al., 2007; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006) and its risk communication (e.g., Ding & Zhang, 2010; Ding, 2009; Leiss & Powell, 2004).

Public relations research focused on organization-public relationships (OPRs) and relationship management and maintenance may also help explain why dialogic risk communication via social media is more effective than one-way communication about risks. Relational risk communication matches a public relations research landscape where "the relationship worldview…seems firmly established in scholarship, if not practice" (Toth, 2010, p. 719). However, while organization-public relationships (OPRs) are key concepts within public relations and the relationship management perspective is well studied, government OPRs have mostly been studied within a political, rather than civic, context (e.g., Ledingham, 2011; Levenshus, 2010; Seltzer & Zhang, 2010). The limited civic OPR contexts have found support for the benefits of organizations seeking to cultivate relationships with communities and residents (e.g., Bruning, Langenhop, &

Green, 2004; Rhee, 2008). Social media may increase government organizations' abilities to carry out relationship cultivation strategies identified in these studies such as putting a human face on the government (Bruning et al., 2004). Despite the potential benefits of using social-mediated communication, there is a need to better understand how organizations are actually communicating via social media and build theory around social media's influence on public relations practice (e.g., Kent, 2010; Stephens & Malone, 2010). An in-depth analysis of the interplay between government public relations, risk communication and social media was needed in order to understand how, if at all, government communicators perceive and manage this intersection, particularly when they operate in a high-risk environment within the public sector. Specifically, I sought to answer the following questions:

- How, if at all, do government communicators in high-risk environments perceive the public sector context influences their risk communication?

- How, if at all, do government communicators in high-risk environments perceive the public sector context influences their social media communication?

- How, if at all, do government communicators in high-risk environments view social media's role in risk communication?

- To what extent do government communicators in high-risk environments engage in relational risk communication via social media?

- How, if at all, do government communicators in high-risk environments plan and execute social media communication strategies and tactics?

Theoretical Framework

To answer these questions, the dissertation applied a theoretical framework drawn from complexity theory and the relational perspective in public relations. The increasingly complex environment with its rising communication needs and chances for failure requires risk and crisis communication activities and approaches that acknowledge these complexities (Seeger et al., 2010). The relational perspective has been called "essential for an understanding of all processes that involve politics, communication, and public relations" (Stromback & Kiousis, 2011a, p. 9). Risk communication scholarship and practice that draw from dialogic and relational perspectives, including postmodern ones, better match normative views of relational risk communication (e.g., Palenchar, 2010). A postmodern complexity approach complements and triangulates the relational view in risk and crisis management (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a). For example, complexity theory helps explain the importance of relationships within risk and crisis communication and helps explain why nonlinearity and uncertainty within a complicated social media environment can also constrain these efforts (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a).

Despite the usefulness of a postmodern lens, public relations has generally lagged in integrating postmodern principles and concepts into theories and conceptualizations (e.g., Holtzhausen, 2002; McKie, 2001; Murphy, 2000) including within a risk and crisis context (e.g., An & Cheng, 2010; Coombs, 2010a; Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a). The larger public relations research and risk communication research streams now include a dialogic, relational perspective (e.g., Botan & Taylor, 2004; Heath, 2001; Palenchar, 2010), yet crisis communication has been slower to include this perspective (e.g., Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a; Kim & Dutta, 2009). In addition to extending theoretical application and conceptualization of complexity approaches to

studying and practicing risk and crisis communication, the dissertation's overlapping

complexity and relational theoretical approaches contribute to the understanding of

organization-public relationships and relationship management or cultivation, particularly

within an online context.

Complexity theory takes a different, not indifferent, view of strategy than

traditional strategic management approaches (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010b). Today's

complex turbulent, highly contextual communication environments demand "new modes

of planning that allow for broader ranges of outcomes, adapt to both gradual and sudden

change, and relinquish the idea of control" (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010b, p. 74). Within the

relational perspective, theoretical concepts like the distributed public relations model

(e.g., Kelleher, 2009) and dialogic theory (e.g., Kent & Taylor, 2002) offer other

explanations for how multiple voices are contributing to relational communication such

as by generating openness and a human, conversational voice (Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher

& Miller, 2006) that may have more authenticity and credibility that can aid relationship

management, risk communication, and crisis communication (e.g., Sweetser & Metzgar,

2007).

Summary of Research Method

To best illustrate and explain how and why U.S. government communicators

perceive and use social media communication in a risk communication context, I

conducted an ethnographic case study of the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) national, or

enterprise-wide, social media program and team at its Washington, D.C. headquarters.

The social media program, and the social media team responsible for it, is a component

of the headquarters public affairs function of the USCG organization. The team is

responsible for the strategies, policies, management and execution of the USCG enterprise-wide social media program. The USCG was selected as the site of the study because of its high-risk operating environment and active social media communication operations within the U.S. federal public sector. I provide more details on the USCG's appropriateness for the study in chapters three and four.

The ethnographic approach allowed me to answer the study's research questions in a real-time, natural context (i.e., field site) within a high-risk operating environment. Recruitment took place in August 2011. I used professional networking to identify and contact the appropriate USCG personnel. I then drafted a formal research request that described the proposed project, data collection methods, access needs, publication requirements, and other important considerations. To meet the ethical obligation of reciprocity, the proposal suggested several ways I could give back to the organization, including providing white papers or lessons learned, various trainings, webinars, or follow-up research projects. One of my professional colleagues then passed on the proposal to a USCG internal contact who forwarded it to the USCG director of public affairs. The proposal was favorably received, vetted by the social media chief, and approved by the director of public affairs.

Data collection included participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. In total, I spent 205.25 hours in the field during 28 visits between October 7, 2011 and January 19, 2012. I also conducted 11 face-to-face and one telephone in-depth interview with 10 participants. The interviews were guided by a semistructured interview protocol found in Appendix A. Prior to collecting data, I received IRB approval for the study. Finally, I collected and analyzed 49 relevant social-

media-related documents produced or referenced during the course of observation (October 2011 – January 2012).

To analyze the data, I used Miles and Huberman's (1994) iterative process that entails three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Throughout the research process, I assessed and sought to strengthen the study's overall craftsmanship (Kvale, 1995) in order to improve the credibility and trustworthiness of my results. Specifically, I utilized reflexivity, triangulation, member checks, peer debriefing, and an audit trail.

Study Implications

Using an ethnographic approach to study the USCG social media program through a complexity and relational theoretical framework, this dissertation offers a rich picture of the complex nature of planning and executing social media communication, including risk communication, in a U.S. public sector context. This ethnographic dissertation pushes forward both theory and practice by offering the first-known behind-the-scenes, real-time depiction of the intersection of risk communication, social media, and government public relations. By better understanding how one U.S. federal agency with particular high-risk missions is currently conceptualizing, developing, and executing social media efforts, the dissertation helps answer Kent's (2010) call for social media research on strategies and social media research placed within the context of the larger media mix. By studying the USCG enterprise social media program, the dissertation has also pushed forward theory surrounding social media's place in the "overall practice of public relations" (Kent, 2010, p. 654). The study found that the USCG sees social media and ongoing social mediated-risk communication within its larger public affairs function.

The dissertation extends the complexity-based conceptualization of a holistic view of risk, risk communication and risk management to include organizations with risk-related or crisis-related missions or responsibilities that may take on a risk communication mindset. Findings suggest that a risk communication mindset may spur and constrain social media communication within such organizations. Similarly, findings suggest that strategies and tactics related to social media communication are also influenced by a complex set of intersecting and overlapping influences that can exist within various contexts and levels. These same influences can determine how well or poorly the social media strategy can be executed and may account for the organization's ability to adapt and learn from such challenges. In the USCG's case, the not-fully-realized strategic design acted as both compass and container – guiding and limiting the effective use of relational social media communication, including in a risk communication context.

Within the USCG, multivocality and relationship-building were encouraged and strategized but limited by resource constraints and lack of buy-in from field communicators, suggesting multivocality and relationship management may exist on a continuum rather than as present or absent. Findings suggest another continuum between organizations participating in engagement and hosting engagement. This view suggests moving away from dialogic theory's two-way relational communication model (e.g., Hallahan, 2008; Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007) toward the multivocal conversational relational communication model that encompasses the distributed public relations model (Kelleher, 2009).

Serving as an engaging host also aligns with Kelleher and Miller's (2006) index for conversational human voice included "[the organization] invites people to

conversation" (p. 413). The dissertation adds depth to the human conversational voice construct (e.g., Bruning, et al., 2004; Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007) and online relational maintenance strategies by offering a real-time, behind-the-scenes understanding of why and how government organizations can be engaging and conversational by inviting audiences to dialogue and engage without having to maintain conversations across all their social media platforms.

Strengths and Limitations

While the dissertation's strengths included offering an in-depth ethnographic view of the study's phenomena, it did have limitations. My background as a former government communicator may have influenced my observations and interviews. To counteract potential bias, my research questions, interview protocol, and data analysis were grounded in the research and theory on government communication, social media, risk communication and relational and complexity theoretical approaches. To account for possible biases related to an ethnographic approach, I utilized strategies such as reflexivity, employing multiple data sources, maintaining a detailed audit trail, and conducting extensive member checks following data analysis.

While not generalizable, results of this study can provide guidance to organizations interested in using social media within a risk communication context. Within the public sector, communicators and leaders may find helpful insights to apply in addressing challenges they face in engaging in risk communication via social media. Results will hopefully also assist USCG leaders by helping identify particular strengths and weaknesses of the program's current approach and use of social media to dialogue with internal and external stakeholders. In doing so, the study's findings could improve

the effectiveness of its social media program, including its risk communication. Because the USCG's dual parent organizations and a decentralized structure and culture were perceived to influence its social media and risk communication, organizations that have chapters or locally-based branches, offices, or manufacturing facilities may be able to apply the findings regarding decentralized centralization and multivocality. Other organizations with risk-related missions or responsibilities or highly-regulated organizations such as those within aviation or medical research sectors may also be able to apply the dissertation's findings regarding legal and policy constraints. Scholars and practitioners interested in complexity approaches to relationship cultivation and dialogic social media management may also find the study's results useful. Given that this study looked at the organization's perspective, future audience-based research should look at publics' perspectives of organizational social media engagement and socially-mediated organization-public relationships.

By chronicling the USCG social media program and its team members' everyday challenges, successes, and public service, I hope that scholars and practitioners can better understand the landscape of influences communicators face and how they navigate the tumultuous, complex waters of social media, particularly in a high-risk environment. Additional research can validate the extent to which the USCG social media team's approach may help guide others' efforts.

Organization of the Study

This introductory chapter has laid the foundation for the study's core concepts and the dissertation's rationale and purpose, the ethnographic case study method it used, as well as its strengths and limitations in terms of its contribution to theory and practice.

The second chapter reviews and connects the existing theoretical literature related to the study's foundational topics, including risk and crisis communication, government communication, relationship management and organization-public relationships, and complexity-based approaches. In the third chapter, I discuss my research design and choices, including my rationale for choosing an ethnographic case study method. I detail my methods for sampling, data collection, analysis and evaluation of quality. The fourth chapter then situates the study by offering background on the U.S. Coast Guard, its public affairs function, including USCG risk communication and social media communication.

Having laid the groundwork for the study and its execution, the fifth chapter presents the dissertation's results related to each research question. The sixth chapter then discusses the findings' connections and contributions to theory and practice, including directions for future research. The chapter also addresses in more depth the study's strengths and limitations before offering a concluding statement. Appendices and references discussed throughout the dissertation are placed at the end.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to explore social media use in "the complex communication context of risk communication" (Sellnow et al., 2009, p. 53) and particularly within the U.S. public sector. While the introduction offered a foundation for the dissertation's purpose, core concepts, and rational, the literature review more fully grounds the study's concepts, research questions and theoretical framework. Therefore, the literature review first explores risk communication and its overlaps with related concepts like crisis communication. To build toward an understanding of social-mediated risk communication within the government sector, I then explore government public relations research, including on risk, crisis and social media. In this dissertation, I argue that the relational perspective offers one theoretical intersection for the study of risk communication, public relations, and social media. To better articulate this intersection, the chapter then explores relationship research within public relations, including research on social media's influence on organization-public relationship management. To show the usefulness of the relational theoretical lens, I then show how risk communication research has moved along a similar path to public relations in terms of valuing dialogue and relationship. The final section of the literature review theoretically triangulates the dissertation by applying a complexity lens to understanding relational risk communication.

Risk Communication

It is important to define and provide background on risk communication, a relatively young and quickly growing field of research and practice (Palenchar, 2010). Because public relations scholars have often studied risk communication within the larger

context of crisis communication and crisis management (Coombs, 2010b), this section compares, contrasts, and identifies overlaps between risk and crisis communication and management.

Risk, risk communication, and risk management. Sellnow et al. (2009) wrote, "In its most basic form, risk is the absence of certainty. If we are absolutely certain of the results an action will produce, that action has no risk. In reality, we rarely, if ever, have the luxury of absolute certainty" (p. 3). As stated previously, this study uses Palenchar's (2005) often-cited definition that risk communication "provides the opportunity to understand and appreciate stakeholders' concerns related to risks generated by organizations, engage in dialogue to address differences and concerns, carry out appropriate actions that can reduce perceived risks, and create a climate of participatory and effective discourse to reduce friction and increase harmony and mutuality" (para. 1). Palenchar's definition is rooted in a process-oriented, two-way communication approach that reflects recent relational and social context understandings and conceptualizations of risk communication by and between stakeholders and organizations (e.g., Gurabardhi, Gutteling, & Kuttschreuter, 2005; Heath, 1995; Leiss, 1996). Palenchar (2005, para. 1) further defined risk communication within a community infrastructure model: "Risk communication is a community infrastructure, transactional communication process among individuals and organizations regarding the character, cause, degree, significance, uncertainty, control, and overall perception of a risk." Within risk communication, there is an emphasis on stakeholders and publics. The concept of risk-sharing and partnering to manage risks reflects the current phase of risk communication's view that successful risk management is dependent on consensus building, meaningful stakeholder engagement

and interaction, and an acceptance of reasonable government risk regulations (Leiss, 1996).

   Stakeholders, publics and risks. Within a risk context, stakeholders are "any persons or group of persons whose lives could be impacted by a given risk" (Sellnow et al., 2009, p. 5). Postmodern perspectives see publics as dynamic complex adaptive systems of individual stakeholders that self-organize new information around their existing identities (Murphy, 2007). Communication also is a complex process among these individual agents that blurs boundaries between internal and external stakeholders and unmoors conceptualizations of publics as fixed categories (e.g., Gilpin & Murphy, 2006, 2010b; Murphy, 2007). As a result, relationships between organizations and publics are not viewed as static, and organizations are urged to avoid developing long-term categories for stakeholders that might lead them to miss the emergence of new stakeholders that develop around an issue (Gilpin & Murphy, 2006, 2010b; Murphy, 2007). Given the focus on individual stakeholder perceptions as critical to effective risk and crisis communication (Palenchar, 2008; Seeger & Reynolds, 2008), this dissertation uses publics and stakeholders interchangeably to reflect the fact that publics are constantly formed and re-formed by individual stakeholders that accumulate to form them. For example, risk communication research has evolved to focus more on the importance of individual stakeholder perceptions because interpretations of risks or hazards in turn influence emotions, uncertainty, and risk assessment (Seeger & Reynolds, 2008). Factors such as control, dread, trust, and familiarity can influence perceptions of risk (e.g., Palenchar, 2008).

Stakeholder perception influences. Four major influences on stakeholder risk

perceptions include cost-reward tradeoffs, cognitive involvement, trust and credibility,

and uncertainty. Risk assessment studies have consistently found evidence that risks are

perceptions of *tradeoffs of costs and rewards* (Palenchar, 2005). Specifically, if risks are

"perceived to be acceptably low and the rewards or benefits of taking the risks are

perceived to be high, then one can predict that the risks will be tolerated" (Palenchar,

2005, para. 14). As part of the costs-benefit analysis, the perception of likely adverse

events (e.g., accidents, catastrophes) as a result of the risk is a second factor critical to

whether risk messages are supported or rejected (Palenchar, 2005). When the sense of

threat is high but efficacy to control the threat is low, fear control (i.e., avoidance, denial)

is predicted (Heath, Lee, & Ni, 2009). Emergency management communication is more

effective in getting people to take appropriate risk-reducing actions when efficacy and

threat perceptions are both high (Heath et al., 2009). "Emergency management control is

likely to be more strategic when it understands and respects targets' sense of likelihood of

an event, likelihood that they or a loved one will be harmed, and perception of how well

prepared the community is, including the perception of the efficacy and persuasiveness of

the emergency management protocol" (Heath et al., 2009, p. 127).

A stakeholder, relational-centered approach might help reduce misperceptions

about internal and external audience beliefs and knowledge and, therefore, the confusion

that stems from such errant assumptions. For example, risk communication researchers

have identified that laypeople, unlike experts, perceive and rate risks based on factors

beyond just their belief in the risk's potential dangers and fatality. Therefore, the second

important factor in risk communication perceptions is *cognitive involvement* which is

closely linked to how intensely individuals will acquire and process risk information (Heath et al., 2009). People are more likely to communicate about issues they see as personally relevant (J. Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Publics who recognize a shared problem, ability to address that problem, and personal involvement with the problem or issue are more likely to communicate actively on such as issue (J. Grunig, 1997). This shared sense is situational and can activate publics within that situational context (J. Grunig, 1997). Personal involvement can also become a sense of shared involvement that influences risk perceptions. In focus groups, when participants sensed that news sources were also affected by a bioterrorism issue (i.e., shared involvement), they were more likely to pay attention to the message (Aldoory & van Dyke, 2006). In an experiment, Aldoory, Kim, and Tindall (2010) found that shared risk with news coverage depictions of bioterrorism risk had the potential to influence participants' concern, perception of personal involvement, and their desire to learn more. Audience-centered messages (i.e., match audience beliefs, values, needs, experiences, etc.) can also increase cognitive involvement and overall effectiveness of risk communication (Samspon et al., 2001; Seeger & Reynolds, 2008). For example, in a survey study of a racially diverse community, researchers found that citizens who could access messages perceived as sensitive to them from sources they perceived as similar to them were more likely to increase their sense of self, expert, and community preparedness (i.e., feel prepared to handle the crisis) (Heath et al., 2009).

Third, *trust* and *credibility* have been said to transcend all other systems of meaning-making regarding risk messages (Seeger & Reynolds, 2008; Sellnow et al., 2009). Unfortunately, there has been a long-term trend in decreasing confidence and trust

in social institutions, including government organizations, that has paralleled the rise in risk communication (Palenchar, 2010). Palenchar et al. (2005) found that trust is based on the degree to which a person or organization "is competent, objective, fair, consistent, having no hidden agenda, and being genuinely concerned about the vulnerability of its stakeholders" (p. 62). Within a risk communication context, organizations tend to establish relationships with those communities that will support, versus reject, the organization's risk perceptions. Within a co-constructed view of risk communication and risk perceptions, both the organization and its stakeholders collaboratively construct and interpret risk estimates affecting a community. If, then, a risk is perceived as negatively affecting the community, publics are more likely to oppose, rather than tolerate, such a risk (Palenchar & Heath, 2002). This co-construction of risks means that risk communicators can be considered untrustworthy or callous when they violate their publics' communication norms or expectations even if the information contained in their risk messages is accurate and the actual environmental or health risk is low (Williams & Olaniran, 1998). Similarly, when government officials appeal to the legality of an action, they make a "grave mistake" by failing to recognize that such an argument will not appease someone's values or expectations surrounding "ethics, health, safety, and security" (Palenchar & Heath, 2006, p. 153).

Trust can also connect with uncertainty, a factor that will be discussed shortly. Without trust, a message the risk communicator considers clear can be uncertain, ambiguous and interpreted very differently by lay publics (Williams & Olaniran, 1998). There are high stakes for ineffective risk communication. Sellnow et al. (2009) called avoiding crises the "ultimate purpose" of risk communication (p. 4). Consequently, crises

can result from failing to identify and act on risks (Sellnow et al., 2009). The next section

conceptualizes crisis, crisis communication, and management within a risk context.

Crisis. Like risks, crises are perceptual (Coombs, 2012). Coombs (2012)

synthesized previous definitions of crises as the "perception of an unpredictable event

that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an

organization's performance and generate negative outcomes" (p. 2). This definition

points to key aspects of crises identified in the literature: perceptions and expectations of

stakeholders; unpredictable but not unexpected events; and threats to organizations. Not

every threatening event or incident can be classified as a crisis. Coombs (2012)

distinguished incidents as minor, localized disruptions. Crises, though, have the potential

to or do actually affect or disrupt entire organizations and as such can result in negative

or undesirable outcomes (Coombs, 2012). Crisis damages can be human (e.g., injuries,

deaths), economic, and environmental. Traditional definitions of crises focus on the

potential or real consequences for an organization resulting from an "untimely but

predictable event" (Heath & Millar, 2004, p. 2). While these definitions may allude to

communication needs, they do not address communication functions and needs in a crisis

(Heath & Millar, 2004). In response to this gap, Heath and Millar (2004) offered a

rhetorical approach to crisis that centers on communication processes necessary in a

perceived or actual crisis:

> A rhetorical definition of crisis features the communication processes and efforts
>
> to co-define meanings that assist persons who are affected—or think they are
>
> affected—to prepare for, accommodate to, and recover from the disruptive events.

What the event means—how it is to be interpreted—becomes a central rhetorical theme (p. 6).

Complexity approaches to risk and crisis management rooted in a postmodern paradigm explored later in the dissertation take a holistic approach (Kim & Dutta, 2009). They view crisis situations as symptoms and look for root causes in an organization and among its relationships with internal and external stakeholders in the operating environment (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a). Reflecting the complexity framework used in the dissertation, I will use Gilpin and Murphy's (2010a) definition of crisis while drawing from Coombs' (2012) acknowledgement of the perceptual nature of crises based on stakeholders' threatened expectancies and Heath and Millar's (2004) communication process-focused view of crisis. A key difference in postmodern approaches to control and uncertainty within a risk and crisis communication and management perspective is explored in the next section. Coombs (2010b) calls risk communication one of the allied fields closely connected to crisis communication and sees risk management and crisis management as reciprocally connected.

Crisis communication. Crisis communication "can be broadly defined as the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation" (Coombs, 2010a, p. 20). Some scholars consider risk communication to be a type of crisis communication (Zaremba, 2010) or have lumped together risk communication and crisis communication as a more comprehensive approach to studying crisis management (e.g., Coombs, 2010b; Seeger et al., 2001). This dissertation sees risk communication and crisis communication as distinct concepts but recognizes their relationship. Risk communication shares a reciprocal relationship with crisis

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communication because (1) risks can morph into crises; (2) proper risk management can prevent crises; and (3) risk communication can also be critical to effective crisis preparation and response (Coombs, 2010b). Using appropriate, audience-centered risk communication programs, organizations can better prepare and plan, avoid and more easily navigate and resolve crises (Seeger et al., 2001). While risk communication is essentially risk centered (i.e., projection about harm at future date), crisis communication is event centered (i.e., specific incident has taken place and produced harm) (Seeger et al., 2003).

Crisis communication may have less preparation than risk communication, and may often include more responsive communication through mediated forms like press conferences, press releases, speeches, and websites (Seeger et al., 2003). Risk communication, however, has be en seen as more long term and planned than crisis communication, often using campaigns, mediated communication through commercials, advertisements, brochures and other devices (Seeger et al., 2003). These distinctions appear aligned with crisis stages and may be more representative of pre-crisis communication and crisis response communication than clear distinctions between risk communication and crisis communication.

Crisis management. Within the managerial view of crisis, crisis management "seeks to prevent or lessen negative outcomes from a crisis and thereby protect the organization, stakeholders, and industry from harm" (Coombs, 2012, p. 5). Risk management combines with issues management and reputation management to make up the crisis management mechanism of crisis scanning that can detect warning signs before a risk or issue manifests into a full-blown crisis (Coombs, 2012).

The lifecycle view of crises offers three broad stages that may be generalized across crises (Seeger et al., 2003). This approach sees crisis management as a process and proactive with a risk management component (Coombs, 2012). In this view, risks can be thought of as vulnerabilities or weaknesses with the potential to develop into issues or crises (Coombs, 2012). Once risks are identified and assessed, organizations can seek to lessen or avoid the risks. Practitioners can monitor issues and risks for signs of their development into a crisis.

Risk and crisis communication and management share an emphasis on factors such as *control* and *uncertainty* based on unpredictability. In terms of uncertainty, risk communication focuses on what is *known* (i.e., probabilities of negative consequences and how to reduce them) while crisis communication emphasizes what is both *known* and *unknown* (i.e., current state or conditions and also uncertainty of situation) (Seeger et al., 2003).

Control and uncertainty. Uncertainty and how it is managed plays a major role in risk and crisis communication (e.g., Seeger et al., 2001). Uncertainty connects with previously mentioned factors like fear, dread, and trust (Heath et al., 2009). Palenchar (2005) called uncertainty "a central variable in the risk perception and communication process" and argues that risks "by definition are matters of uncertainty" (para. 10). In this context, uncertainty is a "measure of confidence regarding (a) the ability to estimate a risk and its consequences and (b) the ability to communication knowledgeably on the facts and issues surrounding any specific risk" (Palenchar, 2005, para. 10). Seeger, et al. (2001) observed: "A basic tenet of risk management suggests that public relations practitioners should reduce the uncertainty surrounding organizational products or

technologies that have the potential to affect others" (p. 157). A related concept is ambiguity. As Sellnow et al. (2009, p. 7) distinguished: "Uncertainty stems from a lack of information. Risk messages seek to alleviate this uncertainty by generating and assessing the credibility of available evidence. Ambiguity occurs when the available information is interpreted in more than one way and the quality or appropriate application of this evidence is debated."

Not all scholars and approaches see risk as something that can be "accurately" communicated or "accurately" (i.e., unambiguously) perceived. Taking a rhetorical perspective, Heath (1997) said that uncertainty is part of risk and communicating with certainty about risk is impossible. These perceptions of risk and risk communication as something that can be accurately known, communicated and perceived derive from a positivist, strategic management ontology (i.e., worldview) and epistemology (i.e., use of knowledge and research) (Ayotte, Bernard, & O'Hair, 2009). Most organizations operate under the assumption that risks can be "known, contained, and controlled" (Seeger et al., 2003, p. 97). The organizations tend to believe they understand their exposure to risk, that it is at an acceptable level, and that they have appropriate norms, policies, safeguards, procedures, and precautions in place (Seeger et al., 2003). Since their planning and scanning may be rooted in such assumptions, they may fail to perceive, prioritize, and meet impending threats (Seeger et al., 2003). Additionally, these assumptions can lead to a perception that risk communicators are knowledgeable while lay publics lack knowledge and hold misperceptions of risks (Heath, 2006). Given these limitations, Heath (2006) still sees risk management as the ability to bring maximum control to bear on uncertain matters (Heath, 2006).

In this context, practitioners should use risk communication that is rooted in the probable and weigh potential harms against benefits (Heath, 1997). While the epistemology may be different than the positivist assumption that risk can be known, eliminated, and managed, Heath's view of risk management still focuses on reducing, though not eliminating, risk. In other words, control becomes a key factor in most risk communication and risk management research. Because some scholars view crises as manifested risks that can lead to or result from issues (e.g., Coombs, 2012; Heath, 1997; Heath & O'Hair, 2008), crises are also contained based on how well organizations can control risk. For example, how crisis manifests itself "depends on individuals,' organizations,' or communities' willingness and ability to exert proper control in the face of the risk" (Heath et al., 2009, p. 125).

Heath and Millar (2004) argued that a crisis can be seen as a "struggle for control" because those affected by a crisis "look to responsible parties to control their actions or to create actions that reduce the harm of the crisis" (p. 9). In this sense, in both risk and crisis contexts, the concept of control is a common response to the uncertainty inherent to risk (Palenchar & Heath, 2002). In an analysis of crisis metaphors used in newspapers, magazines, and textbook case studies, Millar and Beck (2004) found war and container metaphors to be the most common framings (i.e., understandings) of crisis. The war metaphor "presumes an adversarial relationship between interacting systems" (Millar & Beck, 2004, p. 160). What is at stake (i.e., risk) is control of resources, land, materials, supporters, etc. (Millar & Beck, 2004). Even more than the war metaphor, the container image "highlights the 'loss of control' aspect" of crisis (Millar & Beck, 2004, p. 161). The container metaphor "highlights the sense of confusion, the feeling of

powerlessness stemming from being out of bounds, the loss of control and uncertainty experienced by those in a crisis situation" (Millar & Beck, 2004, p. 165). This is true of organizations and individuals. For example, when individuals perceive some control over a situation, they are more likely to accept risks (Nathan, Heath, & Douglas, 1992). As such, dialogue that helps foster trust is also a way to meet people's desire to exert control (Palenchar & Heath, 2006). These views of control (i.e., people's desire to control risks and uncertainties) are different than the organizational approach of trying to control stakeholders' perceptions, knowledge, and actions. Emerging research streams within the postmodern paradigm and chaos and complexity theoretical frameworks that are explored later in this dissertation do not approach control and uncertainty in an effort to manage or contain them.

Key contrasts for government communication. Despite their similarities and overlaps, risk and crisis communication are different constructs and have different research orientations (An & Cheng, 2010). In addition to the distinctions noted above, such as seeing risk communication as a pre-crisis function, this dissertation identifies two key divergences relevant to the current study of government risk communication through social media. First, the crisis management paradigm has predominantly conceptualized risk communication as a pre-crisis planning function (e.g., Coombs, 2012). Second, risk communication has evolved toward a normative stakeholder-centered dialogic, relational perspective while crisis communication has largely remained organization-centered and response driven (e.g., Palenchar, 2010). Viewed through a postmodern complexity lens introduced later, the developing line of research on social media's relationship-building potential may have implications for government risk communication via social media.

Risk, Crisis, and Government

Risk communication from its earliest days has been closely connected to government and industry communication with stakeholders about environmental and public health and safety risks (e.g., Nathan et al., 1992; Palenchar & Heath, 2006; Seeger & Reynolds, 2008). Risk communication has eclectic origins. Researchers from academic and practical backgrounds spanning political science, psychology, public relations, risk management, and sociology have contributed to knowledge of risk communication (Palenchar, 2005). Regardless of discipline, government and government communication have been closely connected to risk communication from the beginning (Palenchar & Heath, 2006). From a risk regulatory perspective, risk communication originated with a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency marketing effort (Palenchar & Heath, 2006). An interest and focus on risk communication emerged from several points including community-based activism (e.g., antinuclear movement), government regulations (e.g., chemical industry regulations), and industry-generated efforts (Palenchar, 2008). More than two decades ago, an influential government report reinforced the early connection between risk communication and government where government and industry both served as risk communication catalysts to inform citizens of risks, counter opposition to decisions, collaborate on decisions, and find non-regulatory means to control risk (National Research Council, 1989).

In contrast, crisis communication has been more often associated with corporate communication to various stakeholders as part of a crisis response designed to protect organizational reputation and image (e.g., An & Cheng, 2010; Avery & Lariscy, 2010; Gilpin & Murphy, 2006; Seeger & Reynolds, 2008; Zaremba, 2010). This is problematic

because, as the introduction noted, the public sector communication environment is unique from the private sector's (e.g., M. Lee, 2008, 2012; Liu & Horsley, 2007; Liu et al., 2010) and government communication within a risk and crisis context may also be unique (e.g., Avery & Lariscy, 2010; Horsley, 2010; K. Lee, 2009).

Government communication research overview. While government's communication with its citizens, other governments, and other nations' citizens is critically important, especially within a high-stakes risk or crisis context, minimal research has focused specifically on government communication or government public relations (e.g., M. Lee, 2008; Stromback & Kiousis, 2011a). Several factors may have contributed to this dearth of government communication research and the existing research's general lack of theoretical depth and variety (e.g., Liu & Horsley, 2007; Sanders, 2011). First, government communication research in general has been hampered by lack of clear conceptualization (Sanders, 2011). Second, the professional field of government communication may have been ignored in academia due to "historical controversy over the role of public relations within the federal government" (Fairbanks et al., 2007, p. 23-24). Third, only recently has there been an acknowledgement that communication within the public sector is unique and needs its own theories and best practices (e.g., Avery & Lariscy, 2010; M. Lee, 2008; Liu & Horsley, 2007). To address the issue of conceptualization, this dissertation uses a broader understanding of government public relations based on recent ones offered by M. Lee (2008, 2012) and Sanders (2011) to include the civic function of government communication rather than merely a political, campaign communication lens.

In a recent volume of research on political public relations, Stromback and Kiousis (2011a) defined political public relations as:

the management process by which an organization or individual actor for political purposes, through purposeful communication and action, seeks to influence and to establish, build, and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with its key publics to help support its mission and achieve its goals. (p. 8)

As noted earlier, while Sanders (2011) agreed with the broader functions addressed here, the author was concerned with the use of "political purposes" as inappropriately narrow and misleading: "…We need to be clear that there is a distinction between communication managed to achieve a government's political goals and communication managed in line with overarching government obligations in relation to the common civic good" (p. 266). In this dissertation, I align with Sanders' (2011) claim that a more useful definition reflective of government communication management would add "civic purposes as well as political ones" (p. 266). Further, this dissertation uses government public relations interchangeably with government communication (and its related government strategic communication). The term is also used interchangeably with public affairs since it is sometimes used as a synonym for public relations (e.g., Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, & Toth, 2008; M. Lee, 2012; Sanders, 2011; Taylor, 2012). In this sense the term is not referencing its other common uses such as those reflecting a management process by which mostly corporate organizations "for political purposes and through communication and action, seek to influence and to establish, build and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with its key publics, primarily within governments" (Harris & Fleisher, 2005, xxxii). Because this study is specific to a U.S.

government context, government communicators are defined as employees or professional consultants at the city, county, state, or federal level whose primary responsibilities are communicating internally or externally with various publics regarding government policies, decisions, or actions and/or guiding communication strategy (Liu, Levenshus, & Horsley, forthcoming). Other terms used synonymously in this dissertation to describe government communicators and public relations practitioners include commonly used terms such as public information officers and public affairs officers (Lattimore et al., 2012).

In an analysis of the overall government communication research landscape, Liu, Levenshus, et al. (forthcoming) found the limited theoretical research studies have not looked at government communication in its full functionality, instead focusing on single functions such as agenda-setting/gatekeeping theory (e.g., Kim & Yang, 2008; Turk & Franklin, 1987), the two-way symmetrical model (e.g., Chen, 2003; Chen & Culbertson, 1992; Mohammed & Kelly, 2001), high reliability organizations and chaos theory applications to crisis communication and management (e.g., Horsley, 2010), and discourse of renewal in crisis management (e.g., Avery & Lariscy, 2010). One exception was a model for understanding how government communicators incorporate transparency into their communication with external stakeholders, but the model did not address how organizational leaders increase transparency with internal stakeholders (Fairbanks et al., 2007). Additionally, while the study offered a theoretical model and provided a case example of the model's use, it has not yet been empirically tested.

Liu, Levenshus, et al. (forthcoming) found that the remaining research was atheoretical and fell under three main types: (1) case studies; (2) practitioners'

perspectives; and, (3) overviews of the landscape of government communication. In the case study category, scholars have profiled how governments use strategic communication to assuage opponents (e.g., Kozolanka, 2006b; M. Lee, 2009), guide responses to crises and scandals (e.g., Baines & Worcester, 2005; Chen, 2009; Hulbert, 2002; Kozolanka, 2006b; B. K. Lee, 2007), foster democracy (e.g., Salazar, Kovats, Ngesi, Bucher, & Gebhuza, 2007; Yeomans & Adshead, 2003), and professionalize government public relations (e.g., M. Lee, 2006; L'Etang, 1998). A second category of government communication research analyzes practitioners' perspectives on government communication functions and roles (e.g., Gelders, De Cock, Neijens, & Roe, 2007; Glenny, 2008; Neijens & Smit, 2006).

Finally, a third category identified by Liu, Levenshus, et al. (forthcoming) provides overviews of the practice of government communication in countries including Mexico (Johnson, 2005), the Netherlands (Vos & Westerhoudt, 2008), United Arab Emirates (Kirat, 2006), and the United States (Martinelli, 2006). In some ways, these studies could be considered cases of government public relations. Only one study provided generalizable results (Vos & Westerhouldt, 2008). A recent edited volume of chapters focused on political public relations also entailed mostly landscapes and reviews of specific government public relations topics (Stromback & Kiousis, 2011b). Relevant to this study, chapters include specializations such as political public relations and crisis management (Coombs, 2011), digital political public relations (Sweetser, 2011), and relationship management (Ledingham, 2011). Each of these chapters, however, focuses more on political (i.e., electoral, campaign, elected official) communication than on non-elected, non-federal, non-campaign official communication for civic purposes.

Communication in the unique U.S. public sector. Recent research has proposed

and tested the government communication decision wheel (GCDW) as the first

comprehensive framework for understanding how communication in the U.S. public

sector is distinct from communication in the corporate sector (Horsley, Liu, &

Levenshus, 2010; K. Lee, 2009; Liu & Levenshus, 2010). The GCDW explains two

categories of attributes especially prevalent in the public sector that affect communication

decision-making in the microenvironments: (1) influences on daily activities (*federalism*,

media scrutiny, *relationships with primary publics*, *legal frameworks*, and *politics*) and

(2) influences on professional advancement (*professional development opportunities*,

management support for communication, and *management team membership*). In

subsequent interviews, government practitioners reported a greater influence of legal

constraints and increased media scrutiny, though interestingly communicators saw this as

a positive opportunity for greater media responsiveness (Liu & Levenshus, 2010). Survey

results from 976 government and corporate communicators supported many of the

attributes identified in the GCDW such as budget restraints, politics, interactions with

primary publics, media scrutiny, and legal frameworks that do have a greater impact on

government communicators than on private sector communicators and their

communication activities (Liu et al., 2010). For example, U.S. government

communicators face myriad legal restrictions including freedom of information (FOIA)

or "sunshine" laws, lobbying restrictions, and laws regulating their political campaign

communication during work hours (e.g., Hatch Act). U.S. federal, state, and local

government communicators similarly evaluated the effect of legal frameworks on their

daily activities, but those communicators working for elected officials reported a greater

impact of legal frameworks than did those working for non-elected officials (Horsley et al., 2010; Liu, Levenshus, et al., forthcoming). K. Lee (2009) noted the GCDW's potential use in studying government crisis communication.

Other recent government communication research beyond the GCDW has identified unique public sector characteristics, many of which overlap with those included in the GCDW. For example, Sanders (2011) considered key characteristics of government communication to be its *multi-layered* nature; *complexity* (e.g., audiences, goals, resources); *publicness* (e.g., public service, public good, public sphere); and the *political environment* in which it takes place. Tracy (2007), in a study of a local school district's public meetings regarding a financial mismanagement crisis, argued that government agencies are unique in that they are complex and public service driven. Both Avery and Lariscy (2010), in their study of FEMA's staged press conference crisis, and Tracy's study, found that the government is also uniquely in the position of "doing democracy" (Tracy, 2007, p. 328) when it must put its public face forward (e.g., hold a public meeting or press conference).

The political environment also increases complexity of audiences and communication with them. For example, while the GCDW proposed that poor public perception of government communication as propaganda or spin could devalue government messages and public relations (Liu & Horsley, 2007), a study found a partisan gap in the valuing or devaluing of government-attributed messages (Connolly-Ahern, Grantham, & Cabrera-Baukus, 2010). When video news releases were attributed to government sources, partisan viewers who did not support the current administration found the messages less credible after learning the source was a federal agency.

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M. Lee (2008) also acknowledged the *diversity* of government audiences. U.S. government public relations has focused more on external audiences and external affairs, but internal communication systems are stressed as important foundations for effective external communication programs (M. Lee, 2008). The government's diverse audience categories include citizens who are represented and served by the government, citizens who use government goods and services, communities (e.g., those affected by government actions), and special interest groups (M. Lee, 2008). Beyond these citizen categories, government communicators often engage with the media, senior government officials and other government agencies and entities (M. Lee, 2008). These unique characteristics that contribute to government agencies' environmental context may help understand how government communicators make decisions about their risk and crisis communication programs.

Risk and crisis communication in the public sector. The connection between risk communication and government addressed previously has become more vital. For example, people's sense of entitlement and desire to hold government and business leaders responsible for policies has helped drive the expansion of risk communication research and practice (Fischhoff, 1985). As Palenchar (2010) wrote: "More and more governmental agencies are acknowledging this vital role for risk communication as it relates to regulation based on risk and crisis management" (p. 449). Palenchar (2010) listed several examples of government risk communication programs including FEMA's National Response Framework (designed to provide a national systematic, proactive approach to risk and crisis events); the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Food and Drug Administration and its long-term strategic plan for risk communication;

and CDC and its Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication model. Because many of these threats and risks are to public health and safety, risk communication has often been studied within a health communication or health risk context (Seeger & Reynolds, 2008; Zaremba, 2010).

Within a crisis context, Avery and Lariscy (2010) identified two key characteristics unique to government agencies. First, government agencies' products are the reputations they acquire through public service. Second, government agencies' crisis publics are more fixed or static than they are for private sector organizations in crisis. These publics are often the funders (i.e., taxpayers) and recipients (e.g., evacuees) of crisis response services not offered by competing organizations. They do not have other options that shareholders or customers of other companies would have, and this makes them more vulnerable. "FEMA's job *is* crisis, and publics – rightfully so—expect them to master it" (Avery & Lariscy, 2010, p. 330). Due to these distinct characteristics, Avery and Lariscy argued that organizational type should be taken into account when prescribing guidelines and best practices for crisis communication. Referencing a 2006 study by DeVries and Fitzpatrick on the National Zoo (part of the Smithsonian) and an ongoing, lingering crisis of poor management and animal deaths, Avery and Lariscy suggested "for a variety of reasons yet to be determined…public agencies are uniquely more likely to face lingering crises when compared to their corporate counterparts" (2010, p. 326). These unique public relations challenges to the government can be exacerbated if these agencies do not engage in reputation management and pre-crisis stakeholder relationship building (Avery & Lariscy, 2010).

From a crisis perspective, governments are more often tasked with extreme crisis or disaster management (Schneider, 1995). As such, in addition to increased media scrutiny generally, government agencies (e.g., emergency management agencies) may face greater crisis management scrutiny (Horsley, 2010). Previous organizational scholars have identified high reliability organizations (HROs) that operate in an environment of high risk and uncertainty, yet they carry out their missions with a high level of reliability (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). Many of these HROs are government organizations or carry out traditionally government-related functions (e.g., aircraft carriers, air traffic control systems, hostage negotiation) (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). While Horsley (2010) did not define all government agencies as HROs, the author did argue that "crisis-mandated government agencies, like HROs, operate in an increasingly complex and chaotic environment where mistakes can result in the loss of life and property" (p. 554). Government responsibility to protect citizens can influence agencies' priorities during public health risks and crises. In other words, government risk and crisis communicators may face situations in which "public information and uncertainty reduction are more pressing than image restoration" more often than private sector communicators do (Avery & Kim, 2009, p. 188).

The idea of lingering crisis or crisis history could be seen in some studies of government agencies' crisis communication. For example, NASA's handling of the 1986 *Challenger* explosion influenced its handling of the 2003 *Columbia* explosion as well as perceptions of its crisis communication (Martin & Boynton, 2005). Other government crisis contexts have included federal and state emergency/disaster management agencies (e.g., Avery & Kim, 2009; Horsley, 2010); military organizations (e.g., U.S. Air Force)

(Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009); and various agencies and representatives within the federal government (i.e., Department of Homeland Security, President Bush, members of Congress; CDC; FEMA) following hurricanes like Katrina and Rita (e.g., Gallagher, Fontenot, & Boyle, 2007; Liu, 2007; Seeger & Reynolds, 2008; Vanderford, Nastoff, Telfer, & Bonzo, 2007; Waymer & Heath, 2007). As stated earlier, a significant body of research has examined the federal government's crisis communication response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. September 11 highlighted government agencies' crisis communication responses (Seeger et al., 2010). The October 2001 anthrax attacks have also been used in research (e.g., Freimuth, 2006; Quinn, Thomas, & McAllister, 2008; Veil, Reynolds, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2008).

Given that the minimal research on the under-studied context of civic government communication has focused more on crisis than risk and on social media's influence on crisis, rather than risk, communication, the first research question focuses on government communicators' perceptions of risk communication:

RQ1a: How, if at all, do government communicators in high-risk environments perceive the public sector context influences their risk communication?

High-risk environments within the public sector refer to government organizational operating contexts that may include (1) greater uncertainty or risk for crisis; (2) higher expectations of responding to extreme crises or disasters; or, (3) risk-related or crisis-related missions or responsibilities (e.g., Avery & Kim, 2009; Avery & Lariscy, 2010; Schneider, 1995). As Avery and Lariscy (2010) wrote about one such high-risk environment in the public sector: "FEMA's job *is* crisis, and publics – rightfully so— expect them to master it" (Avery & Lariscy, 2010, p. 330). A public relations context that

has offered challenges and opportunities for government communication, and may be influenced by a high-risk environment in the public sector, is the rising use of new and social media.

   Social media in the public sector. Within a government context, *e-government* has been described as using information technology to facilitate government business (United Nations & American Society for Public Administration, 2002). Sweetser (2011) observed that the "presence of public relations variables as a prime motivation for adopting e-government initiatives suggests that the concept is not solely about technology and efficiency, but also driven by the desire to improve relationships with citizens" (p. 302). As stated in the introduction, Johnson (1997) conceptualized new media as the technologies used by public relations professionals that are interactive and computer- or satellite-mediated. Included were such technologies as electronic mail, electronic bulletin boards, World Wide Web pages, online databases, online media monitoring systems, and virtual reality. Interactivity was defined as describing technologies that allow users to control information flow and allow two-way communication between practitioner and receiver or both (Johnson, 1997). Interactivity can apply in this study though today's social media also have participatory qualities where users are now producers of content as well as consumers (Levinson, 2009). The term social media has commonly referred to blogs and social network sites online and also describe the online practices that use web-based technology to enable people to share content, opinions, experiences, and ideas themselves (Lariscy, Avery, Sweetser, & Howes, 2009).

   Kent (2010) offered some defining features of most social media: moderation, interactivity, interchangeability, propinquity, responsiveness, and dialogue. While

moderation or maintenance is not always formally employed (e.g., listserv moderator, blog comment moderator, deleting offensive photos), it is part of all social media. Social network sites allow individuals to grant or deny access. *Interactivity*, as also pointed out by Johnson (1997) and Levinson (2009), has long been a feature of more traditional forms of "social" media (e.g., letters to the editor); more modern social media offer real-time interactivity and are capable of supporting interactions across social networks (Kent, 2010). Despite the allure of interactivity, Kent noted there is little substantive, public interaction with some exceptions (e.g., blogs). Others just lurk despite the possibility to participate in the discussion (Kent, 2010). People on social networks and across social media are virtually *interchangeable*. "Followers" and "friends" and "likes" may give the illusion of close connections, but Kent (2010) explained that participating in a network is as interchangeable as switching the television channel to get your news elsewhere. *Propinquity* has been linked with dialogue in terms of its meaning as nearness, proximity. Social media may give a sense of closeness or potential for nearness, but these relationships must be nurtured through commitment of time and energy (Kent, 2010). *Responsiveness* is most often displayed through threaded dialogue of comments that relate to one another, but as described earlier, this responsiveness is still moderated and maintained. Finally, "social media revolve around what is essentially a central tenet of dialogue: the value of the individual" (Kent, 2010, p. 649). Early public relations research on the Internet acknowledged its dialogic potential (e.g., Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002).

      Values and uses of social media. White and Raman (1999) considered the Web the "first public relations mass medium" because it enabled organizations to communicate directly with mass audiences without a mass media gatekeeper (p. 406).

Early descriptive research that predominantly used interviews and surveys to gauge

public relations practitioners' perceptions and uses of the World Wide Web identified a

gap between practitioners' perceptions of potential for the Internet (e.g., websites, online

databases) and how they actually used new technologies (e.g., Hill & White, 2000; Jo &

Kim, 2003; Porter, Sallot, Cameron, & Shamp, 1998; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; White &

Raman, 1999). Practitioners initially lagged behind the general population in terms of

using the Internet (e.g., organizational website) despite recognizing the potential value of

websites to enhance the organizational image and competitive stance, and serve as a

communication, research, and relationship-building tool.

The government sector has also been slow to adopt Internet-based, digital

communication tools (e.g., Thomas & Streib, 2003; West, 2004, 2011). In West's (2004)

comprehensive study of the state of electronic government or e-government, he argued

that e-government had "fallen short of its potential to transform government service

delivery and trust in government" (p. 16). Adoption constraints included considering the

Internet a low priority on the task list and lacking resources to maintain it. While public

relations practitioners faced these organizational constraints, they increasingly saw the

Internet's power and gained the skills needed to use it (Porter & Sallot, 2005; Ryan,

2003). However, as online media shifted to include more participatory and user-generated

(social) components, research once again found that while public relations was well-

suited for social media and while practitioners acknowledged its value, they were slow to

adopt the tools or capitalize on these opportunities (Kelleher, 2008; Leichty & Esrock,

2001; McAllister-Spooner, 2008; Taylor, 2010). Some research has reported that this gap

may be closing (Eyrich, Padman & Sweetser, 2008). Wright and Hinson (2006, 2007,

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2008, 2009, 2010) have conducted international trend studies surveying public relations practitioners about their uses and perceptions of blogs and social media and the influence they are having on the practice of public relations. Their studies have consistently found blogs and other social media are changing public relations. A majority of participants report that social media have changed the way their organizations communicate (though more often externally than internally) and contributed to increased empowerment of stakeholders (e.g., more inclusion of their voices). In their most recent survey, nearly all practitioner respondents (99%) reported spending part of their average workday interacting with social media (Wright & Hinson, 2010). Other surveys of public relations practitioners, however, still show a disconnect between recognition of social media's potential and use of the tools (e.g., Lariscy et al., 2009; Porter, Sweetser & Chung, 2009).

West (2004) took a holistic view of government's incorporation of Internet-based communication tools by empirically examining government's Internet use to communicate with citizens (e.g., budget expenditures, Web site content, and responsiveness to e-mail inquiry) and public perceptions of e-government. West did find that citizens' attitudes about the government were positively impacted by e-government actions and that many government agencies were moving forward with using the Internet to improve service delivery and communication with citizens. However, West also found that this change is incremental rather than transformational. West's (2004, 2011) findings echo other public administration research that has suggested two-way, interactive communication between government and its citizens is a long way off (e.g., Thomas & Streib, 2003). West's (2011) comprehensive report on technology innovation still found government was lagging behind the private sector in overall innovation and factors that

lead to its effective adoption like focusing on stakeholders, valuing audience-based

research, and taking stakeholder feedback seriously. In general, private sector companies

have devoted a greater proportion of overall budget to information technology than have

public sector organizations. In addition to being more likely to invest in new technology,

commercial entities have been quicker to restructure and make policy changes that

facilitate use of new technology, all of which contribute to facilitate effective digital

innovation that can improve communication and overall organizational performance

(West, 2011).

Governments face several challenges in trying to incorporate a more interactive

stance with citizens including: organizational structure, limited budget resources, group

conflict, organizational culture, and individual beliefs and behaviors (West, 2004). In a

case study of the Chicago Police Department's use of Internet-based technology to

increase communication with citizens, Welch and Fulla (2005) noted similar challenges

(e.g., unique budgetary and regulatory and structural challenges) that governments can

face when adopting a more interactive online posture with publics.

Avery et al. (2010) added depth to research on social media attitudes and adoption

by identifying internal and external factors (e.g., size of practice area and perceived value

or benefit to the public) that influence adoption of social media tools at public health

departments in urban, suburban, large town, and rural communities. They found that

government health agency communicators were most likely to use social networking

sites, social media releases, blogs, and discussion boards. Rural areas were least likely to

use social media at all but most likely to use podcasts. In a survey of corporate

practitioners, blogs were the most popular social media tools followed by video sharing

and photo sharing (Lariscy et al., 2009). Legal frameworks may limit or constrain government communicators in what they can and cannot do or say in an online context (Liu & Horsley, 2007). One such challenge government communicators in this study may face is how to navigate those legal constraints in order to implement or maintain internal and external organizational social media platforms like blogs and microblogging tools, intranets, and social networking site pages.

Given the challenges and characteristics identified in the limited research on how the U.S. public sector may influence government communicators' social media communication, the next question seeks to add depth to this research:

RQ1b: How, if at all, do government communicators in high-risk environments perceive the public sector context influences their communication via social media?

Organizational social media in risk and crisis communication. Research has begun to explore the use and role of social media in risk communication (e.g., Capriotti, 2007; Ding, 2009; Ding & Zhang, 2010; Macias, Hilyard, & Freimuth, 2009). Similar to the gap between recognition of value and actual use of the Internet for relationship building, online risk communication is also underused despite its potential (Hobbs, Kittler, Fox, Middleton, & Bates, 2004). Ding and Zhang (2010) differentiated between organizational risk communication originated or sponsored by the organization and extra-institutional risk communication often initiated by bottom-up, grassroots communication in which publics seek to find out truths about emerging or existing risks. Within a risk environment, social media may allow users to maintain constant connection and interaction to share ideas and risk messages in real time; disrupt or avoid controlled

government institutional communication; and, break down the barrier between expert and lay people's risk languages in order to enhance the exchange between the institutional and lay public spheres (e.g., Ding, 2009; Ding & Zhang, 2010; Leiss & Powell, 2004). In a comparative study of U.S. and Chinese government agencies' risk communication via social media regarding a SARS epidemic, Ding and Zhang (2010) found that the U.S. government used six social-mediated risk communication message strategies: provide general information on the flu (knowledge by experts/officials); updates (government actions); prevention tips (education information for public); policies and guidelines (control spread of disease); official actions/events (announcements about government actions and campaigns); and, scientific research (technical data). While the U.S. was more democratic and two-way in its social-mediated risk communication than China, the U.S. was still highly limited in its engagement of user participation and involvement. These findings supported Grabill and Simmons' (1998) argument that user participation only takes place after experts have made risk management and risk communication strategies.

Similarly, research has just begun to help understand online communication's effect on stages of crisis communication and crisis management of information and meaning in each of those stages (Coombs, 2010c). Crisis communication research in general is increasingly interested in understanding the organizational use of Internet tools like websites and blogs to communicate with stakeholders (Stephens & Malone, 2009, 2010). As an information source, the Internet is somewhere people are turning for information and support (Procopio & Procopio, 2007). Stakeholders are also capable of using the Internet and new media to create their own message strategies during crises and

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to seek out others who are able to provide the information and support they need, meaning they are less dependent on organizational information sources (Stephens & Malone, 2009, 2010). Blogs can offer two-way, dialogic communication between organizations and publics that can influence their perceptions of crisis seriousness. In an experiment, Sweetser and Metzgar (2007) found that as communication increased (blog posts), people's perceptions of the crisis were less serious. However, the Internet can also fuel rumors, a special kind of crisis (Heath & Millar, 2004). Rumors are often based on "narrow or misinformed misinterpretations of fact" (Heath & Millar, 2004, p. 2-3). Rather than serving as a supplemental approach, risks and crises can be considered blog-mediated or social-mediated when they are either initiated or intensified via social media (Jin & Liu, 2010; Liu, Jin, Briones, & Kuch, forthcoming). The social-mediated crisis communication model is rooted in the assumption that engagement is the best approach to crisis management and that some bloggers are more influential than others. A subsequent empirical test of the model using 40 interviews with American Red Cross communicators who frequently manage and conduct crisis communication found support for the model's matrix that can help crisis managers identify influential social media to monitor and strategies for engaging with influential voices (Liu, Jin, et al., forthcoming).

In a content analysis of differences in bloggers' and newspapers' coverage of five political crises, Liu (2010) identified lessons relevant to government communication. Both newspapers and blogs use government sources more often than any other sources, though newspapers did so more often than blogs did, demonstrating that government communicators may have more ability to influence crisis coverage and the most opportunity in newspapers (Liu, 2010). That finding is counterbalanced by findings that

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both online newspapers and blogs are more likely to assign blame to those representing governments (Liu, 2010).

Connecting new media research on crisis communication and relationship management, Yang, Kang, and Johnson (2010) used an experiment to examine what forms of crisis narratives could maximize audience engagement (e.g., reduce negative emotions) in crisis communication. The authors reported the most effective way to show concern and empathy for victims and affected publics was to employ invitational rhetoric in an orientation of openness to dialogic communication. This approach has the most positive post-crisis outcomes. Transparency, authenticity, and credibility are increasingly important issues when managing crises and building relationships online (e.g., Burns, 2008; Gilpin et al., 2010; Stephens & Malone, 2009, 2010). Online communication, like that in blogs, can generate risk and crisis because they can lack authenticity and transparency, a critical ethical issue for public relations practitioners who create blogs (Burns, 2008). Offering links within online posts can enhance perceived credibility of provided information while offering dialogic interaction opportunities (Stephens & Malone, 2009, 2010). In a study of stakeholder communication surrounding a major U.S. pet food recall, Stephens and Malone (2009) found support for the credibility explanation and noted that when stakeholders provide information (e.g., technical translation of details), they also share more dialogic links (e.g., web, phone, email links in blog post). Because these links could also lead down a path of misinformation, Stephens and Malone (2009) recommended that organizations use the Web prior to a crisis in order to build credibility with stakeholders as their first information source. In support of Hallahan's (2008) OPR measures of dialogic interaction, Stephens and Malone (2009) urged

organizations to commit resources to dialogic resources and update sites, blogs, and news

sources on a frequent, regular basis.

As the literature reviewed has indicated, the government's complex public

relations environment may include relationships with diverse but fixed stakeholders and

publics; overlapping voices and layers of authority within complex government

organizations; increased legal constraints; a public good/democracy mandate; political

environment; poor public perception of government communication; and higher risk and

crisis management scrutiny from the public and the media. The GCDW and government

communication research have identified and found support for unique public sector

attributes and their potential influence on government communication activities,

including limited application in a crisis context (e.g., Avery & Lariscy, 2010; Horsley,

2010). These attributes may result in higher risks and stakes than private sector

organizations face when managing risks and crises (Seeger et al., 2010). Despite the

added complexities and high risks within some government operating environments, the

research largely ignores differences between organizational types (Avery & Lariscy,

2010). The limited research that does exist over-emphasizes crisis communication or risk

communication within a crisis context. Scholarship has also not yet explored how

government communicators' perceive and carry out risk communication via social media.

Kent (2010) identified a need for more theory-building surrounding social media,

particularly theories that can help explain social media's place in the "overall practice of

public relations" (p. 654). Therefore, the second research question seeks to answer Kent's

(2010) call within a risk communication context:

RQ2: How, if at all, do government communicators in high-risk environments

view social media's role in risk communication?

In addition to social media's potential use in a risk communication context,

scholars and practitioners have pointed out the relationship-building potential of social

media and their natural fit with public relations' focus on relationship building (Avery et

al., 2010; Jo & Kim, 2003; Kent & Taylor, 2002). Avery et al. (2010) observed, "Social

media are inherently interactive, communicative, and social…Some herald social media

as bringing public relations full circle to its original foundation of building relationships"

(p. 337). Because this foundation within public relations may inform how government

public relations practitioners build relationships with internal and external publics, the

next section overviews the public relations and relationship management literature.

Relational Perspective in Public Relations

In their assessment of the state of public relations research, Botan and Taylor

(2004) considered the most significant trend in the past 20 years to be the field's move

toward a cocreational perspective that viewed publics as cocreators of meaning and

emphasized relationships. Within the relational perspective, communication becomes a

supporting strategic function that helps organizations initiate and nurture organization-

public relationships (OPR) (Dozier, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 1995; Ledingham, 2006).

Before exploring the relational perspective in the public relations literature, I first situate

the relational perspective at the nexus of various approaches to studying public relations.

Approaches to studying public relations. This study seeks convergence among

various paradigms and approaches to studying government communication. Therefore, I

first offer a brief overview of public relations research and practice paradigms, including

how scholars within these paradigms conceptualize public relations. Paradigms are complex ideas that include the theories and community of scholars that advocate and describe theories as well as the body of research practices that those theories generate (Kuhn, 1970). L. Grunig, J. Grunig and Dozier (2002) defined a paradigm as a set of presuppositions, theories, methods, and exemplars of solutions to research problems that produce a unified worldview for the scholars associated with the paradigm. Paradigms lead to, or perhaps emerge from, a unified way and perspective of seeing the world and the phenomena (e.g., public relations, risk communication, social media) within it – including how to study the phenomena.

Strategic management paradigm. Most prominently, the strategic management or "functionalist" paradigm seeks to solve the research problems of the professional practice (e.g., improve the applied practice of public relations at the functional/ organizational level). The functionalist worldview seeks to describe, explain and improve how public relations functions in organizations (Toth, 2009). Grunig (2006) described this approach as explaining "how the public relations function should be structured and managed to provide the greatest value to organizations, publics, and society" (p. 152). Coming from this behavioral strategic paradigm, public relations has traditionally been defined as a management function of communication between organizations and their internal (e.g., employees, volunteers) and external (e.g., media, community, customers, government regulators, supporters) publics. Cutlip, Center and Broom (2000) defined public relations as "the management function that identifies, establishes, and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the various publics on whom its success or failure depends" (p. 6). Significant strategic management theories within this

paradigm include excellence (see, for example, L. Grunig, J. Grunig, Dozier, 2002) and contingency theory (see, for example, Cameron, Pang, & Jin, 2007).

Rhetorical paradigm. Rather than the functional and organizational (meso) worldview, rhetorical scholars take a more humanistic and societal (macro) worldview that focuses on meaning-making between organizations and publics that develop, co-create, negotiate and maintain their relationships with one another (Heath, 2009). Organizations are viewed as speakers or rhetors seeking to influence stakeholders, employees, media, government and others in society (Toth, 2009). Within the rhetorical approach, Heath (2006, p. 98) conceptualized public relations as:

one of the many instances of social influence by which entities (corporate and individual) vie to cocreate shared meaning, negotiate relationships, influence and yield to influence, create and resolve conflict, distribute resources, manage power resources, exert and yield to control, manage risks and shape and respond to preferences, work to resolve uncertainty, foster trust, engage in support and opposition, distribute rewards and costs, foster interdependency and make enlightened choices.

Rhetorical perspectives see public relations as a dynamic clash of narratives that need to be resolved or adjusted to in order to build mutually beneficial relationships and outcomes (Heath, 2001).

Critical paradigm. Some critical scholars have argued that public relations' functionalist paradigm is flawed and should be replaced, rather than supplemented, by other perspectives (e.g., critical cultural, postmodern) (Curtin & Gaither, 2005; Holtzhausen, 2002; L'Etang, 2005). Dozier and Lauzen (2000) sought to move beyond a

conceptualization of public relations as practice (privileging organizations) to public relations as an intellectual domain. From this perspective, public relations is the study of communication, action and relationships between publics and organizations, and the consequences (intended and unintended) of those relationships on individuals and society (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000).

   Postmodern paradigm. While some scholars have placed postmodernism within the critical paradigm (e.g., Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Toth, 2009), Lather (1992, 2006) added a postmodern/poststructural orientation. Rather than merely seeking to change or emancipate or empower as in the critical stance, postmodernists reject and seek to problematize and question the rational assumptions and language about a modern world that they argue no longer hold, including the traditional scientific method approach to research (Merriam, 2009). Their worldview rejects metanarratives or benchmarks/best practices and privileges difference, dissensus, complexity, uncertainty, and change (Holtzhausen, 2002; Murphy, 2007; Stroh, 2007). Postmodern scholars seek to deconstruct the modernist beliefs and assumptions about organizations and publics that privilege the powerful organizations and their biases (e.g., sexism, racism, bureaucracies) (Toth, 2009). From a postmodern critical viewpoint, public relations has been seen as a hegemonic practice that helps create metanarratives which privilege organizational power by urging consensus and developing norms, structures and practices that marginalize and devalue conflict and competing voices (Holtzhausen, 2002). Other postmodern scholars have recognized a positive role for public relations. For example, Stroh (2007) argued for the potential of public relations strategic communication management to use participative

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approaches that empower marginalized groups through participation and dialogue that recognizes difference and dissension between organizations and publics.

       Seeking paradigmatic convergence. In explaining a message-centered approach to risk communication, Sellnow, Ulmer, Seeger, and Littlefield (2009) distinguish between convergence and congruence. Congruence describes a unified, single interpretation of a phenomenon (i.e., risk communication). Rather than seeking false simplification or a single best interpretation, Sellnow et al. instead look for places of convergence. Convergence happens when there exists "some degree of agreement between two bodies of argument on seemingly opposing sides" (Sellnow et al., 2009, p. 14). Convergence does not declare a winner or loser, a right or wrong perspective. It instead respects all viewpoints and sees them as contributing to a place of convergence. Scholars have recognized the value and need for multiple paradigms and considered these perspectives and their related scholars and theories as offering complementary and challenging, but not mutually exclusive, perspectives on public relations phenomena (J. Grunig, 2006; Toth, 2009, 2010). One such phenomenon that can illustrate this convergence is the increasing focus on relational perspectives within various public relations specializations such as government public relations, risk communication research, and social media research. In synthesizing the paradigmatic research landscape in public relations, Toth (2010) observed that "the relationship worldview of public relations seems firmly established in scholarship, if not practice" (p. 719). I now explore the shift toward relationships within public relations, risk communication, and new media.

Relationship management and organization-public relationships. Twenty-five

years after Ferguson's (1984) call for relationship management as the focus of public

relations scholarship, the relationship management research stream has expanded to

include definitions, types, dimensions, antecedents, maintenance strategies, outcomes,

measurements, applications and theories and models of organization-public relationships

(OPRs) (Ledingham, 2003). Thomlinson (2000) defined relationship management in

public relations contexts as "the development, maintenance, growth, and nurturing of

mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their significant publics" (p.

178). Broom, Casey and Ritchey (2000) said relationships consist of "transactions that

involve the exchange of resources between organizations…and lead to mutual benefit, as

well as mutual achievement" (p. 91). This dissertation uses Hung's (2005) definition that

states OPRs "arise when organizations and their strategic publics are interdependent and

this interdependence results in consequences to each other that organizations need to

manage constantly" (p. 396). This conceptualization recognizes the constant fluctuation

of relationships and interdependence between organizations and publics while still

stressing that organizations seek to manage or guide these relationships.

Relationship management theory focuses on managing OPRs that produce

benefits for both organizations and their key publics (e.g., Bruning, 2001; Bruning,

DeMiglio, & Embry, 2006; Ledingham, 2006). Ledingham (2003) offered a theoretical

statement on relationship management: "Effectively managing organizational

relationships around common interests and shared goals, over time, results in mutual

understanding and benefit for interacting organizations and publics" (p. 190). This

relationship management theory is both abstract enough to accommodate midrange and

subtheories (e.g., notion of public loyalty toward an organization) while also being specific enough to predict outcomes and conditions under which those outcomes can occur (e.g., mutually beneficial OPRs) (Ledingham, 2006). It identifies the elements of an OPR (organizations, publics), the phenomenon (mutual benefit) and the conditions that can produce that benefit (e.g., effective management, common interests, shared goals) (Ledingham, 2006).

Perceptions of mutual benefit (quality of organization-public relationships) have been linked to traditional positive organizational outcomes such as favorable dispositions and loyalty toward organizations, satisfaction and behavioral intent (e.g., Bruning, 2002; Bruning, et al., 2006; Bruning & Ledingham, 1998; Bruning & Ledingham, 2000; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). As such, organizations' relationships with key publics have been seen as critical to organizational success (e.g., Dozier et al., 1995; L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Ehling, 1992). In supporting such success, public relations' contribution to organizational effectiveness is its ability to build quality, long-term relationships with strategic constituencies (e.g., L. Grunig et al., 1992; J. Grunig & Huang, 2000; Ledingham, 2003, 2006).

Models. Public relations scholars have offered OPR models (e.g., Broom et al., 1997; J. Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hung, 2007). The most well-tested model, J. Grunig and Huang's (2000), reflects a strategic management strategy approach. It identifies maintenance strategies, measurable outcomes, and antecedents drawn from excellence theory and its view of public relations' strategic management role (J. Grunig & Huang, 2000). In this model, relationship management (e.g., communication and process) is viewed and measured as two-way with effects on management and publics, because

relationships are best built as symmetrical ones that benefit organizations and publics rather than asymmetrical ones that only positively affect organizations (J. Grunig & Huang, 2000).

Hung's (2005, 2007) model focuses on cultivation strategies rather than measuring outcomes. Combining exchange theory with dialectical perspectives (e.g., Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, as cited in Hung, 2005) that see communication and relational behavior as dynamic and ongoing shift between various tensions, Hung (2005) showed how relationship type influences cultivation strategies used and noted that in positive types of relationships, organizations tend to use symmetrical strategies (e.g., sharing of tasks, access, positivity, openness or disclosure). Hung (2007) modified the OPR continuum to include new kinds of relationships beyond communal (benefits given to please each other) and exchange (benefits given based on benefits received or expected). The more diverse continuum included a win-win zone between mutual communal, covenantal, and exchange relationships where both organizations and publics benefit the most and neither is exploited. Hung (2005, 2007) viewed relationship types as antecedents that helped explain relationship outcomes (e.g., viewing relationship types as influencing intended interactions) and why some are better than others. Subsequent studies have found support for this continuum of relationship types and the fact that OPRs are not mutually exclusive (e.g., Hung & Chen, 2009). In a meta-analysis of OPR research in China, Hung and Chen (2009) found that while general types of relationships are starting points, characteristics of organizations and specific publics are important components of analyzing organizations' OPRs with specific publics as well as developing relationship cultivation strategies.

Dimensions and measures. Scholars have also focused on developing dimensions that make up OPRs as well as measures and scales to evaluate them (e.g., Bruning & Galloway, 2003; Bruning & Ledingham, 1999; J. Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & J. Grunig, 1999). Within J. Grunig and Huang's (2000) approach, relationships can be measured based on four OPR outcomes as relationship quality indicators: *trust* (level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party), *control mutuality* (sense that both parties can influence the other), *satisfaction* (positive view of relationship, sense that its benefits outweigh its costs), and *commitment* (desire to maintain a relationship). Because prior research had found these four characteristics to be interrelated in the minds of participants, J. Grunig and Huang urged their use to conceptualize and measure OPR quality. Hon and J. Grunig (1999) tested quantitative measurement scales for the four dimensions and found they were sufficiently strong for use in evaluating relationships. The measures have been found reliable in other studies (e.g., Hon & Brunner, 2002; Jo, Hon, & Brunner, 2004; Ki & Hon, 2007). Ki and Hon (2007) found satisfaction and control mutuality perceptions were the strongest predictors of a positive attitude toward the organization that can lead to supportive behavioral intentions toward the organization. Satisfaction has been the most common outcome variable in relationship measurement research (Ki & Shin, 2005).

Relationship maintenance strategies. Organizational relationship maintenance or cultivation strategies can mediate perceptions or outcomes (e.g., J. Grunig & Huang, 2000; Ki & Hon, 2007; Ki & Shin, 2005). Ki and Hon (2007) called these strategies "any organizational behavioral efforts that attempt to establish, cultivate, and sustain relationships with strategic publics" (p. 5). For example, J. Grunig and Huang's (2000)

model includes monitoring strategies and stages: environmental scanning to identify

strategic publics for relationship-building; building communication strategies for

developing and maintaining relationships; and then using relationship outcomes to assess

the quality of OPRs and, as a result, public relations' contribution to organizational

effectiveness (J. Grunig & Huang, 2000).

Within the larger relationship management literature, other commonly identified

relationship maintenance strategies can be categorized as networking, openness, sharing

of tasks, assurance, and access (Ki & Shin, 2005). Similar to complexity theory that will

be discussed in the next section, scholars have identified the importance of duration of

commitment (Ledingham, Bruning, & Wilson, 1999) and relationship history (Coombs,

2000) in cultivating relationships. Because business-to-business relationships hinge on

trust, organizations should engage in relationship building activities, actions and

communication that could enhance organizational credibility, promote honest and open

communication, and actively participate in the relationship, including showing

commitment and investment in the interests of the other businesses in the relationship

(Bruning & Ledingham, 2000). It is not enough to engage in these activities;

organizations must communicate to publics their organizational relational efforts

(commitment, investment, etc.) to influence their perceptions and behaviors (Bruning &

Ledingham, 1998). One such context for this communication is within government risk

communication.

Government relationship management. Scholars have applied and found

support for a relational perspective within a political communication (e.g., electoral,

campaign) context (e.g., Ledingham, 2011; Levenshus, 2010; Seltzer & Zhang, 2011;

Sweetser, 2011). Indeed, the expanded definition of government public relations used in this paper includes relationship management (Stromback & Kiousis, 2011a). However, despite this relational focus, Ledingham (2011) made several distinctions between political public relations and relationship management. Based on Stromback and Kiousis' (2011a) definition, Ledingham (2011) distinguished, "The relationship management perspective is inexorably linked to building enduring relationships, whereas product-oriented public relations, as a function of political public relations, is just as firmly fixed on the gaining of power" (p. 244). Ledingham argued that these relationship efforts seek power, stability, dominance and victory. These distinctions may be addressed by Sanders' (2011) inclusion of "civic" in the definition rather than merely political purposes or by distinguishing, as the GCDW has done, the distinction between those government communicators working for elected officials, politicians, or political parties or those working for non-elected officials or in career civil service roles. Certainly, relationship management efforts might be different for the communication director for the National Republican Committee versus the public information officer at a local emergency management agency.

As Hung and Chen (2009) noted, organizational type can influence relationship dimensions and types. In proposing a model of political organization-public relationships (POPRs), Seltzer and Zhang (2011) included politically-relevant antecedents (e.g., time, interpersonal trust, and party identification), political party maintenance strategies as mediators, and J. Grunig and Huang's (2000) outcome dimensions (e.g., trust, commitment, satisfaction, control mutuality) to measure the resulting state of the relationship in terms of attitudinal and behavioral outcomes that affect the political

parties and larger political system. While an important contribution to OPR research, the POPR model may not encompass the civic government organization-public relationship explored in this dissertation.

In fact, relationship management has been studied in a very limited capacity within the civic versus political government context inherent in Ledingham's (2011) chapter. For example, research has addressed city resident-government relationships (e.g., Bruning, Langenhop, & Green, 2004), community-government relationships (e.g., Rhee, 2008), relationships with public officials in a public affairs capacity (e.g., Toth, 2006), and lobbyist-government relationships (e.g., Wise, 2007). Bruning et al.'s (2004) study supports the efforts of city managers, mayors or government communicators to nurture strong OPRs with residents in order to maximize their positive living experiences. One strategy for doing so is putting a human face on the city government through increased interaction with individual employees. Rhee (2008) identified cultivation strategies by the government's Brookhaven National Laboratory in its relationships with its community publics (e.g., sharing of tasks, involving executive leadership in community relations). This study found that involving employees in community relations efforts improved employee-organization relationships. Because interpersonal (rather than mediated) communication between employees and community members had a stronger effect on community-public relationships, it would be useful to look at how organizations foster employee communication with communities and with the organizations. Social media communication may offer one way organizations can enhance their employees' ability to interact with communities and enhance organizational relationship-building efforts. The next section explores research on social media and relationship management.

Social media and relationship management. Despite social media tools'

relationship-building potential, much of the research has shown public relations, and risk

communication, professionals have been generally slow to adopt them (e.g., Avery et al.,

2010; Ding & Zhang, 2009; Eyrich et al., 2008). Social media research has added to the

understanding of organization-public relationships including the need for real interaction

(e.g., Kent & Taylor, 1998) and social media's ability to generate *openness* and a *human,*

conversational voice that promotes relationship building (e.g., Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher

& Miller, 2006), all of which are critical given continual declines in how the public views

and trusts government communication (Pew Research Center, 2011). By increasing

government-public interactions and increasing perceptions of government

responsiveness, online communication with governments can improve trust (Tolbert &

Mossberger, 2006), and this improved trust could influence relationship cultivation.

Research has also deepened the understanding of relationship antecedents and how they

can predict future intended behavior (e.g., among nonprofit volunteers) (e.g., Bortree,

2011). For example, *involving* users in the design and strategy of a social media

technology or platform (e.g., employee intranet) can improve the technology's adoption

and also improve communication effectiveness, perceived employee voice, and employee

satisfaction (Spurlock & O'Neil, 2009).

Authenticity, transparency, and openness. Authors have consistently found

evidence of the need for *authenticity* in social media use to enhance relationship

management (e.g., Gilpin et al., 2010; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007; Smudde, 2005).

Authenticity has been a central concept in online communication research (Slater, 2002).

Rather than a fixed characteristic of an organization or its communication, authenticity is

perceptual (e.g., in minds of constituents) (Sweetser, 2011) and a construct made up of other characteristics (Gilpin et al., 2010). When government organizations and public institutions use social media communication with stakeholders, questions of authenticity become more critical (Gilpin et al., 2010). Gilpin et al. (2010) proposed a theoretical model of socially mediated authenticity in public sphere discourse conducted via social media. In an analysis of the U.S. State Department's DipNote blog, the authors applied the model to better understand how government agencies navigate issues of accountability and public debate through social media. Based on a synthesis of existing research on notions of authenticity, Gilpin et al. (2010) conceptualized it as made up of four dimensions, each with a continuum of perceptions that make up that dimension and contribute to the larger construct of perceived authenticity: authority, identity, engagement, and transparency. The model found DipNote blog to have mixed authenticity, because while it offered a space where public commenters could openly question, respond and engage with one another, blog posters rarely responded to these comments or followed up on requests for more information (Gilpin et al., 2010).

Transparency and openness are closely related to authenticity (Gilpin et al., 2010). As Gilpin et al. (2010) pointed out, government social media efforts often are "frequently described as operating in the name of transparency, attempting to counter perceptions of 'black box' governance by showing citizens the inner workings of public institutions, without fundamentally changing their opaque nature" (p. 260). Achieving transparency is risky within a public relations context because it makes organizations more vulnerable to public judgments (Duhé, 2007). However, lack of communication transparency and authenticity can damage relationships with constituents if nondisclosure

is discovered (Sweetser, 2010). Based on their interviews with federal U.S. government communicators, Fairbanks et al. (2007) found that government communicators highly valued transparency. The authors offered several factors that can explain government communication transparency, many of which were also proposed in the GCDW model (e.g., Liu & Horsley, 2007) introduced earlier. For example, organizational factors influencing government transparent communication included agency communication structure, managers' influence on communication, politics, and agency mission as well as resource factors like staff, time and money (Fairbanks et al, 2007). These factors may also help understand government communicators' views and influences on government communication via social media in terms of its potential to increase transparency and openness and also the factors influencing its adoption.

Developing codes of ethics can guide transparent, open and ethical online communication that is also important to relationship management (Smudde, 2005). Other policies, such as editorial policies, could encourage government social media blog authors or site managers to respond to public comments and questions in order to increase transparency and access to verification (Gilpin et al., 2010). Doing so could also help ensure government social media does not violate the Smith-Mundt Act's ban on domestic propaganda (Gilpin et al.). Transparency, and relationship management, must be integrated into an entire government public relations program, not just use of the digital tools (Sweetser, 2011). Sweetser wrote:

> Regardless of the technology, one thing will remain constant in digital political public relations. Communication that does not appear organic and which is not engaging will not yield results. Public relations, political and otherwise has

always been about the relationships with one's publics, and the development of

digital tools has only emphasized the potential for developing those relationships

on a larger basis. (2011, p. 309)

Control. Social media research has also identified challenges to using new

technologies for relationship management. The Internet's influence on increasing

unpredictability has only further problematized public relations' strategic management

focus (McKie, 2001). From a relationship management perspective, sites like

Amazon.com have helped create virtual publics and relationship building as a service

(McKie, 2001). Public relations firms and practitioners could plan and manage more as

"living learning systems" as advanced by chaos and complexity theories (McKie, 2001,

p. 90). These approaches also differ in their different approaches to strategic management

and planning and overall view of uncertainty, change, control and prediction.

The issue of a perceived loss of organizational control is raised in new media

research (Karpinski, 2003; Kent, 2008; Marken, 2005). For example, new and social

media may be slowly shifting the locus of control within public relations from the

organization to the public and challenging a top-down, controlled management view of

the OPR (Cozier & Witmer, 2001; Gilpin, 2010; Kelleher, 2009). Kent (2008) listed

communication risks, including loss of control, in his list of weaknesses of using blogs in

public relations. Employees' voices in organizational blogs share control of the

organization's official voice (Kelleher, 2009). Information control is also challenging in a

fragmented media environment with many platforms from which current and former

employees, customers, partners, competitors, and other related parties communicate

about you (Gilpin, 2010). Despite the large research stream that has grown around this

connection between relationship management and social media, theory development, with few exceptions (e.g., Yang & Lim, 2009), has lagged due to descriptive use and perceptions studies (Kent, 2010). The following section addresses two theoretical influences for this dissertation regarding relational risk communication via social media in a public sector context: dialogic theory (e.g., Kent & Taylor, 2002) and the distributed public relations model (Kelleher, 2009).

   Dialogic theory. One of the most often-used theoretical frameworks within public relations and new media is Kent and Taylor's (2002) dialogic theory focusing on the Internet's potential to increase dialogic communication between organizations and their publics as a relationship management tool (e.g., Bruning, Dials, & Shirka, 2008; Kent & Taylor; 2002; Kent & Taylor, 1998). Kent and Taylor (1998) defined dialogic communication as "any negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions" (p. 325). The authors view dialogue as centering on discussion versus agreement. Dialogic theory shifted the emphasis from communication management to communication as negotiated engaged conversation. In this way, it draws from the rhetorical, discourse view of relationship management and aligns with Sellnow et al.'s (2009) concept of convergence. Kent and Taylor (2002) viewed dialogic communication as critical to using the Internet effectively and ethically within public relations and to creating dynamic, enduring relationships with publics.

   The dialogic theory of public relations (e.g., Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002) draws from philosophy, rhetoric, psychology and relational communication to conceptualize a dialogic (two-way, relational communication) model for public relations. The dialogic tenets are rooted in commitment to relationship building (interpersonal and mediated) and

an assumption that the Internet is particularly useful for fostering relationship-building

dialogue including listening, empathy, and identifying common ground with publics.

Kent and Taylor (2002) thought the Web represented the closest a public relations

practitioner could come to an interpersonal ideal (p. 31). Park and Reber (2008) noted

that organizations' Web sites play a role in fostering dialogue, one aspect of relationship-

building and considered their use as such to be the key to developing mutually beneficial

relationships. In addition to Web sites, blogs were found to also be effective in

establishing OPRs (Seltzer and Mitrook, 2007). They applied to blogs the five principles

Kent and Taylor (1998) identified for organizations to use Web-sites and Webbed

communication to build OPRs: establishing a dialogic loop, creating an easy to use

interface, working to keep visitors, working to encourage visitors to return, and providing

publics with useful information (p. 227). Kent, Taylor, and White (2003) found that the

more an organization depended on its publics for success, the more important dialogic

features on a Web site became.

Hallahan (2008) updated Taylor and Kent's (1998) dialogic principles when

developing online OPR measurements: commitment, control mutuality, communality,

trust, and satisfaction. *Commitment* refers to how publics view organizational dedication

to engaging online, investing resources in cultivating relationships, and making the effort

to communicate. *Control mutuality* refers to the amount of interaction between

organization and public (e.g., organizational responsiveness). Through *communality*, an

organization and a public identify with one and shared interests, values, and beliefs. To

develop *trust*, organizations must be viewed as believable, competent, reliable, and

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consistent. Finally, *satisfaction* is determined by how well the OPR meets publics' needs and expectations (Hallahan, 2008).

Other studies have used dialogic principles to examine organizational online relationship management strategies and tactics and offered best practices in the political campaign (e.g., Levenshus), political party (e.g., Seltzer & Zhang, 2011) and nonprofit (e.g., Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009) environments. Scholars have generally found that practitioners and organizations are not using dialogic communication tools to their full relationship-building potential (e.g., Capriotti & Moreno, 2007; Esrock & Leichty, 1998; Hill & White, 2000; Kent, 2010; Kent et al., 2003). Because social media studies lack daily, real-time views of how these relationship-building activities are actually carried out, the current study may help explain the gap between practitioner recognition of social media relationship-building potential and its actual use.

Distributed public relations model. An emerging theory relevant to this dissertation's emphasis on government relational risk communication via social media is the distributed public relations model (Kelleher, 2009). Rather than focusing on an organization's online presence and communication at the public relations function or organizational level (e.g., organization's website, organization's blog), the distributed public relations model accounts for the fragmented online communication environment includes many voices that represent organizations. The model draws from a wide range of people (sometimes external) to build relationships with key publics and represent the organization's identity. This approach could lend itself to embracing multivocality in online image construction and relationship management. It expands the view of "public

relations" function to recognize other public-relating voices (e.g., current and former employees). The more organizational blog posts participants were exposed to in a 2009 experiment, the more likely they were to associate a human, conversational voice with the organization that correlated with higher relational outcomes (e.g., trust, satisfaction, commitment) (Kelleher, 2009). The model challenges best practices and approaches that recommend single spokespeople and a hierarchical information control system within day-to-day public relations contexts as well as government risk and crisis communication environments.

      Summary of dissertation's relational perspective. Along with early works by Hallahan (2001) and previously reviewed research examining practitioners' tactical use of social media tools, relational theoretical perspectives of authenticity, transparency, and openness and control and those drawn from organization-public relationship research, dialogic theory and the distributed public relations model may help understand how and why practitioners are making the strategic *and* tactical choices in their use of social media communication with key publics. Doing so helps respond to Kent's (2010) critique that a great deal of social media research includes flawed assumptions about organizational social media communication motives and uses. In one of four recommended directions for future social media research in public relations, Kent (2010) urged research on social media strategies rather than outcomes and research that places social media within the context of the larger media mix. Again, this helps answer Kent's (2010) call for more theory-building surrounding social media, particularly theories that can help explain social media's place in the "overall practice of public relations" (p. 654). Given the complex operating environment explored earlier in the paper, it may be useful to intersect

a relational public relations theoretical framework with a postmodern complexity approach as a framework through which to study government relational risk and crisis communication via social media.

Relational Risk Communication

Recent syntheses of risk communication best practices reflect the current phase of relational risk communication (e.g., Covello, 2003; Palenchar, 2010; Sellnow, et al., 2009) and its overlap with many relationship management principles outlined earlier. For example, in Sellnow et al.'s (2009) grounded theory approach to research on risk communication, the authors described their resulting best practices as "designed to help build constructive and mutually beneficial relationships with risk stakeholders, acknowledge the complex and multi-dimensional nature of both risk and communication, and respond to the communication and informational needs of diverse and changing audiences" (p. 21).

Just as in public relations, the tension between informing (one-way), persuading (two-way asymmetric), and partnering (two-way symmetrical) with stakeholders can be found in the evolution of risk communication from its origins in the 1980s through today (e.g., Gurabardhi et al., 2005; Leiss, 1996; Palenchar, 2005). Several scholars have acknowledged and charted the various changes and models of risk communication (e.g., Gurabardhi et al., 2005; Heath, 1995; Leiss, 1996; Palenchar, 2005). Palenchar (2010) described that risk communication has moved away "from the power of information within education to one of consensus building through dialogue" (Palenchar, 2010, p. 448).

Crisis communication research has taken a different path. Over the last 30 years, organizational crisis management has grown into a central research stream and practice within public relations (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010b). Yet, while some scholars have argued that the relational perspective dominates public relations research, this relational view has recently begun to emerge alongside the organization-centered crisis management research focus (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010b, Coombs, 2010c).

Postmodern and critical theorists have critiqued a crisis communication approach that they see as privileging the organization (e.g., Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a; Kim & Dutta, 2009). Kim and Dutta (2009) charged that such crisis communication focuses on the "strategies and processes that organizations ought to take to secure favorable positions in times of crisis" and emphasizes "restituting the status quo and fixing the damages posted to the organization by the crisis" (p. 144). The authors identified biases and assumptions within this paradigm including the managerial bias that critical scholars have also levied against public relations research in general (Holtzhausen, 2002). According to Kim and Dutta (2009), the conceptualization of crisis as a threat to organizational survival can lead to an over-emphasis on effectiveness of organizational crisis communication messages or strategies (e.g., situational crisis communication theory) and preparedness best practices geared toward managerial practices (e.g., segmenting publics based on importance to the corporation).

It is not surprising then that image restoration theory and theories developed from it (e.g., situational crisis communication theory, discourse of renewal) are the primary theoretical framework for crisis communication (Seeger et al., 2010). In a thematic meta-analysis of crisis communication research published in the top public relations journals,

Journal of Public Relations Research and *Public Relations Review*, from 1975-2006, An

and Cheng (2010) also found an overall trend of research focused on organizational crisis

response strategies. Gilpin and Murphy (2010a) also identified a shift in crisis

communication practices: "Asymmetric approaches to crisis planning strategies, in which

the organization's needs come first, are giving way to a more relational view that

emphasizes ongoing stakeholder interactions to negotiate how a crisis is interpreted, who

is responsible, and what should be done" (p. 683).

Though not as developed as the relational risk communication perspective,

scholars have begun to stress the importance of relationships in a crisis communication

context, though this research is mostly coming from the rhetorical and postmodern

perspectives addressed earlier. For example, in the precrisis stage, risk communication

can be used to build positive stakeholder relations that can help resolve future crises

(Heath, 1997; Seeger et al., 2001).

In contrast, government risk communication research and practice acknowledged

early in its development the need for two-way, dialogic, relational approaches. For

example, an influential National Research Council (1989) report distinguished risk

messages and other views of one-way risk communication from the council's view of risk

communication "as an interactive process of exchange of information and opinion among

individuals, groups, and institutions" (p. 2) and stressed that "it involves multiple

messages about the nature of risk and other messages, not strictly about risk, that express

concerns, opinions, or reaction to risk messages or to legal or institutional arrangements

for risk management" (p. 21). The council further defined effective risk communication

as doing more than convincing audiences to accept the opinions or arguments of the risk

communicator. Rather, risk communication's success is dependent on the extent to which it "raises the level of understanding of relevant issues or actions for those involved and satisfies them that they are adequately informed within the limits of available knowledge" (NRC, 1989, p. 2). Sellnow et al. (2009) pointed out that this change in the government's view of risk communication made two important contributions to the study and understanding of risk communication. It validated risk communication as an interactive process, and it recognized that risk communication inherently involves multiple, often competing messages (Sellnow et al., 2009).

While Seeger and Reynolds (2008) defined risk communication as the "intentional effort to inform the public about risks and persuade individuals to modify their behavior to reduce risks" (p. 9), the NRC struggled with the role of public officials or governments in trying to persuade or influence individuals regarding risks and risk-mitigating behaviors or actions. "Government officials must be accountable for their decisions and will likely find their efforts to influence contested if they stray from accepted scientific views or if they challenge popular consensus. A public official should be aware of the political risks and of the legitimate constraints placed upon government in advocacy" (NRC, 1989, p. 2). The report went on to recommend the strategic use of independent review processes to gauge appropriateness of persuasive techniques and cautioned that when "an unusually strong degree of advocacy seems warranted, officials should seek legitimization of such actions through the democratic process" (NRC, 1989, p. 2-3).

This difficult balance of responsible advocacy is made more challenging by decreasing trust, a key dimension of OPRs and effective risk communication, in

government risk communication. In a longitudinal study of risk communication involving manufacturing industry and government risk communication in a Texas ship channel community, Heath and Palenchar (2000) found that while residents' increased awareness of industry's health and safety efforts increased their support of those efforts, this awareness did not translate to higher support or trust for the industry or government officials.

  Risk communication models. Heath (1995) considered early risk communication to be part of the information exchange and shared knowledge model that was rooted in sending messages about risk levels, precautions, and ways to mitigate risk. Palenchar (2005) called this the technical risk assessment period in which risk communication was source-centered and linear. Leiss (1996) called this technical assessment period of risk communication Phase I (1975-1984) in which the focus was on risk, and objective science dominated in terms of measuring risk. This objective science risk communication approach left out lay audiences and their perceptions of risk (Palenchar, 2010). As Heath's (1995) information exchange and shared knowledge model noted, early risk communication was more of an information exchange about risks between interested parties. So, for example, industrial spokespersons were encouraged to provide clear and credible information about the nature of risks to meet the informational needs of an anxious public (Palenchar, 2005). This model grew out of the fact that risk communication was grounded in "the public's right to know about hazards and risks that might have an impact on their wellbeing" (Seeger & Reynolds, 2008, p. 9). Risk communication, as practiced within public health, largely focuses on public messages as part of persuasive campaigns often disseminated through the mainstream mass media

(Seeger & Reynolds, 2008). The goal is to inform the public in order to bring about

behavior change that protects and improves public health and safety (Seeger & Reynolds,

2008).

The second stage, which Palenchar (2005) called interactive risk perception and

management, saw communication as more interactive and a process of exchange of

information among individuals, groups, and institutions. While two-way communication

was used, it was mostly done in an effort to improve acceptance of the experts' risk

communication messages (Palenchar, 2010). Leiss (1996) referred to this as Phase II

(1985-1994). Where Phase I emphasized the risk component of risk communication,

Phase II emphasized communication. However, communication strategies mostly

included persuasive messages designed to convince listeners that risk assessments were

correct (Leiss, 1996). Palenchar and Heath (2006) pointed out that this era was valuable

to the development of risk communication because it did consider people's risk

perceptions and introduced the idea of community dialogue among stakeholders.

However, the era was limited by organization's unwillingness to actually engage and

partner with those stakeholders through messages that adequately addressed community

concerns and appreciated stakeholders' complex interpretations and decision-making

processes (Palenchar & Heath, 2006). As such, the era was based more on marketing

communication efforts that appealed to the psychometrics of audiences and sought to

build trust through increasing source credibility (Palenchar & Heath, 2006).

The third, current era of risk communication, as referenced earlier, reflects a more

relational perspective that elevates the audience and situates audiences contextually.

Leiss's third phase (1995 on) also highlights the social context and recognizes that lack of

trust in risk messages is pervasive and cannot be overcome by using persuasive techniques that were the focus of Phase II. This lack of trust could have particular implications for government communicators. For example, Leiss (1996) hypothesized that "trust in institutional risk actors (governments and industry) can accumulate slowly, through the commitments by these institutions—as demonstrated by deeds, not words— to carry out responsible risk communication and, furthermore, to do so consistently as a matter of daily practice over the long term, not just in response to crisis events" (p. 90). Honesty and openness about risks "may promote an environment of risk-sharing, where the public and agencies mutually accept responsibility for managing a risk" (Seeger, 2006, p. 239).

The concept of risk-sharing and partnering to manage risks reflects the current phase of risk communication's view that successful risk management is dependent on consensus building, meaningful stakeholder engagement and interaction, and an acceptance of reasonable government risk regulations (Leiss, 1996). If these building blocks were not in place, risk communicators, especially governments, would lose all risk management authority. Leiss (1996) pointed out that there was no current code of good practice in the area of risk communication that could provide benchmarks for responsible risk communication but predicted that the third phase of risk communication might lead to such benchmarks (Leiss, 1996). Benchmarks or best practices have been recommended in this era and will be discussed later (e.g., Covello, 2003; Palenchar, 2010; Sellnow et al., 2009). Beyond benchmarks, Leiss (1996) also suggested improving responsible risk communication by developing a code of conduct and risk communication audits to build public trust and credibility.

Heath (1995) characterized this most recent approach to risk communication as within the communication infrastructure model. This model emphasizes social context or "social interrelations among the stakeholders in the dialogue and resulting actions within risk management" (Palenchar & Heath, 2006, p. 135). In terms of models and methodologies, the social context phase "rejects the transfer of information model, assumes the existence of multiple, eclectic, and active audiences, and is sensitive to creating fluid relationships among people and their societies" (Palenchar, 2010, p. 452). Within this approach, the goal of risk communication is to facilitate decision making and risk sharing and to allow publics to make informed choices about risks (Seeger & Reynolds, 2008, p. 9). The model is also viewed as one that fosters ethical, responsible advocacy through strategic risk communication (Palenchar & Heath, 2006).

These three phases of risk communication were supported in a 2005 theoretical synthesis of risk communication research in the science journals. Based on a review of 349 peer-reviewed articles published between 1988 and 2000, Gurabardhi et al. (2005) called control mutuality the dominant theoretical perspective. Overlapping with the key relationship management dimension and outcome measure, Gurabardhi et al. (2005) defined this perspective as emphasizing the interaction between parties involved in a risk decision-making process and their mutual influence. The control mutuality perspective contrasts with a unidirectional control model where one stakeholder tries to control the other. They found an overall increase in risk communication articles and an increasing amount of research focused on two-way, versus one-way, communication and that referred to stakeholder participation in risk decisions (Gurabardhi et al., 2005).

Complexity theory, discussed in the next section, may help explain the importance of relationships within risk and crisis communication.

Relational risk and crisis communication. Palenchar (2010) argued that risk communication provides the opportunity to better understand stakeholders' concerns about risks generated by organizations, to dialogue with those stakeholders in order to address their concerns, and to take action to appropriately reduce perceived risks. Part of listening to and understanding stakeholders and elevating them as partners means better understanding their perceptions and ratings of risks. Normatively, risk communication, then, should be viewed as a dialogue, rather than a monologue (Williams & Olaniran, 1998). This is true for government risk communicators (Sellnow et al., 2009). When risk communication approaches value two-way communication that build trust and credibility and engage stakeholders as decision makers, they can lead to this shared dialogue rather than more one-way push risk communication from government experts to lay publics (Palenchar, 2010). In a study of citizens' perceptions of government public information meetings as risk communication venues, McComas (2003) found that if governments hold public meetings only to explain and justify previously-determined decisions, "rather than establishing two-way communication, some critics argue that holding a public meeting is the surest way for government agencies to minimize citizen input into decision making" (p. 165).

Government relationships with key publics may also be strained by government risk communicators' inability to be fully open about all risks. For example, risk communicators have been urged to use honesty, openness, transparency, candor, and compassion and concern (Sellnow et al., 2009). However, governments in some high-risk

contexts may need to balance relationship management efforts with other significant safety or security issues. As Palenchar and Heath (2006) wrote:

> In an era of terrorism, too much transparency can have negative consequences; information could fall into hands that might be able to use it against the industry and the people whose interests must be served. However, organizations should be concerned that this strategically dampened flow of information about health, safety, and environmental planning might harm their relationship with community residents (p. 153).

In addition to that balancing act, Palenchar and Heath (2006) offered additional guidelines directly related to stakeholder (e.g., community, employee) perceptions. First, understand publics' concerns in terms of their own experiences and values. Second, communications should include both benefits and harms, and communicators should not assume that everyone's decision heuristics or values will lead them to identical weightings of these harms and benefits. Finally, Palenchar and Heath (2006) urged communicators to recognize the "value-laden, personalized decision process" that community members apply and to then frame the risk assessment according to this process (p. 140). Government risk communicators (i.e., experts and regulatory agencies) often make the mistake of assuming that they share with their audiences a common framework for analyzing and interpreting risk messages (National Research Council, 1989). The fact that government speaks with so many voices and may take opposing viewpoints can exacerbate public confusion (National Research Council, 1989).

Given the research reviewed on differences in various conceptualizations and models of risk communication (top-down, controlled strategic management versus

holistic, complexity orientation with relational approach), social media's relationship-building potential, and the public sector, the following research question is posed:

RQ3: To what extent do government communicators in high-risk environments engage in relational risk communication via social media?

Complexity-Based Approaches to Risk and Crisis Communication

Emerging risk and crisis communication perspectives drawn from postmodern concepts like self-organization, complex adaptive systems, and the importance of stakeholder perspectives and relationships may provide the most useful complexity-based framework for studying how government risk communication is conducted via social media within the public sector's complex communication environment. Today's organizations, including those in the public sector, operate in an increasingly complex, connected environment. This complex environment includes ever-expanding technologies, globalization, and advances in communication as well as better informed and more active stakeholders (Palenchar, 2010; Seeger et al., 2001; Sellnow et al., 2009). This contemporary context with its increase in uncertainty and risk has, therefore, accelerated the need for applied risk communication (Seeger et al., 2001). As Palenchar (2010) stated, "The industrial and information ages have created a whole new range of risks and crises, while advances in communication and information technologies have increased people's awareness of these risks as well as increasing the opportunities for dialogue and shared decision making based on risk assessment and associated political and social discussions" (p. 448).

These challenges and opportunities may be best studied and understood through the postmodern paradigm of complexity and chaos (Gilpin & Murphy, 2006, 2010a,

2010b; Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009). While chaos and complexity theories may have first been applied to public relations research within a crisis communication context, scholars have urged their application beyond crisis (e.g., Duhé, 2007; Gilpin & Murphy, 2010b; McKie, 2001; Murphy, 2000, 2007; Stroh, 2007). Relevant to this dissertation, these contexts include public relations strategic management (e.g., Duhé, 2007; Gilpin & Murphy, 2010b; Holtzhausen, 2002; Murphy, 2007; Stroh, 2007), government public relations (e.g., Freimuth, 2006; Horsley, 2010; Seeger et al., 2010), risk communication (e.g., Seeger et al., 2010), online communication and social media (e.g., Gilpin & Murphy, 2010b), and building relationships with internal and external stakeholders (e.g., Gilpin & Murphy, 2010b; Horsley, 2010).

Despite these opportunities, public relations has generally lagged in integrating postmodern principles and concepts into theories and conceptualizations (Holtzhausen, 2002; McKie, 2001; Murphy, 2000). Within a risk and crisis context, these postmodern perspectives are still relatively new (e.g., An & Cheng, 2010; Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a). In an analysis of theories used or cited in crisis communication research, chaos theory and postmodern theory were each only used once (An & Cheng, 2010). The next section overviews complexity and chaos and demonstrates their usefulness in studying government risk and crisis communication.

Complexity and chaos theories. Complexity theory has been defined as "the study of many individual actors who interact locally in an effort to adapt to their immediate situation" where "these local adaptations…accumulate to form large-scale patterns that affect the greater society, often in ways that could not have been anticipated" (Murphy, 2000, p. 450). Chaos theory is often discussed in conjunction, and

sometimes synonymously, with complexity theory. While these theories do share a postmodern worldview and overlapping characteristics, they take different approaches to strategic management and communication. Scholars have used complexity and complex adaptive systems as metaphors for organizations, publics, and crises (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a; Seeger et al., 2010). Chaos and complexity theories started in the natural sciences and have been translated to the social sciences (Nowotny, 2005). Initially, this translation was a metaphor and way to expand conceptualizations of organizations and their communication, but complexity theory has moved beyond metaphor to include rigorous methods for studying organizations and their communication and interactions from a complexity-based perspective (Murphy, 2000).

Gilpin and Murphy (2010a) described five characteristics of complex adaptive systems: (1) made up of individual agents whose local interactions fundamentally change the system over time, (2) dynamic and, therefore, unstable and unpredictable in their behaviors and outcomes, (3) irreducible without losing significant meaning, (4) dependent on own history, and (5) have indistinct, permeable boundaries that make it hard to separate systems from their surrounding environments (p. 684-685). These elements are tightly interconnected (coupled) and evolve dynamically, so these systems are by nature non-linear in their change patterns (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a).

Complexity and government risk and crisis management. Chaos theory can provide a richer view of organizations and crises, particularly by attending to a more holistic view of crises and crisis communication that accounts for complexity and sensitivity beyond merely crisis responses (Seeger et al., 2001). The postmodern approach, and specifically chaos and complexity theories, also fits well with the relational

view in risk and crisis management (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a). "Complexity theory, combined with organizational learning, can be seen as part of this larger movement toward a relational perspective" (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a, p. 688). Embracing complexity can also provide more adaptability for organizations to survive crises than traditional, fixed, strategic management approaches that fail to recognize unique issues arising from each crisis (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009).

Complexity theory sees organizations as complex adaptive systems that hold onto patterns that accrue over time and resist efforts to change or control these embedded patterns (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a). The role of history makes each crisis unfold uniquely and constrains efforts to predict or generalize best practices related to types of crises (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a). The fact that these changes can happen gradually or rapidly depending on the specific system and its history poses another challenge to efforts to predict or control (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a). Despite these differences, scholars offer complexity approaches to crisis management. While the emerging chaos and complexity research addressed here has mostly focused on crisis communication, these complexity-based approaches can also apply to risk management and risk communication. For example, government communicators can take a holistic view of risk, risk communication, and risk management; embrace uncertainty; foster multivocality; and build relationships with key internal and external stakeholders.

Take a holistic view. By seeing risk and crisis as a nonlinear, holistic, dynamic process within a complex adaptive system, organizations can better identify and respond to risk and crisis (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a). Such a holistic view can also apply to seeing risk and crisis communication as integrated, rather than fully distinct, functions. For

example, Freimuth (2006) applied the postmodern chaos theory to explain the challenges

the author faced while managing the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's

communication during the anthrax attacks. Lesson learned included communicating

uncertainty, meeting the needs of a 24/7 media cycle, and all with speed. In response to

that experience, CDC staff developed and adopted an integrated risk and crisis

communication model called Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) that

recognizes the time constraints and lack of complete information that distinguish

emergency risk and crisis communication decisions (Palenchar, 2010). This theoretical

and practical approach has been well-studied (e.g., Freimuth, Hilyard, Barge, & Sokler,

2008; Prue et al., 2003; Quinn et al., 2008; Seeger & Reynolds, 2008; Veil et al., 2008).

For example, Freimuth et al. (2008) conducted a risk communication simulation based on

an avian flu pandemic scenario in which local health departments in Georgia were asked

to follow the CERC principles in real-time. Such an exercise revealed the difficulty of

applying the model in a real-time, stressful scenario. Sellnow, Seeger, and Ulmer (2005)

used chaos theory's explanation of the "new normal" that emerges when a complex

adaptive system self-organizes in order to analyze how the CDC's post-anthrax crisis

discourse helped develop its "new normal" (p. 168).

Taking a holistic approach can also expand the current focus within crisis

management that emphasizes organizational crisis response. Rather than relegating risk

communication to monitoring an environment in a pre-crisis stage, a holistic approach

means organizations constantly seek to identify fractals (e.g., issues, rumors, risks,

patterns, norms, relationships) and can hopefully prevent bifurcation (i.e., crisis)

(Sellnow et al., 2009). Recent research on the discourse of renewal has also emphasized

the positive opportunities, rather than just negative threats and consequences, for organizations in crisis (Coombs, 2010c). Postmodern approaches also help explain why through discourses of renewal rather than blame, organizational learning, change, and development can emerge from crises (e.g., Seeger et al., 2010; Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow, 2007; Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2010). Such learning "facilitates the adjustment of risk recognition and refines the collective understanding of a risk" (Seeger & Reynolds, 2008, p. 16). In other words, organizations can see risk in new places (e.g., Twitter). Learning can also help an organization realign its norms and avoidance systems so future crisis events are less likely (Seeger & Reynolds, 2008). Additionally, learning can bring about new resources or capabilities.

Government examples of these types of organizational learning include the "largest ever reorganization of the federal bureaucracy" in the wake of the September 11, 2011 terrorist attacks that resulted in the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) (Seeger & Reynolds, 2008, p. 17). The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also changed its information production and dissemination in the wake of the 2001 anthrax attack (Robinson & Newstetter, 2003), and DHS made changes to its optimistic planning assumptions that had marred its response to Hurricane Katrina (Seeger & Reynolds, 2008). In a study of the U.S. Air Force's handling of its sexual assault scandal, Holtzhausen and Roberts (2009) found that learning can occur on both ends of the organization-publics spectrum. For example, the Air Force learned better how to handle the issue of sexual assault, and the media found more balanced ways of viewing the events (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009).

Embrace uncertainty. Despite its usefulness, complexity theory as a framework

for crisis management in public relations is a "long way off" (Holtzhausen & Roberts,

2009, p. 181). Embracing complexity theory would mean accepting uncertainty which

may be uncomfortable compared to other theories' (i.e., contingency, situational crisis

communication theory) steps for successful management (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009).

As noted previously, complexity theory takes a different, not indifferent, view of strategy.

In contrast to traditional approaches' goal-oriented efforts to reduce complexity and gain

control and predictability, crisis managers can embrace and absorb a system's non-

linearity, uncertainty and multi-causality (multiple causes and outcomes) (Gilpin &

Murphy, 2010a). Other management approaches to complement top-down ones include

what scholars have termed a complexity orientation that embraces ambiguity and

flexibility (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a), structured flexibility (Wakefield, 2007), and

pragmatic complexity communication model (e.g., Corman et al., 2008). Structured

flexibility theory is based on organizations operating in complex, uncertain environments

and bases the idea on having some generic principles (e.g., budget management, strategic

management, agreement on policies, etc.) and then some local-specific variables

(Brinkerhoff & Ingle, 1989).

A complexity orientation complements, rather than abandons, premises and

principles within the strategic management paradigm and its related excellence theory[1]

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[1] The Excellence theory spans more than 25 years of research on public relations' value
to organizational effectiveness. It now serves as a benchmark for organizations to use to
structure or improve public relations within their organizations. These benchmark
characteristics of excellence are at the program, functional and organizational levels. For
example, at the organizational level, organizations need to see two-way symmetrical
(mutually adapting) communication with internal and external publics as key to

(Murphy, 2007). Within a strategic management perspective, public relations strategy provides the focus and direction for an organization's communication with key internal and external stakeholders (Steyn, 2007). Strategy can be both deliberate (i.e., planned) or emergent where it is planned but adjusts to a changing landscape that may include risks (Steyn, 2007). Public relations strategies link the public relations function (e.g., department, team) and its communication plan and activities with the achievement of the larger organization's mission and strategies (Steyn, 2007). Generally speaking, complexity approaches aim to shape the context in which strategy emerges versus shaping patterns of strategy (Holtzhausen, 2002; Murphy, 2007; Stroh, 2007). Multiple contingencies and voices are taken into account, and their predictive power is viewed as weak (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009, p. 181).

Corman et al. (2008) took a strategic management and persuasion approach to government military and public diplomacy communication regarding the global war on terror. The authors offered a pragmatic complexity communication model that embraced strategic ambiguity and pushed for an audience-based, culture-centered view of communication as a complex sense-making process (Goodall, Jr., Trethewey, & Corman, 2008). Because audiences and media are large complex systems in a dynamic, uncertain environment, messages are, therefore, interpreted within these contexts. The new model deemphasizes control and discrete channels, audiences, and messages. It instead embraces complexity, uses experimentally varied rather than repeated messages, considers ways to disrupt an existing system, and expects and makes contingency plans for failure (Goodall, Jr. et al., 2008).

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relationship-building and organizational success. (See Dozier et al., 1995; L. Grunig et al., 2002; J. Grunig et al., 2006).

Excellence and complexity theories share an idea that the social world seeks balance and equilibrium, but complexity theory suggests that individual agents interact in ways that alter a system over time as agents both adapt to changing environments and create change in the environment (Holtzhausen, 2002). Complexity-based approaches help explain why asymmetry, not the normative ideal in excellence theory, is not successful (Murphy, 2007). Change does not occur by force but rather happens through natural self-organization, therefore, asymmetrical attempts at persuasion will not be effective in the long-term. Unlike excellence theory, however, complexity approaches are ethically neutral about power and view power as always shared and never given up voluntarily or rationally (Murphy, 2007). Therefore, within this approach, asymmetry is not viewed through an ethical or rational lens (Murphy, 2007).

In addition, complexity theory suggests that shifting and uncertain environments can be productive, because they push for change (innovation and renewal). Complexity has a looser approach to prediction and control, because cause and effect is difficult to identify in a complex system with its "dense, multidirectional, dynamic connections" (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010b, p. 73). These turbulent, highly contextual, holistic, and indeterminate communication environments demand "new modes of planning that allow for broader ranges of outcomes, adapt to both gradual and sudden change, and relinquish the idea of control" (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010b, p. 74). Adopting organizational ambiguity or strategic ambiguity during organizational crises (e.g., Sellnow & Ulmer, 2004) means developing a "tolerance for looser causality, looser controls, and limited predictability" (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a, p. 685). This approach may mean acknowledging, not minimizing, uncertainty in risk assessments and using it to fuel efforts to seek out more

and better answers to address community concerns (e.g., Palenchar & Heath, 2006). Roberts (1990) found that interdependence and empowerment at all ranks as well as a common understanding of organizational goals and safety concerns were cultural characteristics that contributed to organized chaos and high reliability.

Managers can also explore various possible contingencies and ways to quickly adapt to unexpected circumstances (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a). While useful, contingencies can only offer a "small window onto the landscape of the network of possibilities that might affect a crisis" (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009, p. 181). Therefore, contingencies should not extend too far into the future as the dynamic interconnectedness of complex systems makes it very difficult and unreliable to project too far into the long-term future (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a).

Empower stakeholder and organizational multivocality. In doing so, organizations should enact requisite variety by gathering information from multiple stakeholder perspectives throughout the crisis management process versus just during a post-crisis organizational learning period. Within this complexity orientation there are similarities to traditional models, though with important divergences in underlying worldview and application (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a). Organizations can still have crisis teams and develop plans, but these teams should be made up of multiple voices and perspectives and these short-term contingencies should be rooted in multiple causes and possible outcomes. Second, organizations should value relationships with stakeholders (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a).

Aligning with complexity's explanation of the value of multivocality and interdependence of individual actors in a complex adaptive system, rhetorical scholars

have traced competing voices that can be forgotten and marginalized in both the study and practice of risk and crisis communication (e.g., Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; Heath, 2004; Waymer & Heath, 2007). Coombs (2010c) identified the multivocal approach as a significant development emerging from the rhetorical perspective. This perspective helps address limitations within crisis communication research including (1) a focus on the crisis response stage, (2) focus on a single actor (i.e., organization, individual) viewed as the communication sender (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010); and (3) public relations' tendency to view publics from the organization's perspective (Leitch & Neilson, 2001). The traditional strategies of segmenting and communicating with publics as fixed categories is problematic, because publics hold their own identities and views of the organizations and there is "no guarantee that such publics will be content with their status as organizational artifacts or will accept the meanings that organizations have imposed on them" (Leitch & Neilson, 2001, p. 138).

The multivocal nature of many organizational crises represent a "complex constellation of political, religious, cultural, and commercial crises involving not only the media, governments, ambasadors [sic], religious leaders, and citizens from many countries, but also private companies" (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010, p. 426). The audience-centered and message-centered risk communication approach advocated by Sellnow et al. (2009) emphasizes audience-centered communication and messages that are culturally sensitive, recognize diversity and multiplicity of audiences and their risk tolerance levels, complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity in risk situations, and the interactive nature of risk communication as a process. Embracing multivocality in order to collaborate with a variety of credible sources can help to build trust over time (e.g.,

Covello, 2003; Palenchar & Heath, 2006; Sellnow et al., 2009). Therefore, risk communication best practices focus on the importance of listening, understanding, and responding to publics as well as empathizing and partnering with them (e.g., Covello, 2003; Palenchar, 2005, 2010; Sellnow et al., 2009).

This listening, multivocality approach also fits with recent social and relational risk communication perspectives that emphasize multiple audiences and interpretations (Palenchar, 2010). Scholars like Murphy (2007) have argued that the strategic management and complexity worldviews can also offer complementary perspectives. Chaos and complexity theories stress the importance of "interaction, relationships, and self-regulations" to organizational strategic management of communication (Stroh, 2007, p. 204). Studying relationships through these lenses moves away from the systems theory perspective that spurred the early relationship work and relationship management theory (e.g., Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997; 2000). Authenticity, transparency, and openness could also be advanced through the use of social media. However, this "lifting of the corporate veil brings both complexity and uncertainty" to practicing public relations (Duhé, 2007, p. 58). Using complexity-based approaches could help identify whether the veil is really being lifted, merely offering a veneer of openness, or a mix of the two (e.g., Duhé, 2007; Gilpin et al., 2010).

Set criteria for engagement. While boundaries may be blurred, complexity thinking recognizes that organizations cannot become so transparent as to be indistinguishable from their environments (Duhé, 2007, p. 66). Therefore, despite blurred borders and the need for multivocal perspectives, organizations are subject to limited resources, other priorities, and concerns about source and content credibility that

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constrain them from actively engaging online with all stakeholders (Duhé, 2007). Rather than through hierarchical policies, "rules" are dynamically developed by agents as a product of their nonlinear actions and interactions that have unpredictable results (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2002; Murphy, 2007). The context (e.g., organizational, cultural, economic) provides constraints. Rules develop at the microlevel but are patterned by macrolevel expectations (e.g., organizational culture). Culture in this sense is accrued over time through adaptations as the microlevel (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a).

Complexity theory, therefore, looks at mutual adaptation within a complex adaptive system's fitness landscape or field of action (Duhé, 2007). The Internet, and social media platforms, bind organizations and stakeholders within these fitness landscapes by providing enhanced transparency and the potential of two-way communication (Duhé, 2007). The policies, rules or processes organizations and publics use to conduct this communication are seen as fitness criteria that organization develop and enforce to "define suitable bounds guiding and limiting stakeholder involvement in decision making, as increased involvement restricts organizational autonomy to some degree" (Duhé, 2007, p. 66). Scholars have, therefore, identified relationship and crisis management as dialectical processes with an ebb and flow (e.g., Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009; Hung, 2007) and this fluctuating process can be based in conflict (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009). Another factor key to conflict and organizational learning is receiving and processing feedback, both positive and negative (Duhé, 2007). Similar to fitness criteria for engaging stakeholders online, organizations need fitness criteria for incorporating feedback in order to keep positive (amplifying) feedback from allowing

stakeholders to overstep boundaries and inappropriately interfere with decision making

that requires organizational expertise (e.g., disaster management).

   Cultivate relationships with key stakeholders. Complexity theory can also inform

relationship management approaches, including efforts to cultivate organization public

relationships via social media within a risk communication context. Just as the Internet

and social media present opportunities for relationship management, complexity theory

helps explain why social media can also constrain these efforts. Gilpin and Murphy

(2010b) considered the current media landscape, including social media, to represent a

complex system in which organizations and stakeholders are trying to communicate and

build trust. However, the "nonlinearity and uncertainty inherent in such a system" can

confound efforts to build and maintain lasting, stable relationships (Gilpin & Murphy,

2010b, p. 73). Two relationship contexts studied in this dissertation include ones with

external publics and ones with internal publics, including empowering those internal

publics to communicate externally via social media.

   External publics and relationships. As described earlier, within a complexity

approach, relationships are not viewed as static and organizations should avoid

developing long-term categories for stakeholders that might lead them to miss the

emergence of new stakeholders that develop around an issue (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a).

Publics also are complex adaptive systems that self-organize new information around

their existing identities (Murphy, 2007). Each individual agent interacts at the microlocal

level through interdependent, accumulating interactions that eventually produce and

change the larger system (i.e., organizational cultures, identities, behaviors) (Murphy,

2007). When these changes occur, complexity approaches do not consider organizations

able to exert control over these adaptations nor are organizations able to draw firm boundaries between an organization and its context or environment (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a). Public relations has traditionally been tasked with a boundary-spanning, monitoring function (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010b). Complex environments have fluid boundaries that can make it difficult for practitioners to identify stakeholders, track issues, and monitor reputations (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010b). Social media are creating networked organizations that can make it more difficult to distinguish between internal and external stakeholders and environments. "Public relations practitioners may find themselves increasingly having to not only span boundaries but also constantly negotiate the existence of various types of divisions inside and outside the organizations they represent" (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010b, p. 76).

Heath and Palenchar (2000) suggested blending community relations and risk communication to "build community support through collaborative, community-based decisions regarding the kinds of risks that exist and the emergency response measures that can be initiated as needed for public safety" (p. 132). The community relations perspective establishes clear links between government agencies and their stakeholders (Sellnow et al., 2009). Within the government environment, internal and external social media communication could lower barriers to lay public participation in risk discourse and access to decision makers (Palenchar & Heath, 2006). They could also answer scholars' suggestion that more frequent public communication efforts are needed to stem declining citizen trust and improve relationships between the government and publics, including media and citizens (e.g., Fairbanks et al., 2007; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). These efforts should not just take place during a crisis. "Organizational players…need to

have the tools and skills necessary to look beyond their assumptions and actively engage with others, and with their environment, on an ongoing basis" (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a, p. 688). A robust internal and external organizational social media effort could help support such day-to-day active engagement.

Internal publics and relationships. Beyond community stakeholders, employees are an often forgotten, but critical, public with which to engage in risk communication dialogues (e.g., Rhee, 2008; Waymer & Ni, 2009). Often left out of the discussion on risk communication best practices is the need for both internal and external risk communication. Employee relations, in general, has been understudied and undervalued in public relations because it has not always had full responsibility for internal communication (Waymer & Ni, 2009).

A complexity-based approach sees an organization's future (including its future relationships) as a product of "everyday microinteraction among people, entities, and the environment" (Gilpin & Murphy, 2006, p. 382). Therefore, integrating and supporting ongoing, everyday social media interaction between employees and publics are better ways to understand how relationships are cultivated. In doing so, organizations could also engage their often overlooked employees as part of the discussed need for multiple voices (e.g., Rhee, 2008; Waymer & Ni, 2009). As studies have demonstrated, these employees' voices are contributing online to developing organizational identities (e.g., Gilpin, 2010), generating openness and a human, conversational voice (Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006) that can also be perceived as more ordinary voices (versus spokesperson voices) (Gilpin et al., 2010). These voices may have more authenticity and credibility that

can aid relationship management, risk communication, and crisis communication (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007).

As Seeger et al. (2003) pointed out: "Risks often originate within an organization" (p. 213). These risks can be inherent to the tight connections, interactions, and interdependence (i.e., coupling) within the organization. Errors and actions that can lead to crises are not just connected to individuals but also to the larger patterns of management, policies, structures, and failures related to communication, coordination, information sharing, and other practices (Seeger et al., 2003). Taking a systemic culture view of organizations, Weick and Sutcliffe (2001) offered a strategy for fostering an organizational culture of mindfulness and risk vigilance. Using a reward system that aligns with an overall management system that demonstrates through actions, beliefs, and values management's commitment to risk vigilance can lead to employees identifying and articulating warning signs (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). Research is needed in order to better understand how well or poorly organizations encourage their employees to identify and openly share via internal and/or external social media "even the most subtle signs that all is not well within the organization" (Seeger et al., 2003, p. 214). In so doing, social media could help answer Waymer and Ni's (2009) call for improved employee-organization relationships by helping organizations develop social media strategies and tactics that give employees at all levels a sense of connection to the organization and a perception that what they do and say will make a difference. Such empowerment and enhanced relationships could benefit efforts to successfully carry out risk communication. Social-mediated risk communication could allow organizations to foster multiple voices and worldviews without dominating the conversation or marginalizing viewpoints.

A relational and complexity perspective can also help address the fact that researchers "still understand very little about how organizations and their publics can use [social] media to interact in productive and ethical ways" (Stephens & Malone, 2009, p. 238). Kent (2010) advocated theory building around social media's influence on public relations practice and argued that thinking there is one right way to do social media is "absurd and ignores the needs of most public relations professionals to solve their own *unique* problems in their own *unique* organizational environment" (p. 654). In this study that organizational environment sits within the unique public sector, and the problem context is risk communication and relationship cultivation with key publics (e.g., employees). Given the research reviewed on complexity-based approaches to risk and crisis communication and the lack of real-time, in-context research on how governments in a complex, high-risk environment approach and use social media, the study asks the final research question:

RQ4: How, if at all, do government communicators in high-risk environments plan and execute social media communication strategies and tactics?

Summary

By using a complexity and relational theoretical framework, this dissertation will address several gaps in social media, relationship management, government communication, and risk communication research. First, this study adds to the understanding of how governments see the role of social media in involving stakeholders in the risk and crisis sense-making process (Stephens & Malone, 2009). The relational perspective answers Palenchar's (2010) call for adding to risk communication scholarship

and practice more dialogic and relational perspectives, including postmodern ones, that better match the evolution of risk communication.

Second, the dissertation will add to theoretical development within the under-studied government communication context (e.g., Fairbanks et al., 2007; M. Lee, 2008; Liu & Horsley, 2007), particularly within a civic government relational risk and crisis communication context (e.g., Avery & Lariscy, 2010; Horsley, 2010). Within a government context, it uses a relational perspective that Stromback and Kiousis (2011a) called "essential for an understanding of all processes that involve politics, communication, and public relations" (p. 9).

Third, the dissertation's qualitative approach that is particularly useful for studying "the complex communication context of risk communication" (Sellnow et al., 2009, p. 53) will add depth to a risk communication research field that has been "dominated by rational, logical, and predictable approaches" (Palenchar, 2010, p. 456). Using this method also answers the call for more qualitative research methods, such as ethnographic and participatory, to understand relationships with publics (Broom et al., 1997; Murphy, 2007; Stroh, 2007) and for studying risk communication (Palenchar, 2010; Sellnow et al., 2009).

Fourth, the dissertation will expand theoretical application and conceptualization of complexity approaches to studying and practicing relational risk and crisis communication. Postmodern views and discussions within risk communication research and practice can benefit the understanding of relational risk communication (e.g., Palenchar, 2010). Dialectical OPR models that align with a complexity approach may better explain organization-public relationships in the government sector. Complexity

theory could help understand the unique, shifting, complex nature of an organization's stakeholder environment and how its use of interactive social media affects the organization and its environment.

Finally, the dissertation will help look behind the curtain and see how organizations are actually doing communication via social media and build theory around social media's influence on public relations practice (Kent, 2010; Stephens & Malone, 2009). This practice includes government risk communication via social media. Of course, this understanding of one unique federal government agency's risk communication will not be generalizable to all government agencies. Complexity thinking discourages seeking one standard best practices list, yet lessons can be learned that agency leaders and other organizations may find helpful in addressing very tangible challenges they face in engaging in risk communication with key publics via social media. For example, Kent (2010) wrote:

> We currently study "tweets" and not publics. We count blog posts and not solutions to problems. The future of social media and publics relations is a future of stepping past the technologies as marketing and advertising tools and embracing them as tools capable of solving problems and engaging publics in real-world issues. (p. 655)

Using an ethnographic approach and a complexity and relational framework, this dissertation seeks to help understand *how*, if at all, government communicators are using social media to engage publics, including in a risk communication context.

Chapter 3: Method

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of how government communicators in high-risk environments view and use social media within a risk communication context, I conducted an ethnographic case study, also called an ethnographic field study, of the USCG social media team. The main fieldwork data collection method was participant observation complemented by interviews with key informants and document analysis. Fieldwork data collection through participant observation (PO) is a useful technique when an activity, event, or situation can be observed firsthand and a fresh perspective will provide important perspectives (e.g., Hume & Mulcock, 2004; Merriam, 2009; Wolcott, 2005). In the context of this study, an ethnographic case study provided a real-time, in-context, unique perspective on government social media risk communication management through the case of the USCG Office of Public Affairs social media team.

Qualitative Methodology

This study used a qualitative research approach well-suited for in-depth exploration of people's interpretations and perceptions, the way they understand and attribute meaning in their everyday lives, and how they construct their worlds (Berg, 2009; Chesbro & Borisoff, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Relevant to this study, qualitative data are a "source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 1). They can "preserve chronological flow, see precisely which events led to which consequences, and derive fruitful explanations" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 1).

Qualitative methods are particularly useful for studying "the complex communication context of risk communication" (Sellnow et al., 2009, p. 53). The study

of risk communication from dialogic and relational perspectives requires a broad

discussion and acceptance of different viewpoints, including postmodern ones, within the

field of risk communication research and practice (Palenchar, 2010). In contrast, the

crisis communication research stream historically has emphasized retrospective case

studies of crisis events and more recently has emphasized quantitative designs,

particularly experiments (An & Cheng, 2010; Coombs, 2010a). Much of the past

qualitative crisis research was limited by lack of theoretical framework, methodological

rigor, and research questions or hypotheses (Coombs, 2010a). Some of these same

criticisms have been leveled against government public relations research (e.g., Liu et al.,

2010). However, more rigorous qualitative case study research that uses strict

methodological criteria can contribute important value to the study of risk and crisis

communication by providing more in-depth understandings of organizations' crisis

management (e.g., An & Cheng, 2010; Phillips, 2002; Sellnow et al., 2009), including

within government contexts.

   Additionally, qualitative methods can play an important role in relational research

(J. Grunig, 2002). Most relationship management research has been quantitatively

focused such as establishing relationship measures (e.g., Hon & J. Grunig, 1999; Huang,

2001; Jo, Hon, & Brunner, 2004; Ki & Hon, 2007). Ki and Shin (2005, 2006) found in

their meta-analysis of organization-public relationship (OPR) research published between

1984 and 2004 that only five of the 38 articles analyzed took a qualitative approach to

studying OPRs. To complement that emphasis, qualitative approaches to studying

relationships can allow researchers to describe the relationship in greater detail and to

develop a relationship with research participants that leads to a more holistic and candid

perspective of the OPR (J. Grunig, 2002). Participant observation may be particularly useful in a relationship management context because observed behavior may not always match participant reports and perceptions. For example, Broom et al. (2000) used participant observation and logs of communication between staff at a continuing education center and its key publics and identified differences between staff perceptions and actual information and resource exchanges.

All methodological approaches have advantages, disadvantages, and trade-offs. For example, qualitative methods "allow us to give 'thick descriptions' of what is going on inside and outside of an organization in a crisis situation, but they are not easily generalized and make it difficult to work with huge amounts of data" (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010, p. 429). Conversely, quantitative methods "are very strong when it comes to generalizing and handling data, but they seldom do justice to complexity" (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010, p. 429). Importantly, because "disasters challenge communities in unexpected ways and have unanticipated consequences," qualitative research can "capture human behavior at its most open, realistic moments" (Phillips, 2002, p. 202). In particular, this dissertation used an ethnographic case study approach to capture in real-time the complexity of planning and executing USCG social media communication.

Ethnographic case study. Case study research can offer in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system (Merriam, 2009) though the boundaries between the phenomenon of interest and its context may be blurred (Yin, 2009). Stake (1995) defined case study research as "the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (1995, p.xi). Yin

(2009) encouraged scholars to conceptualize case study research as an "all-encompassing method" rather than the "case" as a unit of analysis (e.g., individual, process, program) (p. 18). Specifically, Yin (2009) stated that a "case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 18). The dissertation also fits the second part of Yin's (2009) definition: "The case study inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis" (p. 18). The dissertation's questions drew from existing research on government communication, risk communication and social media and used theoretical lenses to expand and explain the phenomenon of how and why government communicators may use social media communication, including in a risk communication context. As such, this case study is explanatory (Yin, 2009) and reflects a social scientific approach, a theoretical framework, research questions (mostly "how" and "why" questions), a unit or units of analysis (e.g., organization-wide social media program, including the individuals who make up the team and function), data that connects logically to the framework and questions, and criteria for analyzing the findings (Yin, 2009, p. 27). While they are limited in their generalizability, case studies are valuable for their concrete, context-dependent knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Additionally, a key strength of case study research is using the power of example(s) in theory development and knowledge building (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

Ethnographic case study. The ethnographic case study should not be confused with a specific data collection method like ethnography or participant observation (Yin, 2009). Case studies are a form of inquiry that does not rely solely on ethnographic or participant-observation data but also bring in other methods that can include participant observation in the field (Yin, 2009). Many early methods books labeled research as case studies simply because they used ethnographic or participant observation data (Yin, 2009). Because this ethnographic case study used extensive participant observation in the field as a main data collection method and triangulated that data with interviews and documents collected in the field, the next section defines and discusses ethnographic research.

Ethnographic research. Within communication research, ethnography is the genre of qualitative research most closely associated with fieldwork methods like participating, observing, and recording communication (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). In this sense, ethnography is a general term that is not technically associated with any single qualitative method (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Ethnography refers to both product and process and derives from both anthropology and sociology (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Within an organizational management research context, Gummesson (2000) described ethnography as the branch of anthropology "of prime interest to the management researcher/consultant" (p. 132). Within a management research context, where participant observation sometimes blurs the line between researcher and management consultant, Gummesson (2000) distinguished:

> In its widest sense, anthropology is a study of a series of cultural phenomena such as customs, beliefs, behavior, and the social organization of humankind. Actually,

consultants work much like anthropologists, although the latter seem to have

defined their domain to that of primitive tribes in Papua New Guinea or social

dropouts in slum districts. Today, however, there are "corporate anthropologists"

who have entered business firms as consultants in the United States. (p. 132)

Ethnographic research encompasses a variety of techniques for "collecting data on

human beliefs, values, and practices" (Hume & Mulcock, 2004, p. xi). Gummesson

(2000) described observation as an "essential" data collection method in ethnography and

called participant observation the "prevailing method" of access and data collection (p.

132). Similarly, Hume and Mulcock (2004) called participant observation ethnography's

"core methodology" and that it "requires that researchers simultaneously observe and

participate (as much as possible) in the social action they are attempting to document"

(Hume & Mulcock, 2004, p. xi). As part of the participation, rigorous, systematic

observation involves "watching and in-depth interviews, documented not only in the form

of memos but also photographs, films, and tape recordings" (Gummesson, 2000, p. 132).

Gummesson used the term artifacts to describe objects that may play significant roles in a

culture and recommended their observation and collection (p. 132). In this dissertation,

documents that would qualify as artifacts include manuals, policies, memos, emails, and

reports. As such, this artifact content also falls under the document category.

This ethnographic case study takes the epistemological assumption that "by

'being there' and actively taking part in the interactions at hand, the researcher can come

closer to experiencing and understanding the 'insider's' point of view" (Hume &

Mulcock, 2004, p. xi). Watson (2008) cautioned against "an unfortunate trend for

researchers to seek legitimacy that is felt to come from 'getting close to one's research

subjects' by too cavalierly grabbing at the ethnographic or participant observation label"

(p. 99). Similarly, Anderson (2008) noted that the participant observation term can be

misleading as it is a "general heading" for types of engaged research, not all of which are

participatory (p. 150). Some of this confusion may be further complicated by the fact that

scholars have used varied terms to describe communication research studies that have

used ethnographic data collection methods like observation and/or participant

observation.

For example, scholars have described their work as an *ethnographic study* (e.g.,

Ashcraft, 2000; Brewer, 2007; DiSanzo, 1993; Kramer, 2006; Mangrum, Fairley, &

Wider, 2011; Rush Horde, 2001); *ethnographic case study* (e.g., Barker, Melville, &

Pacanowsky, 1993; Bird, 2007; Boczkowski, 2004; Crandell Goodier & Eisenberg, 2006;

Domingo, 2008; Neff, Fiore-Silfvast, & Dossick, 2010); *ethnographic field study* (e.g.,

Lauring, 2011; Thornton & Novak, 2010); *ethnographic research study* (e.g., Pope-

Ruark, 2008); and, *ethnography* (e.g., Lynch, 2009), or *interpretive ethnography* (e.g.,

Baxter, 1993). When terms like ethnography or ethnographic were not attributed to

studies that used participant observation or observation as main or supplemental data

collection methods, these studies were often characterized as case studies (e.g., Pal &

Buzzanell, 2008; Serini, 1993; Sha, 2004).

Field research and fieldwork. Field research and fieldwork are also terms often

used in relation to ethnography and participant observation (e.g., Watson, 2008; Wolcott,

2005). Watson (2008) defined field research as "an important tradition which emerged in

twentieth-century social science" in which researchers got themselves "deeply involved

or immersed in whichever part of the social world they wanted to investigate" (p. 99).

Fieldwork manifests in two research categories:

> …Anthropological research in 'economically non-developed settings' and in
> sociological research studying 'aspects of modern, mainly urban, social
> life'…Such studies can be bracketed together as *field research*, and included
> within this category are both *participant observation*…and *ethnography*…These
> two terms are sometimes used interchangeably and sometimes to distinguish
> between different things. (Watson, 2008, p. 99)

Ethnographically grounded case studies can use direct, in-person observation of
daily life to represent the essence of an organization or community (Szymanski &
Whalen, 2011, p. 5). As in this dissertation, the ethnographic work-practice studies
involved researchers who were committed to naturalistic observation and to:

> …leaving the highly controlled environment of the laboratory so that what
> humans did and how they did it could be studied in real-world habitats and
> settings, under ordinary, everyday conditions. This immersion in the everyday
> world meant that researchers could actively participate in the ordinary activities of
> subjects' lives, as this would afford detailed understanding of the natural
> organization of such activities and of the competencies required of participants to
> produce them. (Szymanski & Whalen, 2011, p. 5)

Similarly, this dissertation aligns with worksite ethnographic studies that seek a
"*holistic* understanding of work" and are interested in more than describing roles, jobs,
and tasks; instead, they focus on "workscapes" (Szymanski & Whalen, 2011, p. 6).
Workscapes refer to "configurations not only of people and their communal practices (the

methodical means they use to organize and accomplish their work), but also the environments where this work gets done and the artifacts and devices that populate these sites and are thus intimately involved in the work's achievement" (Szymanski & Whalen, 2011, p. 6). The authors argued that these phenomena are closely related and, as such, whenever possible must be analyzed holistically based on their interrelatedness.

Therefore, to maximize qualitative research's potential, this ethnographic case study primarily used a real-time participant observation approach to address the complexity of government social media communication in a risk communication context. Rigorous, systematic data collection and analysis methods were used to help focus and make meaning of the large amount of data collected in this qualitative study and increase the findings' trustworthiness and credibility. This study's use of complexity and relational perspectives fits with Wolcott's (2005) recommended use of multiple theories and perspectives in fieldwork. Holding multiple theoretical perspectives can keep the researcher open, flexible, and innovative to new understandings and explanations within an ethnographic research study like this one (Wolcott, 2005). Having chosen an ethnographic case study approach to answering the dissertation's research questions, the next section discusses the dissertation's research design.

Research Design

Research designs form the roadmap or strategy for carrying out a research study (Berg, 2009). One strength of qualitative research is an emergent, flexible research design that allows the researcher, often the human instrument of data collection and analysis, to adapt and respond throughout the study (e.g., Merriam, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2009). While qualitative studies may look messy or chaotic from the outside, they

are actually undergoing constant redesign (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Studies can have more and less formal or structured research designs; however, a design should be in place that offers a logical map for how to get from "here" to "there" with "here" being the research questions or problem and "there" being the conclusions or answers to those questions or problems (Yin, 2009).

In terms of a research design roadmap, this dissertation has already described the project's topic, purpose, research questions that guided the study, the previous research in which the questions are rooted, and the theoretical lens that guided data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009). This chapter next describes the study's sample and unit and level of analysis and how I gained access to the site, followed by the main data collection methods of participant observation, interviews, and document analysis. In addition to overall research design roadmap, this chapter also details the data analysis strategy and criteria (e.g., validity and reliability) by which the quality of the dissertation was evaluated (Yin, 2009).

Sample. Qualitative research is most often interested in small samples of people "nested in their context and studied in-depth" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 27). This dissertation utilized theory-driven purposive or non-random sampling to achieve the greatest diversity of opinions and perspectives within the limited pool of U.S. federal government agencies operating in a high-risk environment that are using organizational social media. Purposive samples allow the researcher to sample those participants who can best answer the research question and provide the richest data (Merriam, 2009). Because researchers cannot study everyone and everything related to their topic, choosing a population and sample is important for bounding a study's territory (Miles &

Huberman, 1994). Within ethnographic research, this includes identifying the field site where the researcher will carry out participant observation, often referred to as fieldwork (Merriam, 2009).

This dissertation aimed to study U.S. government social media communication, including risk communication, in a real-time, natural context (i.e., field site) within a high-risk landscape. The USCG satisfies Yin's (2009) circumstances in which single-case studies are justified, because the USCG is both a critical case that meets all the conditions to test complexity and relational theoretical perspectives on government risk and social media communication and is also a revelatory case that shows the behind-the-scenes view of a government social media phenomenon that researchers have not previously captured. USCG was selected because of its high-risk (i.e., risk-related missions and responsibilities) operating environment and its leadership in making social media a formal program within its public affairs function. The USCG and its operating environment, social media efforts, and team will be described in more detail in the next chapter. As noted in the literature review, high-risk environments within the U.S. public sector refer to government organizational operating environments that may include greater uncertainty or risk for crisis, higher expectations of responding to extreme crises or disasters, or a risk or crisis mandate (e.g., Avery & Kim, 2009; Avery & Lariscy, 2010; Schneider, 1995).

Unit and level of analysis. A challenge in qualitative and case study research is defining and bounding the case (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2009). This ethnographic case study studied the USCG's organization-wide social media program as the unit of analysis. J. Grunig and L. Grunig (2001) described the public affairs program level as

"individual communication programs such as media relations, community relations, or employee relations that are components of the overall public affairs function of an organization" (p. 8). The social media program is a component of the headquarters public affairs function of the USCG organization.

Case studies of programs can make defining the unit of analysis difficult because 1) they can identify differences in program definitions, depending on individual actors and 2) program aspects that existed prior to the formal designation of the program (Yin, 2009, p. 30). These challenges were true in this dissertation focusing on the USCG enterprise social media program within the larger USCG public affairs function. A third challenge was blurred boundaries between the social media program and the public affairs function. For example, the media relations and social media programs were training for and implementing a combined after-hours "watch" function over the course of the study.

The study's complexity framework informed my view of the social media program as the unit of analysis and helped address the challenges listed above. The study used a complexity framework that sees organizations, and programs within them, as complex adaptive systems made up of individual actors whose local interactions "accumulate to form large-scale patterns" (Murphy, 2000, p. 450) and change the system over time (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a). A complexity perspective cautions against tightly bounding functions because they only exist or can be described in terms of the context in which they exist (Stroh, 2007). In this view, organizations are self-organizing systems that cannot be easily reduced to levels or units, because these levels and units are intertwined (Stroh, 2007). Therefore, while the unit of analysis was the USCG's

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enterprise-wide social media program, the study's research questions and approach focused on the program and the individuals that make up the function and the patterns of their interactions and perspectives. Because complexity theory also sees organizations and their subsystems as having indistinct, permeable boundaries that are difficult to separate from their surrounding contexts (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a), I kept a loose view of the program by including in interviews and observations those personnel within the directorate who interacted most frequently with the social media team such as the director of public affairs and representatives of media relations and the motion picture divisions. Additionally, the strategic communication directorate that exists alongside the office of public affairs has been tasked with examining social media for internal communication, so two members of this team were also interviewed. Because the program is integrated into the public affairs function and responsible for the enterprise-wide social media strategy and program, implications were discussed for the program, functional and organizational levels.

Gaining entry to the site. After identifying the USCG as an ideal organization to study, I sought entry. Using friends and social networks to seek a referral into a group can be a particularly effective way to gain site entry (Vallance, 2001). Berg (2009) noted that many researchers have gained entry to research sites by negotiating access "with a highly visible and respected individual who held a position of rank, authority, or respect among others in the group" (p. 205).

Through consultation with professional and personal contacts, Captain Ron LaBrec, USCG Director of Public Affairs, was identified as having the authority, rank, and visibility to authorize access. I drafted a formal research request that included a

summary of the proposed project, data collection methods, access needs, publication

requirements, and other important considerations. A former graduate school colleague

who worked within the Department of Homeland Security then emailed that proposal and

an assurance about my professionalism and ability to one of LaBrec's colleagues who she

knew. The proposal offered a wide continuum of participant observation that ranged from

observation only to full immersion as a participant on the team. Reciprocity is an

important ethical consideration for researchers using participant observation who hold an

obligation to give as well as take in a research setting (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). To

meet this ethical obligation of reciprocity, the proposal also offered several ways to give

back to the organization in recognition of the team's willingness to openly and actively

participate in the project. These offers included working on the social media team,

providing white papers or lessons learned, various trainings, webinars, or follow-up

research projects. The proposal was favorably received through the internal USCG

contact and was vetted by LaBrec and Christopher Lagan, the social media chief. LaBrec

provided initial e-mail authorization to participate in the project that was forwarded by

the initial contact who had sent the request on my behalf (LaBrec, personal

communication, August 9, 2011). Subsequently, I spoke via telephone with the social

media chief at headquarters responsible for the social media program. In personal

communication on August 30, 2011, Lagan indicated that he had been tasked by LaBrec

with vetting the proposal and would be my direct supervisor during on-site data

collection. We discussed preliminary details and briefly discussed access, confidentiality,

and publication issues. I followed up in an email on September 1, 2011 with more details

in writing. My first site visit on October 7, 2011 included an orientation meeting with

LaBrec and Lagan in LaBrec's office in which we discussed the official ground rules for the study including:

- Participation limitations – I was asked not to post or publish social media content on USCG platforms as that would not be an "authentic" Coast Guard voice. I was invited to copy edit and suggest content and help the team as needed with internal-facing tasks. LaBrec offered to vet my IRB consent form with USCG ethics lawyers to ensure I was not violating any gift bans by offering free service. He also offered to alert the team to my presence and purpose. Once approved by USCG lawyers, I was free to enroll participants in the study via consent forms. I was asked not to participate much or interview participants in the first two weeks in order to acclimate to the team and the team to me.

- Access – I was welcome to choose any weekday and any hours between their normal hours of 8 a.m. – 5 p.m. I would need an escort each time and could arrange that with social media team personnel. Once on site, I could attend daily public affairs staff morning meetings, request access to other meetings, work alongside and observe the social media team, and request interviews and access to relevant documents. One surprise that came up in the meeting was that the social media chief had just received long-awaited orders to attend a two-month course at the Defense Information School which would mean he would not be in the office until the end of December. He offered to make himself available by email during that time.

- Recording – I would need consent for recording interviews, meetings, and conversations.

- Publication – As requested, I committed to giving LaBrec and Lagan the opportunity to review my work before reporting or publishing to ensure accuracy and that I did not violate sensitivity, security, privacy, or propriety issues. They also asked that I not publish any of my own personal social media about what I observed or participated in.

- Goals – LaBrec and Lagan's goal for the study was to secure outside validation that their social media program has value (is worthy studying), to learn what they can improve, and to incorporate lessons learned from the study.

Once on site, LaBrec worked with the lawyers to approve my study and IRB forms, one for the participant observation portion and one for interviews. On October 18, 2011, the public affairs director and I both signed a Gratuitous Services Agreement drafted by the attorneys that can be read in Appendix B.

By being officially endorsed as a participant-observer of the strategic communication and social media team, I was better able to identify participants for formal and informal interviews, processes and activities for observation and engagement, and documents for analysis. Initially, the public affairs director and social media team served as guides and informants, those indigenous to the site who could provide access within the site and vouch for my legitimacy (Berg, 2009). Once on site, I then used snowball sampling to grow my network of perspectives and improve my maneuverability within the USCG social media function (Berg, 2009). Because this study required significant time and participation in the field in order to fully answer the research questions, I also used maximum variation to increase the diversity of perspectives and opinions about the topics of interest and more fully answer the research questions

(Merriam, 2009). For example, I sought to collect data reflecting perspectives from all members of the social media team and those who interacted closely with them but were not part of the social media team. The next section discusses the data collection methods and procedures I used in more detail.

Data Collection Methods

Methods are specific techniques for collecting and analyzing data (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008). Participant observation was the main data collection method used in this study. As Lindlof and Taylor (2010) suggested, participation observation can be combined with interviews, document analysis, and other methods to triangulate and complement data gathered through participant observation. In this dissertation, in-depth interviews and document analysis also triangulated data collected through participant observation and helped build a chain of evidence toward a converging line of inquiry (Merriam 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2009). Appendix D includes a breakdown of the data collected in this dissertation.

Participant observation. Participant observation (PO) is an umbrella term for a blend of methods and research techniques that allow the researcher to observe and participate in a phenomenon (Jorgensen, 1990). PO assumes that to understand a world firsthand, a researcher must participate rather than observe at a distance (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008). PO is often called fieldwork and "involves going to the site, program, institution, setting—the field—to observe the phenomenon under study" (Merriam, 2009, p. 136).

As Wolcott (2005) noted, the term can be used so broadly that it encompasses "virtually everything that qualitative researchers do in pursuing naturalistic inquiry, that

cultural anthropologists do in pursuing ethnography, that sociologists do in pursuing a field study, and so forth" (p. 88). Instead, Wolcott (2005) argued that PO's "essence is captured, although oversimplified, in the phrase 'being there'" (p. 89). Within a risk, crisis, and disaster context, qualitative observational data can best capture people's "backstage" behavior (Phillips, 2002, p. 202). Phillips encouraged the increased use of observational studies, including PO, within disaster situations and identified a "significant lack of longitudinal research" that expanded beyond the actual disaster response stage (i.e., pre-disaster, disaster recovery) and looked at the organizational or community level.

Though rarely used, PO has proved useful for providing enlightening context for government communication, including in risk and crisis communication contexts (e.g., Horsley, 2010; Palenchar, 2008; Rhee, 2008). L'Etang (2011) encouraged researchers to study public relations practice in the context of everyday life. Doing so through ethnographic and PO methods can help uncover nuances and complexities (L'Etang, 2011). Complexity scholars have recognized the value of qualitative participatory methodologies to studying complex systems (e.g., Christensen, 2005; Stacey & Griffin, 2005; Stroh, 2007). "The answer is not to be fixated on measurement, but rather to be more flexible in the acceptance of less positivistic approaches, and to use participative research to achieve a deeper understanding of contexts and behavior" (Stroh, 2007, p. 213).

PO has several key elements including: staying in the context for an extended period of time; using everyday conversation as an interview technique; informally observing the context; recording observations in field notes; valuing tacit and explicit

knowledge in analysis and writing (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). While it may involve more informal, everyday conversation and observation, PO differs from routine observation in that it is systematic, helps to answer particular research questions, and is concerned with producing trustworthy results (Merriam, 2009).

Advantages and disadvantages. The overarching approach poses opportunities and challenges in addition to those discussed above. PO offers the ability to observe the behaviors and interactions of a population in a real-time, natural setting not present in artificially created environments of the interview or focus group (Berg, 2009; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011; Merriam, 2009). While focus groups allow researchers to observe interactions and nonverbal behavior, PO provides this in an extended, naturally unfolding environment (Berg, 2009). Observational data then represent a firsthand encounter with a phenomenon rather than a mediated account obtained in an interview or other out-of-context setting and time (Merriam, 2009). Observation is important because it is the only way to know if people do what they say they do (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). PO can also lead to researchers being treated as insiders, generating new depths of understanding (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). However, the insider/outsider duality role of researcher is common to participant observation (Calvey, 2000). Even though a covert role may provide even more natural information and a greater insider status, a fully covert, embedded method should only be used if it is the richest way to engage with participants in a meaningful sense (Calvey, 2000). Despite the transparent, overt nature of this participant observation research, it still afforded greater insider and backstage knowledge than would have most other data collection methods.

PO does come with challenges, many of which can be overcome with training and knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011; Merriam, 2009). For example, as is the case with any research, the selective nature of human perception and interpretation can pose challenges (Merriam, 2009). Researchers may also give more meaning to an action or interaction based on observation without member checking that interpretation with participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). To gather rich data that answer the research questions, researchers must be able to successfully "fit in" to a PO research context (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. 21). In addition to those more general hurdles, participant observation is particularly challenging for novice researchers who may not be comfortable balancing the ethical issues required, may not be well-trained in observing data, and may not be comfortable fitting in to research contexts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). As such, the method is not right for every researcher and every research setting. As part of the recruitment process, I initially referenced my experiences as a federal government communicator, instructor of social media writing, and my scholarly and professional interest in social media strategy to demonstrate my potential "fit" with the research project and team. Other factors necessary for effective PO include the ability to actively see and listen, utilize short-term memory, interviewing skills, recorded detailed field notes, and patience (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011).

Despite skill, experience, and fit with a particular site, PO often comes with inherent weaknesses. While it can be the most demanding and time consuming of all qualitative approaches, it can lead to a deeper understanding of the topic and rich, descriptive detail in the analysis (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2003; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The ambiguity of role can create a struggle for determining how much to

participate and how to determine the extent to which the observation or participation affects what is being observed (Merriam, 2009). For example, Lagan and I agreed that I would spend the first two weeks in a predominantly listening observer role with less proactive participation in order to better assimilate with the team. Participant observation can also make it difficult to disengage and withdraw from a site; affect approach to reflexive research analysis; and can pose ethical issues based on how overt or covert the researcher is about the study (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). I discuss in the next section how I addressed those issues.

   Procedures. The study executed participant observation of the USCG social media team in three stages: entry, data collection, and exit (Merriam, 2009). In addition to gaining entry to a field site, researchers make the first contact and build rapport (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Entry took take place October 7, 2011 and the final observation occurred on January 19, 2012. Over the course of those three months, I made 28 site visits (including the initial orientation) totaling 205.25 hours. These observations ranged from 2 hours to 9.25 hours in length and averaged 7.31 hours. While they mostly took place on Tuesdays (10 visits) and Thursdays (9 visits), I also visited on Mondays (2), Wednesdays (3), and Fridays (4). Most visits took place at USCG's Washington, D.C. headquarters. However, I did make four off-site observations that are described later. While I had asked the director of public affairs to circulate the flier to the team via e-mail, he preferred to make the announcement verbally during the morning meeting on October 13, 2011. The flier is included in Appendix C. Each member of the social media team and the director of public affairs signed participant observation IRB consent forms at the beginning of the project. I would continue to announce my presence and purpose

and brought with me fliers about the dissertation study to meetings or anytime I interacted with the team outside of the office of public affairs.

Data collection included observation of and participation in the daily work lives of the social media staff. During data collection, I was immersed in the setting and worked to develop participants' trust (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Before meaningful ethnographic data can be collected, participant observers must learn to talk the talk and walk the walk (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Fortunately, my experience as a government public relations practitioner and public relations writing instructor meant I had extensive experience with public relations writing and the Associated Press (AP) style used by the USCG public affairs team. Blog posts were written in AP style, so my experience helped establish credibility with the tactical social media staff tasked with writing and editing content in this style. By catching errors and adding value to their writing, they saw me as useful and helpful and helped develop rapport with the team. Before entering the site, I also sought advice and expertise from personal USCG contacts. For example, a graduate student colleague who is a member of the USCG recommended I consult the unofficial, publicly-available spouse's handbook that includes an overview of the USCG including common acronyms. That contact also escorted me on site the first day and introduced me to public affairs staff and walked me to my on-site contact (LaBrec). My initial meeting with Lagan and LaBrec also helped orient me and convey legitimacy to other members of the team. At the first morning meeting I observed on October 13, 2011, LaBrec communicated to the entire office of public affairs staff present at the meeting who I was, why I was there, and that I had approval to observe and participate in the social media team's activities. Given the USCG's military hierarchy, the Captain's rank and authority

was respected by the team who acknowledged his approval of my presence and purpose. By playing more of an observer role the first two weeks on site, I also better understood the team makeup, its role within the larger office of public affairs, headquarters, and non-headquarters USCG organization, as well as the team's routines, procedures, acronyms, rules, and other information key to translating the operating environment. I immediately began a spreadsheet of common terms used by the team and their meanings that I could reference throughout the study. The final spreadsheet included in Appendix E defined 53 terms and acronyms.

Field issues like respect, reciprocity, and data ownership are key to ethnographic methods like participant observation (Creswell, 2007). As noted earlier, I also offered reciprocity to meet the obligation to give, not just take, from the USCG social media team. In fact, Lagan considered this potential reciprocity a key reason for recommending to LaBrec that USCG participate in the dissertation. Because the agency has restrictions on what it can accept from non-employees or contract personnel, I was asked to sign the Gratuitous Services Agreement. The contract clearly stated the terms of the research agreement and what services I could provide (e.g., share research results in form of copy of dissertation, executive summary, briefings, and copy of any academic journal articles published as a result of the project). In exchange, I agreed to provide said services with the full understanding that the United States would not compensate, provide any financial benefit to or reimburse me in any manner for these services. The attorneys also vetted the two IRB-approved consent forms – one to enroll social media team personnel in the participant observation portion of the study and one for interview participants.

In this study, exiting the field and exiting the ethnography have taken place in stages. The first phase of the exit included completing on-site participant observation on January 13, 2012. On the last day, I brought donuts to the morning meeting and small tokens of my appreciation for the social media team. The director of public affairs thanked me during the morning meeting for showing interest in the work of the public affairs directorate and social media team and for helping them improve the program moving forward by offering recommendations and observations. A week later, on January 19, 2012, I met a USCG social media team member at an offsite Department of Defense All Services social media council meeting. That concluded the participant observation portion of the study. However, because of member check meetings and ongoing conversations with the team over the course of data analysis and reporting, I did not fully exit the study – though I had exited the field. I have also committed to working with the director of public affairs and chief of social media following the completion of the dissertation to develop a white paper strategy document with recommendations that I will present to USCG leadership. As such, the exit has been a gradual one.

Observation. I used Merriam's (2009) checklist of elements to help guide my observations: physical setting, participants, activities and interactions, conversations, subtle factors, and the researcher's own behavior. Within that general checklist, observations included interactions and activities of the social media team within the USCG headquarters and staff work setting, as well as personnel from other public affairs teams and other staff they interacted with via meetings, informal conversation, and contexts. Important to this project, communication activities and interactions were both online and offline. I observed both USCG social media content as well as the process by

which it was strategized, solicited, written, edited and posted. On-scene observation gave

me a deeper understanding of the social media team's strategies and tactics. My

observation techniques also included counting (e.g., people, interactions, and meetings),

attending to conversations, and experiencing and mapping the setting (DeWalt &

DeWalt, 2011). By observing the team in its workplace setting, I could better understand

how the team fit into the office of public affairs and larger USCG landscape. Common

observation settings included everyday work in the office, phone calls with personnel

outside of headquarters, and on-site meetings at headquarters. I would arrive at the visitor

entrance, call up to my escort (usually one of three social media staffers), get my visitor

badge, go through security, and arrive in the social media office (part of the multimedia

team office) between 8 – 9 a.m., most often in time for the daily 9 a.m. morning meeting

attended down the hall in the main public affairs office. It offered a daily snapshot of

what various teams within the public affairs directorate were working on. On a given day

10 – 15 personnel would be present, standing in place, reporting to the public affairs

director on the day's business. The meetings were quick (five – 15 minutes) designed to

make sure teams could work better together and have situational awareness of what

others had going on. For me, this presented an opportunity to see how (1) the social

media team fit in with the rest of the staff, (2) how the social media team's efforts

complemented or aligned with the rest of the directorate, and (3) hear the public affairs

director's feedback and direction to the social media team, including various strategic

issues to be aware of. The meeting provided an excellent grounding for the day that often

led to better context of the team's work that day, anything I had missed on days not

observing, and opportunities for follow-up conversations with social media personnel once down the hall in their office.

Once in the social media office, I would ask the staff what they had planned for the day. I would make note of calls, meetings, or events I was able to attend. I would go over any issues that had surfaced on USCG social media platforms since I had last been there. Each day was different for the team and for me as a participant observer. Some days involved more observation and others more participation. Participation activities will be discussed later. On those days more focused on observation I would sit beside team members or roll my chair into the middle of their shared cubicle space and observe and ask about each person's actions. For example, I might sit by a social media team member to ask him or her aloud about the process of approving comments in the Compass blog queue or YouTube channel queue. I would take notes about the reasoning for either approving or not approving comments. I also observed staff monitoring Twitter lists or other content and seeking content worth retweeting or posting on Facebook. This gave me perspective on the team's day-to-day work activities without being too obtrusive. Throughout my observations, I would note, request and collect either electronic or hard copies of relevant documents such as evaluation reports, emails, memos, and training documents.

Other meetings included one-on-one meetings with public affairs personnel, including the public affairs director, media relations staff, and strategic communication staff; meetings between media relations and social media team members for cross-training to stand the after-hours and weekend watch; a meeting with USCG training staff about social media training options; a strategic leadership meeting with chiefs of various

branches and areas; a meeting with USCG reservist staff to talk about their social media needs; and a meeting with social media and media relations staff to discuss potentially adding social media capabilities to the USCG's media relations online newsroom.

Throughout each day, I would also have the opportunity to hear social media personnel's sides of phone conversations that I would attend to and then ask them about afterward. Many of these conversations included check-ins with the social media chief, soliciting or discussing content for the Compass blog, or talking with other public affairs officers' and specialists' about their social media needs and questions. For example, after hearing a social media team member walking through what a public affairs officer in the field could or could not do on social media in order to comply with USCG social media policy, I would ask the team member after the call about goals when communicating with social media staff about compliance and other relevant issues to help answer my research questions about social media planning and execution. In other cases, I was given permission to listen in on pre-scheduled conference calls that social media participated in. For example, one such call took place with NASA communicators to coordinate USCG's communication at headquarters (including media relations and social media communication) and the field (including the area, district and public affairs detachment in the Houston area) regarding an astronaut at the International Space Station who was former USCG.

Most observations took place at headquarters. However, I did have four opportunities to observe the team outside of headquarters. I accompanied a team member who spoke to a Defense Information School expeditionary public affairs class about social media and attended two Department of Defense All Services social media council

meetings at Georgetown University as a guest of the USCG. I even joined the team for the annual offsite holiday party.

Field notes. Observations were most often recorded as field notes (Merriam, 2009; Potter, 1996). Whenever possible, I typed directly into a Microsoft Word document for that day which included the date, time of observation, location of observation, summary of day's observation and participation activities, and list of personnel observed that day. That overview information was followed by a running timeline and narrative of the day's observations and participation. I intertwined in the document both levels of field notes suggested: factual and reflective. Notes included clear factual, descriptive or verbatim accounts of what took place (Potter, 1996). I also clearly marked throughout with an "OC" and brackets the second level which included reflective observer comments about events, interviews, or observed interactions (Potter, 1996). These reflective comments included researcher "feelings, reactions, hunches, initial interpretations, speculations, and working hypotheses" (Merriam, 2009, p. 131). Such comments provided both context and began the process of reflecting on the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Merriam, 2009; Potter, 1996). I would copy and paste or type into field notes particular social media comments like status updates, tweets, and discussions about social media content. In this way, the focus was on the how and why and behind-the-scenes perspectives on the social media team's work. This strategy allowed me to keep representative social media content in context with the observation and participation about that social media.

In most cases, field notes were relied on as written accounts of observation. In addition to the Microsoft Word field notes, I also filled three notebooks with "scratch

notes" when I needed to be less obtrusive or did not have computer access (Lindlof &

Taylor, 2011, p. 156). These notes included "brief notations about actions, statements,

dialogue, objects, or impressions" that I later elaborated on in typed field notes for the

day (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 156). Because I was able to write these notes openly, I

was able to jot down most things without having to keep them all in my head. I also used

acronyms, abbreviations and visual sketches to help me paraphrase, quote, and record

details, context, and observers' comments in shorthand (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011;

Merriam, 2009). These field notes incorporated data collection, data reduction, and data

analysis. As Corbin and Strauss (2008) wrote, "Whenever observations of events are

made, the observations are filtered through the eyes of the researcher who can't help but

start thinking about and classifying the information. It just kind of happens spontaneously

because persons tend to think consciously, or not in terms of concepts. And there is no

reason not to jot down analytic ideas while in the field…" (p. 123). Following Merriam's

(2009) suggestion, I used brackets to set apart reflective analysis comments from more

descriptive field notes. Following data collection, I compiled field note documents into a

master document that also included jot notes from the notebooks and altogether totaled

156 single-spaced pages.

Participation. The organizational consultant and researcher have historically

taken two very different positions within organizations where researchers have tried *not*

to interfere with what is being observed and bring with them research goals and a

rigorous methodology (Christensen, 2005). Consultants are often expected to give advice,

identify and recommend needed changes, and "act as experts and to intervene by telling

the client what to do" (Christensen, 2005, p. 79). Complexity-based participative inquiry

differs from participatory action research in that PO seeks to make sense of experience through immersion (Stacey & Griffin, 2005). While PO and action research both focus on collaboration, coordination, and participation, action research often comes in with a transformative intention (Stacey & Griffin, 2005). Participant observation in the organizational setting challenges discrete distinctions between these two roles (Christensen, 2005).

DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) noted that observation and participation are two somewhat different processes with participation falling on a continuum. Where researchers fall on the role continuum between total participant and total observation is important and must be acknowledged due to the various underlying trade-offs (e.g., Anderson, 2008; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011; Merriam, 2009). Researchers can be covert or overt with their research interests and can range from a fully participating member of a team to a spectator only who completely observes (Merriam, 2009). DeWalt and DeWalt's (2011) continuum includes nonparticipation, passive participation, moderate participation, active participation, and complete participation. Similarly, Anderson (2008) described four categories of participant observation research: complete participant, participant-as-observer, observer as participant, and complete observer. Of these, this dissertation is closest to participant-as-observer which Anderson (2008) described as occurring when the researcher "forms relationships and participates in activities but makes no secret of an intention to observe events" (p. 151). According to Anderson (2008), participant-as-observer is the most common fieldwork method in management research. "Here, the researcher openly declares herself as such and seeks to embed herself in the organization, learning about the particular aspect of work which she is interested in

and developing relationships with informants (Anderson, 2008, p. 151). Based on DeWalt and DeWalt's (2011) continuum, I fell between moderate and active participation though this was situational. Moderate participation describes the researcher as in the scene and observable as a researcher but acting mostly as an observer with a structured observational framework (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). While I sought active participation, including engaging "in almost everything that other people are doing as a means of trying to learn the cultural rules for behavior" (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. 23-24), my role was not often used that way due to my non-USCG status. Ultimately, it would have been inappropriate to represent myself as USCG social media staff and, as such, I was limited to more moderate participation. While I was observed alongside the social media team and associated with the social media team, it was always as an observing participant. I did have opportunities to more completely participate which is a "temporary event in which the researcher suspends other roles, in order to more fully integrate with the phenomenon, but continues to record observations in field notes and adopts an analytical stance at least partially during the research period and more completely after the period of participation" (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. 24). For example, on two days when they were understaffed, I would search online for content to tweet, post, and repurpose. I would then put together a document of suggested content and potential tweets or status updates and then get feedback from the staff on what they would do and why given my suggestions. I took notes on their feedback to help understand their roles, responsibilities, and decision-making. I also frequently copy edited content coming in from other sources such as submitted blog content or would help with writing headlines and status updates

regarding such content. Other editing working included reviewing policy, regulation, and training documents.

Because participant observation is an "experiential" approach where data come from "observation gained while experiencing and participating in events" (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. 125), active and complete participation obviously strengthens the quality of the study. Despite my best efforts to take a complete and active participant role, a researcher's role is determined by many factors out of the researchers' control including age, gender, class, ethnicity, and group membership (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Factors that influenced my acceptance into the USCG social media team included my identity as a young, female, civilian communication graduate student. My role as researcher and visitor was reinforced in many ways. First, I wore a pink "visitor" badge that read "Requires escort at all times." Second, while my visits took place over several weeks, I was not on scene every day. Third, I was a civilian. While many civilians work at USCG, there is a clear distinction between USCG, civilian USCG personnel, and a civilian visitor.

Within a government agency focused on security issues, not having security clearance and access to the USCG computer network also limited my participation. The culture itself, despite being very transparent, is still formal, hierarchical and constrained by regulations. The fact that I signed a gratuitous services waiver agreement also limited the work I could do on scene without compensation. To be reflexive of these limitations and situational continuum of participation, I included in my memos and field notes where I fell on a given day and in a given situation and how I saw that influencing my data collection and analysis. For example, I kept a document titled "My Participation" in

which I included examples of my participation and wrote memos about this participation. Even with my participation constraints, I developed good rapport and credibility with the social media team and many public affairs personnel. I was able to collect rich data and only twice was I denied access to a requested meeting and that was due to the social media team member not being able to get permission in time for my attendance before the meeting began. To complement and triangulate data collected through observation and participation, I also conducted interviews and analyzed key documents.

Interviews. Participant observation research often uses interviews, the most common method of qualitative data collection (Merriam, 2009), including within the practice of public relations (L. Grunig, 2008). The qualitative in-depth interview is like an extended conversation but more focused, in depth, and detailed and less balanced because one person (i.e., researcher) generally does most of the questioning and the other (i.e., participant) does most of the answering (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Rubin and Rubin (1995) recommended in-depth interviews as a data collection method when research questions cannot be answered simply or briefly, when researchers may need to ask participants to explain their answers, give examples or describe their experiences.

In most interviews, researchers should seek both depth and detail which Rubin and Rubin (1995) considered complementary but distinct concepts. "Detail adds solidity, clarity, evidence, and example; depth adds layers of meaning, different angles on the subject, and understanding" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 131). Details provide the "precise evidence" on which researchers base their conclusions (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 130). I used in-depth interviews to secure relevant details that were not observable within the scope of my participant observation such as the program's evolution. Depth means

"asking about distinct points of view while learning enough of the history or context to be able to put together separate pieces of what you have heard in a meaningful way" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 130). By giving me more access to my participants' work history and context, participant observation benefited my ability to seek depth in interviews.

Interviews vary in type, structure, and formality. Within participant observation studies, interviews often vary from semistructured to unstructured. Semistructured interviews may include an interview protocol, or conversation guide, that includes a written version of interview questions (e.g., main, follow-up, and probes) that are determined before an interview (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). As in most qualitative research, these questions are usually open-ended and flexibly worded to maximize participant elaboration on a topic and to allow the researcher to respond to the participant's worldview and emerging ideas (Merriam, 2009; Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

In addition to in-depth interviews, informal interviews and casual conversations, both with individuals and groups, are more common than semistructured or formal interviewing in participant observation studies (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). These interviews are more like casual conversations among acquaintances and fit within the participant observation goal of engaging in naturally unfolding events and observing them as carefully and objectively as possible (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). "In many cases, more participant observation and informal interviewing can generate more meaningful and interpretable results, more insight for the researcher, and be much less intrusive for the population being studied" (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. 142). Casual interviews with participants can be used for clarification or explanation (Berg, 2009; Horsley, 2010). However, the strength of this approach is that it is largely participant-led and directed

unlike in semistructured or formal interviews that are more organized along a participants' line of questioning (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). As such, the investigator has the least amount of control over the topic and flow of conversation and the least amount of uniformity in questions asked (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Such interviews are not always audio-recorded and do not use protocols or question guides, but notes can be taken during or as soon as possible after the conversation.

Advantages and disadvantages. Like observation, interviews allow researchers to read visual and audible cues. Unlike observation, though, interviews make it possible to study past events that are impossible to replicate or that cannot be externally observed externally (Berg, 2009). They can also allow for a more depth of understanding of one individual's experience rather than the more organizational or group unit focus in a focus group or participant observation of the social media team's actions and interactions (Berg, 2009). A particular advantage of in-depth interviews within a larger participant observation strategy is the fact that I had some history and context from which to draw when conducting interviews. Semistandarized or semistructured interviews can also provide an opportunity to directly focus on a phenomenon that has been observed or in lieu of having to observe it (Berg, 2009). Unstructured interviews and conversations offer the advantage of being more organic (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011).

In terms of disadvantages, interviews, like observation, can be very time-consuming and require a highly skilled interviewer who is a strong listener and can build a positive rapport with respondents (Merriam, 2009). Just as in observation, interviewer personality also plays a role, as do the interview setting and environment (Merriam, 2009). Another disadvantage of the interview is that it does not afford researchers the

ability to see interaction between participants (Berg, 2009). In this project, however, such interactions were often witnessed and recorded through participant observation.

Procedures. While many conversations were more informal and spontaneous, I also identified key individuals for in-depth interviews. Specifically, I conducted 12 in-depth interviews with 10 individuals totaling 10.25 hours. For two members of the social media team, I split interviews over two sessions due to a lengthy initial interview. Interviews took place from November 29 – January 12. I waited until the twelfth site visit which gave me time to gain context and credibility with interview participants. Eleven interviews took place in person and one took place over the phone because the interviewee (branch chief for motion picture public affairs office) was located in California. They ranged from 29 minutes to 127 minutes (when first and second interviews were added together for one participant) with an average length of 67.8 minutes per participant. Interviews took place in the headquarters cafeteria during non-busy times, in a back room in the multimedia office (where the social media team worked) when it was unoccupied, or in individuals' offices when space permitted. All but one interview took place during on-site hours in the field during normal workdays. Each participant signed an IRB consent form and agreed to be recorded. The interviews resulted in 240 single-spaced pages of complete transcriptions. Participants included the four members of the social media team, the director of public affairs, two members of the media relations team (including the branch chief), two members of the strategic communication team (including the branch chief), and the branch chief of the motion picture office located in California.

Participants were selected for their proximity and experience working with the USCG social media team. Informants were determined in an ongoing way during data collection and analysis. For example, the social media chief recommended I speak with the motion picture branch chief because of the division's collaboration regarding social media for USCG-related entertainment projects like the *Coast Guard Alaska* show on the Weather Channel. Other participants such as the strategic communication team members were selected because they had recently developed the strategic framework that social media team members were trying to integrate with their social media communication. Because I was on scene to observe and informally talk with these participants, interviews were semi-structured with adjustments to the protocol to account for emerging insights and participants' roles and perspectives.

In addition to the more formal, semi-structured in-depth interviews, I also conducted informal interviews and conversations without tape recorders. Once on site, it was clear that participants were not comfortable with recording them outside of interviews. To ease their discomfort with being recorded in natural settings, I jotted notes during informal conversations and meetings I observed. As soon as possible after the conversation or meeting, I wrote out notes into typewritten field notes or, when my laptop was not available, in handwritten notebooks. While I had thought it may have been more efficient to record my recollections and thoughts about conversations into my audio-recorder, because I was embedded with the team all day, it was quicker and better for recall to type these notes into my field notes or hand write them in my notebook during the day and then more extensively after leaving the field.

Documents. Per Yin (2009), documents were also used to corroborate and supplement evidence gathered from the other sources used. Document is a general term referring to a "wide range of written, visual, digital, and physical material relevant to the study at hand" (Merriam, 2009, p. 139). To maintain the real-time context that is important to a participant observation study (Stacey & Griffin, 2005), I also collected 49 administrative or strategic documents such as meeting agendas, memos, manuals, reports, and e-mails that related directly to USCG's strategic use of social media with key internal and external stakeholders. These documents were all non-classified though not all publicly available. Because the social media team almost exclusively deals with non-classified information, my inability to see classified material did not impede participation. Throughout data collection, I maintained a document library in an Excel worksheet that catalogued each document, its use or purpose, source, and where it was stored (hard copy in folder, electronically stored in Digital Dropbox, email inbox, CD, etc.).

Data Analysis

Data are often talked about like they magically move from raw data to what ends up in a research report, but this is not the case (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). Data analysis is the process of examining and interpreting data to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Goetz and LeCompte (1984) called data analysis the most "cavalierly and inadequately addressed" research activity in ethnography (p. 241). Qualitative researchers must clearly articulate how they collect and analyze their data (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). This study used Miles and Huberman's (1994) rigorous data analysis methods for qualitative data which is most appropriate in a

theory-driven study like this one. Miles and Huberman (1994) narrowed their focus on data to the form of words based on observation, interviews or documents where data collection activities typically are carried out near a local setting for an extended period of time. Miles and Huberman (1994) have a three-step iterative process to data analysis that entails three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

Data reduction. During data reduction, the researcher selects, focuses, simplifies, abstracts, and transforms data that appear in field notes or transcriptions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data reduction begins when the researcher selects a theoretical framework, develops research questions, and identifies a research site and participants. It occurs continuously throughout the project. Once data collecting begins in earnest, data reduction occurs through writing summaries, coding, identifying themes, clustering, partitioning, and writing memos. In transcribing and reviewing interview transcripts, the researcher identifies emerging themes and assigns them codes that are eliminated, added and adjusted throughout analysis.

Following Miles and Huberman's (1994) approach, during early data analysis, data were summarized and displayed using Excel worksheets that included:

- Log of visits and summary of each day's observation and participation activities;
- Contact sheet for key participants and interviewees that included ranks, titles, roles, responsibilities and status of interviews, etc.;
- Document library listing all relevant documents collected;
- List of terms and acronyms commonly used by team and their descriptions;
- Log of audio recordings that indicated participant, length and date;

- Ongoing themes document that helped keep track of early and ongoing themes surfacing.

Data storage. Interview transcripts were saved in password-protected digital files. I transcribed the first two recordings, and a paid professional transcribed the other 10 recordings. After receiving the transcriptions, I fixed typos and errors, added observer comments, and wrote memos about the interviews. Field notes were maintained on my password-protected computer in Microsoft Word. As noted previously, I also filled three notebooks with hard copy notes that were typed into the appropriate day's electronic field notes. When not in use, notebooks were also kept in my locked office. I kept copies of USCG documents provided electronically in password-protected digital files. I kept a file folder for hard copies of documents I was provided and kept these in my locked office. As noted above, I also maintained a document library in an Excel spreadsheet to keep track of all documents I was provided and where they were stored.

Coding. Codes are tags or labels for assigning meaning to units of gathered descriptive or inferential information (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Codes are used to find and organize, cluster, and display chunks or units of coded data in order to answer the research questions and construct themes. Doing so sets the stage for conclusion drawing and verification. HyperRESEARCH, a qualitative data analysis software program, was used to help store and code relevant electronic sources for the project. The program allowed for multiple codes, revising codes, and other functionality that aided data analysis and conclusion drawing and verification.

Various types of codes were used, beginning with a provisional list of master codes that were descriptive, straightforward category labels drawn from my theoretical

framework and research questions. Master codes were drawn from complexity and relational theories. For example, codes included various complexity and relational theoretical constructs such as control (CG-SM-CONTROL), trust (CG-SM-TRUST), organizational learning (CG-SM-LEARN), multivocality (CG-SM-VOICE-MULTI), engagement (CG-SM-ENGAGE) and dialogue (CG-SM-DIALOG). Codes were also developed related to the dissertation's key research areas of government communication, risk communication, and social media communication. The ongoing code book maintained in HyperRESEARCH included code descriptions and short names as close as possible to the concepts they described. Throughout data analysis, codes were revised, added, and dropped, resulting in 146 final codes.

As analysis advanced and patterns became clearer, interpretive and then pattern codes were added that were more inferential and explanatory. For example, codes were developed that included Coast Guard storytelling (CG-SM-CONTENT-CG STORY), social media challenges with field communicators (CG-SM-INF-CHAL-FIELD) and the influence of USCG public affairs culture (CG-PUBAFF-CULTURE). These codes allowed the researcher to move from first-level coding into a smaller amount of themes, constructs, and data (i.e., data reduction) (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Such higher-level coding, meta-coding, and clustering assisted in identifying emergent themes and explanations to answer the research questions. Miles and Huberman (1994) said pattern, inferential, and meta-codes generally revolve around four summary aspects: themes, causes/explanations, relationships among people, and additional theoretical constructs. Throughout higher-level coding, tentative summary ideas were used to amend the code sheet and test their fit with previously-coded data. In an effort to move toward conclusion

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drawing and verification, I also wrote memos about larger pattern codes to better explore their significance and explanatory power. Throughout this higher-level coding and theme-building process, I stayed open to emerging ideas, surprises, and rival explanations for themes and conclusions.

  Thinking and writing about data. Scholars stress the importance of thinking about and writing about data as part of the data analysis process (e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Merriam, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008). As raw field notes and interview data are transcribed or written up, the researcher can note observer's comments and reflective remarks that reflect on how notes or data fit into the larger data set, research questions, and theoretical ideas (Miles & Huberman, 1994). HyperRESEARCH allowed me to note these comments or marginal remarks within transcripts.

  Memoing was also used as a powerful sense-making mechanism (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Memos are written records of analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Memos are lengthier than observer comments or in-the-field analytic remarks (Corbin & Strauss). They are also generally more in-depth and focused on an event, written in conceptual form after leaving the site (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Out of this coding, thinking about, and analyzing data, the researcher generates more formal, systematic statements about the data and answers to research questions. Some memos in this study included ones focused on my participation, the role of risk and risk communication in my observations and conversations, my reflections on the progress of the project, particular interview reflections, etc. In addition to data reduction through such efforts, data displays

also continued data reduction and helped move toward conclusion drawing and verification.

Data display. Displays are organized, compressed assemblies of information that facilitate conclusion drawing and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The most common data display in qualitative research is extended text that is inefficient for human processing (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The authors suggested data displays such as matrices, graphs and charts to assemble organized information into an immediately accessible, compact form that would help assess what is happening and draw justified conclusions or move on to the next step of analysis. In this way, data display is part of the data analysis process. As noted earlier, several Excel data displays were used throughout this project.

In addition to spreadsheets used during data collection, I used data displays during analysis. For example, I built Excel spreadsheets for each research question that tracked key themes or issues and corresponding evidence from coded interview transcripts, field notes and documents.

Conclusion drawing and verification. From the start of data collection, the researcher begins to draw meaning from data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). While researchers are encouraged to stay open and skeptical, conclusions still form. Therefore, any conclusions drawn should be subjected to further checks and verification. Verification can be informal such as thinking about or returning to data; it can also be more elaborate and systematic such as focused discussion or attempts to replicate findings in other data sets (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I employed Miles and Huberman's (1994) strategies for using data displays to answer the research questions. These four

strategies included forming patterns, seeking contrasts, clarifying relationships, and developing a clear understanding of concepts, relationships, patterns, contrasts and the data. Within these strategies or approaches, my tactics included using memos and an ongoing themes spreadsheet to note patterns or themes while staying skeptical and open to alternative explanations or disconfirming evidence of the same pattern.

Data display spreadsheets allowed me to draw and verify conclusions related to each research question by depicting patterns and themes in the spreadsheets, outlier data, and allowing me to make comparisons and contrasts. These matrices existed as analytic tools or tactics to aid conclusion drawing and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Throughout theme-building and reporting, I used mostly researcher-driven labels to synthesize and crystallize themes and findings. When using participant-driven labels, I used quotes upon first reference to distinguish labels derived from participants' descriptions such as "risk communication mindset," and "military context." Other data analysis tactics used in this study included making metaphors, clustering data, and building a logical chain of evidence. During data collection, I would develop metaphors such as the USCG being like a child with divorced parents to describe its dual parent organizations. I would member check such metaphors with USCG communicators. Once I had identified the themes and findings to research questions, I conducted ongoing in-person and e-mail member checks with the chief of social media and via e-mail with the director of public affairs. These efforts served to strengthen the trustworthiness and credibility of the dissertation's conclusions by correcting inaccuracies and adding critical context. Other strategies and tactics for improving the study's validity and reliability are discussed later.

Reporting the data. This ethnographic study used a theory-building logic to sequence its chapters and sections (Yin, 2009). For example, each section of the results chapter and discussion seeks to uncover parts of the argument being made (Yin, 2009). In this study, the discussion addresses the theoretical and practical implications of using a complexity and relational approach to study and practice at the intersection of government communication, social media, and risk communication. The study's intended audiences include both researchers and practitioners interested in this intersection. The most immediate audiences include the dissertation committee, University of Maryland graduate school, and the USCG office of public affairs.

While the dissertation has been structured following scholarly standards, I am working with the USCG director of public affairs and social media chief to translate the dissertation's results and conclusions into specific policy and program recommendations for the USCG social media program within the office of public affairs. The translated findings and recommendations will be reported in a white paper and in a PowerPoint presentation for Coast Guard leaders, likely including the admiral and vice admiral of the Coast Guard. Prior to the white paper, the director of public affairs and social media chief have already reviewed several drafts of the study's results chapter. As Yin (2009) described, such reviews corrected facts of the case and produced further evidence when they remembered or provided evidence they had forgotten to include during initial data collection or that had occurred outside of the data collection process. While all factual or contextual inaccuracies were corrected, I maintained my discretion over my interpretations of the evidence as recommended by Yin (2009). These reviews, as noted above, improved the study's validity and reliability as discussed next.

Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability are hotly contested and important topics of conversation in qualitative research (e.g., Denzin, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Lack of external validity (e.g., generalizability) has long been a challenge to qualitative research's value especially qualitative case studies (Merriam, 2009). Kvale (1995) said the concepts of validity, reliability and generalizability had achieved the "status of a scientific holy trinity" (p. 20). These terms largely came out of the positivist quantitative approach to research that saw an objective reality and foundational truth or knowledge against which research results were measured. Most qualitative research is rooted in ontologies that reject the idea of one absolute truth and reality that exists outside of the researcher or participant that can be "received" rather than "perceived" (Denzin, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research is more often interested in multiple perspectives and understandings, yet all research is interested in presenting valid and reliable findings in an ethical manner (Merriam, 2009). Dismissing or acquiescing to challenges to qualitative research's validity and reliability can marginalize qualitative research and weaken the knowledge contributions of qualitative inquiry (Denzin, 2009). It is important to both articulate the standards and methods by which qualitative research's validity and reliability can be strengthened and assessed (e.g., Flyvbjerg, 2001; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Merriam, 2009; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008).

Reliability within quantitative research is often associated with replicability (i.e., test-retest) but in qualitative research in which the researcher is the primary data collection and analysis instrument, the focus is less on replicability and more on dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; L. Grunig, 2008). In this case, the reliability of

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qualitative research may be thought of better at the level of analysis than findings (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). For example, if another researcher or the reader were to take my same research questions, theoretical framework and data, would they come to a similar conclusion as I do (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984)? Reliability conceptualized this way might be thought of as consistency (L. Grunig, 2008). Do the reported results seem consistently and logically derived given the theoretical propositions and data (L. Grunig, 2008)? Other qualitative researchers have stressed the importance of demonstrating a transparent, auditable, chain of evidence, and logic linking constructs/propositions to the questions and study which can address validity and reliability (e.g., Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2009).

I align with scholars who have conceptualized validity within qualitative research as credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; L. Grunig, 2008), authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 2000), and believability (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Validity is the "truth value" of the picture that the researcher has drawn from the data (L. Grunig, 2008, p. 123). A researcher can assess how comfortable he or she would be if people took action based on the results provided (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Such a conceptualization is appropriate for this dissertation, because USCG public affairs staff agreed to the research request in part because they value such a research-based report on their social media efforts and plan to act on the dissertation's recommendations.

External validity usually refers to the extent to which research findings from one study can be applied outside the context of the study (Merriam, 2009; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008). Qualitative research has been criticized and devalued for its lack of statistical generalizability to populations (e.g., Flyvbjerg, 2001; Goetz & LeCompte,

1984, Yin, 2009). Qualitative research, with its focus on context, depth, particularization, generative understanding, and rich description, tends to be less interested in broad statistical generalizations to populations that is more often the goal of quantitative research (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Merriam, 2009; Silverman & Marvasti, 2008). However, that is not to say that qualitative research findings cannot extend or transfer to other situations or contexts (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2009). This research may have theoretical or analytic generalization. Qualitative research can test theoretical propositions and hypotheses and generalize to theories (i.e., analytic generalization) (e.g., Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2009). It also may have naturalistic generalization. Stake (1995) talked about naturalistic generalization that can happen when a reader of a case study can generalize aspects of the case to her or his own experiences or a given context. In this way, the power of generalizing is given to the research audience. This study sought external validity more appropriate to qualitative research such as transferability, translatability or extrapolation to other government risk communication contexts and communicators (e.g., Lincoln & Guba, 2000; L. Grunig, 2008). To improve the study's validity, I utilized strong craftsmanship throughout the project.

Craftsmanship. As stated earlier, Kvale (1995) offered a postmodern reconceptualization of validity. One of the three complementary types of validity offered was that of craftsmanship which looks at validity as total quality control throughout a project rather than an inspection of an end product. Craftsmanship involves constantly checking, questioning and theorizing throughout the entire research project from initial thematizing to reporting of data (Kvale, 1995). The total quality control view aligns with the holistic approach of constantly questioning and checking presented by other

researchers (e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994; & Yin, 2009). Within a participant observation context, DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) found that the findings of "trained, self-reflexive observers, using several different approaches to a phenomenon can achieve an acceptable level of reliability and validity and are, to the extent of the method, objective" (p. 123). To that end, I used several general strategies throughout the dissertation to increase its overall craftsmanship validity and subsequent reliability. In addition to member checks, I utilized reflexivity, triangulation, and an audit trail.

Researcher reflexivity, background and approach. Reflexive researchers understand they are part of the social world they are investigating (Berg, 2009). To be reflexive about what one is studying means having an ongoing internal dialogue that consistently asks what the researcher knows and how they know it (Berg, 2009). The ideal result of reflexivity is reflexive knowledge that "provides insights into the workings of the world and insights on how that knowledge came to be" (Berg, 2009, p. 198).

I took a reflexive approach to acknowledging that my own personal and professional background, epistemological perspective, and research paradigm influenced the dissertation, including the topics, qualitative study design, data collection and analysis. To interrogate my own role in the research, I consistently wrote reflexively to question and check my own assumptions, beliefs and findings. For example, my pre-data collection memos reflect on (1) my professional background as a government communicator and public relations scholar and student, (2) my belief (and hope) that social media has relationship-building potential that can mutually benefit organizations and their publics, (3) and my personal feelings as an insider/outsider in my role as

researcher and team member. For example, in one memo, I wrote: "I did feel the pressure of having to step in and out of their lives. Being totally embedded and invested while there and then having to put on my many other hats – mom, wife, student, teacher, job applicant." It was also strange to have the initial data collection end but still be in the data analysis mode. After the team posted a tribute to the four USCG personnel who died in a February 28, 2012 CG-6535 helicopter crash, I wrote about that in-between state: "I'm sure many questions will be asked, investigations will follow, life will go on. I found myself wondering – what was the [morning meeting] like this morning? What do they know on the inside? Are they still going to post a Shipmate of the Week? Where's [the content manager]? Why didn't she post Wednesday or today? Reminded me just how out of the loop I am. Still I sent [the chief] an email – telling him it was a nice tribute and I was thinking of all of them. And now I go back to what feels like cold coding and analyzing their lives and work."

I also recognize the role of my interpretivist or constructivist epistemology and co-creational functionalist paradigm. This epistemological perspective assumes that reality can be interpreted and constructed in a social construct and that there is no single, observable reality (Merriam, 2009). Instead, knowledge is constructed and interpreted, and any event can contain multiple realities and interpretations (Merriam, 2009). This view encouraged me to listen to, observe, and value multiple viewpoints and perspectives. At the same time, I needed to acknowledge my own role in constructing a report that could not include every person's perspective and interpretation of every incident. I sought to balance perspectives and voices to account for the many truths of the social media team by including individual team members rather than only the social

media chief or director of public affairs. My research questions focused on government communicators, reflecting this commitment to individual narratives and perspectives that make up a "team" or "program." These individual views gathered in interviews, participant observation, and documents were woven together to answer the study's research questions and reflect on the findings, and the dissertation does not claim to represent the *only* answers to these research questions.

My public relations worldview as a cocreational functionalist informed by my own experiences as a government communication practitioner, also emphasizes the organizational perspective while seeing the need for a cocreational, relational approach with stakeholders. This perspective from practice has also informed my past research and spurred my interest in the values and uses of social media communication within the government. Through peer debriefing, observer comments, and memos, I tried to name and then set aside my own biases and beliefs. For example some memos focused on what it was like to hear "public relations" spoken about as synonymous with spin and propaganda or times when I saw the social media team being devalued.

Every one to two weeks, I spoke with a peer debriefer by phone for 30 to 45 minutes. The process of peer debriefing can increase the credibility of a study by helping the researcher minimize bias (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). The process involves the researcher discussing the study with a knowledgeable and trusted peer who can provide support, challenge researcher assumptions, and be a sounding board throughout the study (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). The peer debriefer was particularly helpful for allowing me to process political, ethical or uncomfortable issues such as navigating personality differences and internal politics. The peer debriefing exercises helped keep me

accountable to the study and my researcher role. While I wanted to tell my participants'

stories and was aware of my ethical responsibility to consider any potential repercussions

on them for what I would report, I wanted to tell a true story, not just one that cast them

in the best light. Ultimately, the peer debriefer and memoing helped me not "go native"

by keeping me focused on my researcher role (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. 73). Two

other strategies helped me stay focused on the researcher role during participant

observation in the field. First, I was only in the field for two or three days a week during

all but two weeks of the study. These breaks from the field can be an effective way to

allow for a "more objective review of notes, other data, and a bit of analysis" (DeWalt &

DeWalt, 2011, p. 74). Second, I concluded the participant observation portion and exited

the field in January and took time to conduct my in-depth analysis and draw conclusions

after I had exited the field. The time away and distance, complemented by the peer

debriefing and memoing during the participant observation portion of the study helped

me focus on the researcher role and added credibility to the study.

I also maintained reflective observer comments throughout my field notes.

Because insecurities can lead a participant observer to resist active participation (DeWalt

& DeWalt, 2011), it was important that I reflexively acknowledge in memos, field notes,

and observer comments how my insecurities may influence my on-site actions and

observations. One insecurity involved what the team's expectations may be in terms of

my actual "work" for them. While I came in with the goal of understanding their work

and view of risk communication and social media rather than with a transformative goal,

I was not sure where on the researcher-consultant continuum they would see me. As a

former congressional government communicator who had not practiced government

communication for five years, I feared that while I had studied and taught organizational use of social media in a public relations context, what if I was not good at actually doing it? While those insecurities and concerns quickly faded, they rose back up at given moments in the study when I felt out of touch with USCG culture or particular tasks. However, those insecurities did not bear out much in the study because I played a more moderate participation role and was not given large amounts of responsibility.

I also reflected on my presence and the possible effects of my participant observation on what I observed (Merriam, 2009). From a complexity approach that sees all environments as products of local interactions, I recognized that my interactions changed the adaptive system (e.g., Christensen, 2005; Stacey & Griffin, 2005). In sum, these activities allowed me to better reflect on and acknowledge how my own participation, including any potential biases, may have played a role in my data collection and analysis. In addition to taking a reflexive stance throughout the study, I also used interviews and documents to triangulate the participant observation and seek multiple lines of sight (Berg, 2009; Yin, 2009).

Triangulation. Many qualitative scholars consider triangulation an effective way to increase the credibility of qualitative research (e.g., Berg, 2009; Merriam, 2009). It is sometimes thought of as only involving multiple data collection methods, but I followed Yin's (2009) view of triangulation that includes triangulating theories, investigators, and other approaches to getting a more full view of the phenomenon. Many postmodern scholars reject the triangulation metaphor because it was originally drawn from navigation that used three points to try to determine the exact location of a ship (Merriam, 2009). Since postmodernists do not agree that there is an exact truth to pinpoint, they

have used the term crystallization to imply turning the prism. I attempted to triangulate or crystallize through multiple forms of data collection, member checking, and using multiple theoretical lenses. I also sought interviews and viewpoints that might reveal significant, different perspectives and meanings (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). When the strengths of participant observation were combined with those of interviews and document analysis as this study did, researchers can achieve a "more holistic interpretation of the phenomenon being investigated" (Merriam, 2009, p. 136).

Audit trail. The final general strategy I used to increase the validity and reliability of my study was developing and maintaining an audit trail (e.g., Merriam, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2009). By keeping a clear and transparent record of my memos, data collection, coding sheets, transcripts, displays, and analysis procedures, I improved my research's auditability - one aspect of assessing the overall quality of my research study, including its reliability and validity. Craftsmanship validity is also dependent on a researcher conducting research ethically (Kvale, 1995). In this case, I conducted this research overtly and will provide research reciprocity by presenting my results and recommendations to USCG leadership. I secured IRB approval prior to the study and followed their guidelines on securing informed consent during data collection. As needed, I consulted with members of my committee and scholars experienced with participation observation research.

Limitations of the Study

Despite attempts to improve the auditability, credibility, and trustworthiness of my dissertation and its results, the study has several limitations, including lack of statistical generalizability. As stated earlier, I used a nonrandom sample within one site,

the USCG, because I wanted "to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many" (Merriam, 2009, p. 224). While case study research generalizability is limited, case studies can generalize to theories and potentially other contexts (Yin, 2009). Readers may also experience naturalistic generalization or transferability where readers relate to and learn through experiencing the case as presented in the case study (Stake, 1995). As such, while this dissertation is limited in its ability to generalize to all risk communication or all social media use in the U.S. federal government, its results may transfer to other cases and theories in order to push forward theory-building and understanding by offering an in-depth view of a complex phenomenon.

While my observation and participation as a member of the USCG social media team brought me close to the phenomena under study, the fact that I was only able to participate two days a week and for three months limited my ability to observe every interaction during the time period. The fact that the chief of social media was gone for two months had trade-offs. In his absence, I was able to focus first on the team's tactical activities and see how the team worked in the absence of the chief. However, I recognized that his absence may have limited my view of the strategic planning discussions with other USCG leaders. To counter that limitation, I used interviews and document analysis to complement and extend participation and observation by filling gaps in what I could observe in person and going deeper on a topic. I also extended my time in the field by two full work weeks in order to observe the team with the chief of social media present and spend extensive time interviewing and talking with the chief and attending meetings with the director of public affairs. The differences in what I saw

during those times were accounted for in my results section by revealing a strategic vacuum that can emerge when the chief is out of the office, yet how the team's tactical work successfully and effectively continues. Once I had exited the field, I was still able to reach out to social media team members to request additional clarification or documents until I could fully answer the research questions. In-person member check meetings with the chief of social media also helped to counterbalance his absence during the first two months of data collection.

Finally, the fact that I studied an agency with an active social media team may also limit the study's transferability to all U.S. government agencies involved in risk communication. However, during Department of Defense All Services social media council meetings, other government social media communicators raised issues that reflected the USCG experience. When my research was announced at both meetings to alert the group of my presence, I was greeted during breaks and after the meeting by several individuals who thrust business cards in my hand asking if I would next study and help them. Many expressed interest in the results of this study. While the study may not apply and generalize to all agencies, the hunger for rigorous, systematic research on the phenomenon of government social media may more easily transfer. Future longitudinal research and studies of government agencies without social media teams can extend the findings generated in the dissertation. Given these limitations, this dissertation contributes to both theory and practice by extending uses of theories and methods to better understand the complicated nature of using social media communication, particularly within government communication and risk communication contexts. The next chapter situates the study before offering results from the data collected.

Chapter 4: Situating the Study

In order to better situate the study, this study first provides background on the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG). It then introduces and explores the USCG communication structure and function relevant to this study.

USCG Background

The USCG is a unique, complex multi-mission federal agency. It is the nation's "oldest continuous sea-going service," operating since 1790 when the U.S. Congress created the Revenue Cutter Service within the Treasury Department and authorized the construction of 10 ships to prevent smuggling and to enforce tariff and trade laws (Wilson, 2011, p. 12). The current organization is the product of five agencies that have merged over time: Revenue Marine (est. 1790), U.S. Lifesaving Service (est. 1848), U.S. Lighthouse Service (est. 1789), Steamboat Inspection Service (est. 1838), and the Bureau of Navigation (est. 1884). The USCG stayed in the Department of Treasury until 1967 when it was moved within the Department of Transportation and then to the Department of Homeland Security in 2003.

The USCG has a record of "multi-mission maritime service" as both a "law enforcement agency and an armed service" (Doane & DiRenzo III, 2011, p. 32). Its value to the nation is that it "leverages its maritime, multi-mission ability, and military efficiency to *earn* the confidence of leaders and citizens alike" (Doane & DiRenzo III, 2011, p. 34, emphasis in original). It is one of the five U.S. armed forces and the only military organization to be housed within DHS where USCG was placed in 2003 as part of the national security reforms in response to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 (9/11). Table 1 shows USCG's current size and budget compared to other armed services.

Table 1

USCG Personnel Strength and Budget Comparison to Other Services

U.S. Armed Service	Active Personnel[a]	Fiscal Year 2012 Budget[b]
Air Force	333,117	$144.9 billion
Army	559,355	$133.9 billion
Marine Corps	198,976	Funded within Navy budget
Navy	321,190	$156.8 billion
Coast Guard	**42,914**	**$8.634 billion**[c]

[a]Information in this column from "Armed Forces Strength Figures for February 29, 2012" by the U.S. Department of Defense Statistical Information Analysis Division, 2012. [b]Information in this column, except where noted, found in "Summary of the DOD Fiscal 2013 Budget Proposal" by the U.S. Department of Defense, 2012. [c]Coast Guard budget figure taken from "Homeland Security Department: FY2012 Appropriations" by W. L. Painter & J. E. Lake, 2012.

In addition to the USCG reported active duty enlisted personnel and officers, the Coast Guard 2011 Snapshot reported 7,997 reserve, 8,342 civilians, and 31,419 volunteer auxiliarists. While USCG is DHS' largest component (i.e., department, agency, office), its unique multi-maritime mission, culture, and history outside DHS complicate its fit within the relatively young DHS.

Missions and Culture

Risk and crisis are deeply connected to USCG missions and operations as underscored by the USCG's motto, character, and purpose. The agency's motto "Semper Paratus" means "Always Ready." As noted in the last chapter, the USCG's "Missions" web page notes: "This history has forged our character and purpose as America's Maritime Guardian — *Always Ready* for all hazards and all threats" (U.S. Coast Guard, "Missions," emphasis in original, para. 1). The maritime environment "is a complex operating system with a multitude of subsystems; some dependent, some autonomous, but all necessary to the operation of the main system…All of these activities have inherent dangers and are subject to the powers of nature from storms and raging seas placing life, property, and the environment itself at risk" (Doane & DiRenze III, 2011, p.

33). Commandant Admiral Robert J. Papp, who became the 24th commander of the

USCG on May 25, 2010 taking over from Commandant Thad Allen, described the Coast

Guard's unique mission context:

> We are a major component within DHS that provides for maritime security, but
> we also have stewardship and responsibility for marine safety and other
> responsibilities that don't neatly fit with the DHS portfolio—many of these
> responsibilities flow from our legacy relationships serving as part of the
> Department of Transportation and Treasury. My goal is to take the finite
> resources we have and make sure I'm giving sound direction to my senior leaders
> on how to equitably distribute them across our 11 statutory missions. This
> direction will take into account how we relate and interact with DHS, as well as
> DoD –as we are always an armed force—and our other federal, state, and local
> partners. (Wilson, 2011, p. 14-15)

Section 888(a)(2) of The Homeland Security Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-296 of November 25,

2002) established DHS and statutorily assigned the USCG five homeland security

missions: ports, waterways, and coast security; drug interdiction; migrant interdiction;

defense readiness; and, other law enforcement (O'Rourke, 2007). The USCG's other non-

homeland security missions include marine safety; search and rescue; aids to navigation;

living marine resources (fisheries law enforcement); marine environmental protection;

and, ice operations (O'Rourke, 2007). To help contextualize these 11 missions, the

USCG ordered them based on percentage of 2010 operating expenses (U.S. Coast Guard,

2011a, p. 178):

(1)   Ports, waterways, and coastal security

(2)   Drug interdiction

(3)   Aids to navigation

(4)   Search and rescue

(5)   Living marine resources

(6)   Marine safety

(7)   Defense readiness

(8)   Migrant interdiction

(9)   Marine environmental protection

(10)   Ice operations

(11)   Other law enforcement

Based on its missions, the USCG has six major programs: maritime security operations;

maritime law enforcement; maritime prevention; maritime response; defense operations;

marine transportation system management (U.S. Coast Guard, 2012, 2011 Coast Guard

Snapshot). The organization's "military multi-mission maritime persona" and authority to

act as both law enforcement agency and armed force creates opportunities and

challenges:

Having this dual role enables the Coast Guard to work effectively nationally and

internationally with civilian agencies, the private sector, and other militaries. In

effect, the Coast Guard is multicultural with a deep understanding of civilian and

military perspectives. Combined with its broad maritime authorities and

capabilities developed over decades, the Coast Guard also has the breadth of

understanding, organizational construct, and maritime expertise to respond rapidly

and effectively to whatever maritime needs the nation faces. (Doane & DiRenzo III, 2011, p. 32)

The multicultural nature of the USCG means that it has traits of traditional and network coordination structures (Morris, Morris, & Jones, 2007). The military component of the service's character is "reflected in the Coast Guard's effective and efficient organization and the use of tactical, operational, and strategic levels of command – concepts central to military structure" (Doane & DiRenzo III, 2011, p. 32). In addition to military levels of command, the USCG has formal rank structures and a hierarchical organizational form (Morris et al, 2007, p. 101). The USCG describes its approach as infusing top-down command and control with "on-scene initiative" (Doane & DiRenzo III, 2011, p. 32). This on-scene initiative is one of USCG's six principles of operation. Others include: clear objective; effective presence; unity of effort; flexibility; managed risk; and restraint (U.S. Coast Guard, 2012, 2011 Coast Guard Snapshot). The Coast Guard is organized in five levels: national (1), area (2), district (9), sector (35) and unit (1,208) (U.S. Coast Guard, 2012, 2011 Coast Guard Snapshot).

The USCG's relatively small size and resources compared to other military branches have increased the agency's need for internal and external coordination that has blurred and spanned formal structural boundaries and contributed to USCG's "long history of drawing on local relations and partnering to get the job done" (Morris et al., 2007, p. 101). Because these aspects of USCG complex operating system and environment may play a role in its perceptions of social media and internal and external stakeholder engagement, the ideas of on-scene initiative and community relationships will be explored in more detail.

Strategic intent and on-scene initiative. On-scene initiative describes the USCG's philosophy that individual field commanders should be empowered to consider their commanders' strategic intent and make rapid decisions based on the situation as it is changing and evolving (Doane & DiRenzo III, 2011). The USCG used its response to the January 12, 2010 Haiti earthquake as an example of this initiative and empowerment to act individually in a bottom-up manner (Doane & DiRenzo III, 2011). Without waiting for orders from headquarters, operational-level and field-level USCG commanders took action to reassign cutters and aircraft from their prior missions and redirect them to Haiti, and the first USCG cutter and aircraft were on scene by the morning following the quake (Doane & DiRenzo III, 2011). As the authors emphasized:

> It is important to understand that the USCG did not have specific standing commander's intent in the advent of a devastating earthquake in Haiti. What commanders had was a deep understanding of the nation's commitment to humanitarian action. They knew they would be called upon to respond to the devastation. They understood the relative importance of the missions to which they were currently assigned as compared to the situation in Haiti. In doing so, they reminded the world of the United States' commitment to humanitarian causes, thus fulfilling their commander's strategic intent. (Doane & DiRenzo III, 2011, p. 32)

The organization's focus on local on-scene initiative and rapid response was also evident in response to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans during 2005. Success stories are rare when studying the federal government's response to Hurricane Katrina, yet the USCG has been considered one (e.g., Derthick, 2007; Horwitz, 2008; Morris et al.,

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2007). The agency has been praised for its rapid response and "outstanding performance" in its New Orleans response (Derthick, 2007, p. 41). By 2:50 p.m. the afternoon of the day the city flooded, the USCG had already made its first rescue (Derthick, 2007). One measure of USCG's successful response may be that the USCG Commander at the time, Thad Allen, replaced Federal Emergency Management Agency chief Michael Brown within several days of the storm as primary federal official (Morris et al., 2007).

According to Derthick (2007), a 2006 Senate report credited the USCG's success to several factors including training, "an organizational culture of rapid, aggressive response to emergencies" and its close community ties with area agencies and publics (p. 41). For example, its intergovernmental cooperation and coordination with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (DWF) allowed both the USCG and DWF to be more successful in their rescue and relief efforts (Derthick, 2007). The USCG's normal operating environment that includes search and rescue and its training for such missions meant that the USCG was not doing anything out of the ordinary though the scale was extraordinary (Morris et al., 2007). The USCG's history of cooperation, flexibility, and adaptation also played a role (Morris et al., 2007). The organization's complex culture may be both a product of and reason for such a history. For example then-Commander Thad Allen told a *National Journal* reporter (Kitfield, 2006, para. 25):

> Each time we've assumed a new duty or function into the USCG, we've adapted by absorbing the cultures and dialects that went with them. After focusing on guarding the U.S. coasts during World War II, for instance, we moved into monitoring recreational boating safety, enforcing fisheries laws and maritime environmental regulations, combating migrant smuggling at sea, interdicting

narcotics shipments as part of the war on drugs, and establishing port security

after 9/11. In responding to each of those transnational threats and challenges, we

became more familiar with the interagency process. Today, I like to say that one

of the core competencies of the USCG is that we're bureaucratically bilingual.

Morris et al. (2007) considered Allen's bilingual metaphor to be indicative of

organizations that can speak the language of other stakeholder organizations and

successfully carry out contingent coordination. The bilingual metaphor also connotes the

multilingual description of the USCG given by Allen (Kitfield, 2006). Being

multicultural and bilingual can aid effective communication, and communication can

improve the likelihood of accomplishing organizational missions (Phillips & Loy, 2003).

In a book on USCG leadership, leadership expert Donald Phillips and former U.S. Coast

Guard Commandant James Loy (2003) go beyond just communication to relationship-

building communication. "…The very best leaders also intuitively understand that a lack

of good relationships can be as fatal as a lack of critical information. Relationships are

built on mutual respect and trust. But respect and trust can only be earned through

constant, ongoing, dynamic communication. It is from that type of communication that

relationships grow" (Phillips & Loy, 2003, p. 71).

Community relationships. As Derthick (2007) noted, community ties and

relationships were credited with helping the USCG effectively respond to the Hurricane

Katrina disaster. In addition to empowering employees, then, the USCG also counts its

"ability to integrate into the community it serves" and "function like a local agency" as

characteristics that contribute to its success (Doane & DiRenzo, III, 2011, p. 34). Long-

standing relationships with local maritime communities "have inherent value when crisis

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strikes, and the contributions of local communities become an important aspect of the response" (Doane & DiRenzo, III, 2011, p. 34). The commander responsible for the USCG response to the earthquake in Haiti credited relationships with the agency's rapid, integrated response: "Equally important to effective U.S. assistance was the well-developed relationship that existed between the U.S. Coast Guard and the Haitian Coast Guard…These relationships were vital to the Haitian Coast Guard being 'up and running' shortly after the earthquake" (Nash, 2011, p. 119). The next section provides background on the larger communication function, roles, and responsibilities, including USCG risk communication and communication via social media.

USCG Communication

Reflecting an increasingly complex operating environment and mission portfolio, the complexity, visibility, responsibilities, and stakes have risen for USCG public relations (Moorlag, 2007). The 2011 Public Affairs Manual identifies six primary objectives of the USCG's communication program (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b, p. 1-1):

(1) Keeping the American public informed about the Coast Guard's ongoing operations and programs, thereby fostering understanding and support for all our missions.

(2) Making our world a better place to serve and live by taking an active role in community activities and challenges.

(3) Helping Coast Guard leadership attract, motivate and retain highly professional people to continue our tradition of dedicated quality service to the world.

(4) Helping save lives by educating and informing the American public, thus reducing accidents and casualties.

(5) Communicate with target audiences to deter and dissuade illegal activity before it begins.

(6) Informing elected and public officials of the Coast Guard's role in their community and nation, and by informing members of Congress, ensure continued healthy fiscal support for our service.

Before discussing USCG risk communication and social media communication, I first offer background on the public affairs roles within the USCG's decentralized, yet nationally coordinated, public relations function.

USCG Communicators. The USCG organizes its public affairs function in a flexible, decentralized way with the public affairs function being carried out at headquarters (national), area and district (regional) offices, and within individual units. Additionally, USCG leaders consider public affairs a built-in requirement of all individual USCG men and women.

Commandant. The governmental and public affairs unit is a headquarters directorate that answers to the commandant and vice commandant (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011c). Included within this directorate are the director of governmental and public affairs, strategic communications development staff, the office of congressional affairs, and the office of public affairs. Other headquarter units or programs that exist alongside the governmental and public affairs unit include the judge advocate general and chief counsel, the USCG enterprise strategic management and doctrine directorate, the

intelligence and criminal investigations unit, and the planning, resources and procurement unit.

The Director of Governmental and Public Affairs, Rear Admiral Karl Schultz, is the commandant responsible for overall management of public affairs programs, policies, and activities (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b). In addition to advising Coast Guard Commandant Papp on public affairs and major media strategies, Schultz oversees headquarters program managers and directorate or office chiefs with achieving their planning to meet public affairs objectives (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b). Public affairs is organized into programs such as media relations, community relations, and the historian's office.

The USCG has built its social media staff into the public affairs function. The public affairs director and social media chief work with the DHS office of public affairs to define policies and requirements for USCG social media communication. The public affairs directorate is then tasked with coordinating across USCG national commands and directorates and areas and districts to build a social media program that fits within larger policy and communication objectives. At the headquarter level, as the previous chapter noted, Captain Ron LaBrec is the director of public affairs, and Christopher Lagan is the civilian social media chief who directs enterprise social media for the office of public affairs. Lagan has editorial oversight of the USCG's national suite of social media tools, including the Coast Guard Compass blog that was named one of the 2011 best military blogs by Military.com. Lagan also serves as USCG's representative to DHS's enterprise web council and chairs that council's standing committee on enterprise content strategy. The social media team and its members are discussed more in a later section.

Area and district public affairs officers. Underscoring the decentralized nature of USCG and its public affairs function, outside of the headquarters directorates and units, public affairs is also formally conducted by area or district public affairs officers and specialists. These public affairs officers (PAOs) support commands located within one of the areas (Pacific or Atlantic) or in one of the 9 districts that states are divided among. Figure 1 shows the division of the USCG organization.

Figure 1. Map of USCG organization. Provided by USCG social media team. Also available at http://www.uscg.mil/top/units/

There are two types of PAOs: primary duty (full-time) or collateral duty (as needed). The collateral duty PAOs are mostly at the unit level and are discussed there. The area and district PAOs are encouraged to keep their collateral (non-public affairs) duties to a minimum in order to successfully fulfill their communication functions. These communicators serve as spokespeople and conduct media and community relations at the area or district level. Area and district PAOs are also tasked with overseeing regional social media efforts. They support unit commanders by helping set up media relations, community relations, and internal information programs at the unit level. Training is encouraged and provided through the Defense Information School. Across their duties, they are to maintain activities "fluid enough to permit rapid response to unexpected events" that include risks and crises (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b, 1-5). In these non-routine contexts, PAOs are asked to also seek the opinions of operations and legal offices about the release of sensitive information, but those team members' opinions are equally weighted with the PAOs as long as there are no legal restrictions precluding the information (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b). If PAOs perceive a delay or block in information release, they are directed to their unit commander or headquarters public affairs office for help.

Unit commanders. The unit command is closest to the community and, as such, public affairs is considered a critical function at the command level. "The most important people conducting the public affairs program are commanding officers and officers-in-charge. Their daily interaction with the community and media, and the guidance they provide to personnel assigned to their units, form the basic public perception of the Coast Guard" (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b, p. 1-8). Commanding officers conduct the three-part

public affairs program at the unit level. Internal communication is also stressed at this level to ensure personnel have access to career and benefit information. Commanders are encouraged to seek public affairs training once a year from their district or area office. Unit commanders are responsible for social media content posted by the personnel under their commands and for developing units' policies for personal use of social media (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b). If they want to develop unit social media sites, those requests are run through the public affairs staff that service their unit at the area or district level.

 Command PAOs. Just as the unit is the closest USCG organization to the community, the command PAO is the person who is most often the face of the unit, the commanding officer, and the USCG to the media and public (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b). PAOs at the unit command level are often collateral duty and are chosen based on qualifications such as knowledge of USCG and command missions and personal traits such as public speaking, enthusiasm, creativity, and the ability to gain and hold trust and respect from the commanding officer, unit personnel, media, and public (2011b). An even temperament that can stay calm within "hectic tempos, constant demands or tragedy" is also essential since the "PAO will represent the command in crisis situations, possibly even an accident involving your unit and injury or death of a crewmember" (U.S. Coast Guard, 201lb, p. 8-1). Given those high stakes, the manual urges unit commanders not to just assign the most junior member of the unit but to carefully consider who they select as command public affairs officer "as if their careers depended upon it," noting that unit commanders have been "relieved because of public criticism due in part to poor communications" (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b, p. 8-1). Given the manual's basic-level instructions to incoming command PAOs including learning about the media and

communication implies they often have minimal education or background in public relations. The manual recommends they seek training through their district or area office, the Defense Information School, a traveling media relations program, or through university courses.

Public affairs specialists. According to the recruiting website's description of public affairs specialists (PAs), PAs are "enlisted public-communications experts" (U.S. Coast Guard, "Public affairs specialist," para. 1). PAs are stationed around the country near major media markets and work for PAOs within area or district commanders' offices. They may also be stationed at public affairs detachments in major cities where they support a region rather than a specific unit (Coast Guard, 2011b). Duties include raising public awareness through media relations activities such as serving as spokesperson and writing news releases and features. PAs take a 12-week entry-level training course held at the Defense Information School. The training covers public affairs, journalism, media relations, online news gathering, and photography (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b). PAs can also take intermediate or advanced course units in courses such as web design and crisis media relations.

Individuals. The USCG's decentralized structure lends itself to a public affairs policy that recognizes each employee as part of the larger communication function. The manual recognizes that in addition to public affairs officers and specialists, the "cornerstone of the Coast Guard public affairs program is the individual" (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b, p. 1-10). "Active-duty members, Reservists, Auxiliarists [volunteers] and civilian employees interact with the public thousands of times each day. These interactions are opportunities to tell the Coast Guard story, to explain our missions and to

support service goals. Because the USCG has direct, daily involvement with the

community, our public affairs program relies on the good will generated by every

member" (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b, p. 1-10). In fact, the USCG public affairs manual

states that "participation in the public affairs program is a condition of employment.

"Each member of the Coast Guard is authorized and encouraged to publicly discuss non-

restricted aspects of his or her area of responsibility…" (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b, p. 1-

2). The USCG's emphasis on community relations may also inform its view of risk

communication via social media. At the individual level, personnel using social media in

an official or unofficial policy are expected to follow the guidelines as outlined in the

manual whenever they identify themselves in any way as a USCG member or employee.

Social media communication may be in an official, unofficial or personal capacity. The

next sections offer brief background on USCG risk communication and social media

communication.

USCG Risk Communication

USCG missions "involve identifying and minimizing (or if possible eliminating)

hazards to the public, the environment, and U.S. Coast Guard Personnel, preventing

mishaps, and investigating causes when mishaps occur" (U.S. Coast Guard, "Risk

management," para. 1). Myers (2009), a former USCG risk analyst at headquarters,

helped develop the agency's approach to risk-based decision making (RBDM) and apply

it toward risk issues facing the USCG. Risk issues facing USCG include homeland

security, pollution prevention and response, and commercial vessel safety (Myers, 2009).

Outside those contexts, the USCG public affairs manual (2011b) notes the drug

interdiction mission may involve communication about counternarcotic operations that

are already sensitive and risky and may be made more so by communicating about these

operations with the public. Some of the identified risks that may be heightened by

communication include personal safety of involved law enforcement personnel, risk of

compromising efforts to seize drugs or make arrests, jeopardizing prosecutions of those

arrested. Communication could also pose risks to established relationships with

governments "whose citizens, vessels, territory, etc." may be involved in narcotics

activity (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b, p. 2-39). Aside from the drug interdiction mission, the

manual warns about the "great risk for injuring a reputation" when communicating about

"vessel collisions, spills, boating accidents or other damage-causing incidents" (U.S.

Coast Guard, 2011b, p. 2-24). In this risk communication context, the manual cautions

communicators about using intended or unintended blame language when releasing

information. Despite these risks, the USCG public affairs manual (2011b) stresses

proactive, open, timely, honest communication of both good and bad news. Within a

larger risk communication context, Myers (2009) described the USCG's need for dialogic

communication:

> Because the USCG is also a regulatory agency that deals with the public, risk
>
> communication is emphasized heavily in the process to ensure open dialogue,
>
> exchanges of information and opinions among individuals, and participation in
>
> the process. The intent is to include those affected by the decision as well as those
>
> most knowledgable [sic] about the issues under consideration. By engaging the
>
> stakeholders in the discussion, and using the structured approach of risk
>
> assessment and risk management, decisions are more rational and defendable.

The USCG's public information assist team (PIAT) is part of the Coast Guard's National Strike Force (U.S. Coast Guard, "U.S. Coast Guard public information assist team"). This four-person team is specially trained in high-stakes risks and crises involving oil spills, hazardous materials, marine accidents, natural disasters, acts of terrorism, or weapons of mass destruction. In addition to the crisis focus, the team offers risk communication training for the Coast Guard and personnel at other federal, state, and local public and private sector organizations.

The training description includes risk communication definitions, theories, strategies, tactics, and how they apply to risk management. In addition to this content, the training describes how to develop risk communication strategies, uses risk communication scenarios to show communicators how to develop risk responses, and focuses on the media's role in risk and effective media relations (U.S. Coast Guard, "U.S. Coast Guard public information assist team," para. 3). From a stakeholder perspective, the training also covers stakeholders' role in risk communication and provides approaches and tools for community stakeholder identification, prioritization, and ways to get community input (U.S. Coast Guard, "U.S. Coast Guard public information assist team"). While this training does not reference communication platforms and channels, social media may be one way employees can conduct two-way risk communication via social media.

USCG Social Media

An August 27, 2009 Coast Guard Compass blog post reported on a 2009 keynote speech at the Potomac Forum's Gov 2.0 Best Practices Symposium by then-Commandant Allen in which he argued that web-based communication like social media is the

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"information sociological equivalent to climate change" and that governments "cannot NOT engage" (Braesch, 2009, para. 2). Allen recognized though that engagement would involve taking risks and learning from mistakes. The public affairs manual identifies many risks to engaging in social media including legal, security, privacy, and reputation management (2011). Despite these risks, the USCG has moved forward in communicating social media's value to its communication function. In the September 2008 interim social media guidelines memo, then-director of governmental and public affairs wrote, "Social media presents new opportunities to inform and collaborate with the public in many ways" (Landry, 2008, para.1). Landry further indicated that USCG's "approach to online content is very similar to our existing public affairs policy: to be aware of posts relevant to the service's missions, policies, and people and to provide information at the right level and the right time to ensure informed discussions to the extent that our resources allow" (Landry, 2008, para. 1).

The value of social media was reiterated in the new chapter covering social media in the public affairs manual. The manual describes social media's potential for "enhanced access and increased opportunities to educate and engage ever-growing and influential new audiences" and "direct two-way engagement with the American taxpayer which allows us to 'listen' to our constituencies and consider both feedback and criticisms of how we do business as part of our larger organizational maturation process" (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b, p. 11-1). The USCG's social media strategy calls its approach the "Right Tool at the Right Level for the Right Audience" and sees the strategy as complementing the localized media and community relations efforts carried out by independent

commands (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b, p. 11-1). It does not mention its role within internal

information programs.

USCG leadership has resourced the social media program by providing a team.

Currently, the social media team that maintains official USCG social media is made up of

a social media chief who oversees strategy and management; a compliance manager who

focuses on social media compliance with policy and protocol; a content manager who

does the editorial and engagement planning and curates and manages the content. The

content manager also oversees one content assistant who focuses on providing

multimedia content, including creating and editing videos and photos from the field,

designing graphics such as digital "badges" for special occasions like Veterans Day, and

using HTML code to design "buttons" for the USCG homepage.

In addition to investing in the social media program by providing a team, the

manual describes required training for all USCG personnel who communicate on social

media sites. Technical support is also provided on a limited basis through the local

servicing Coast Guard Command, Control, Communications, Computers & Information

Technology office. The headquarters social media team can also provide guidance when

needed. The manual also references the internal USCG portal and a "social media folder"

within a public affairs collaboration place where the governmental and public affairs

directorate maintains and publishes a Social Media Field Guide (U.S. Coast Guard,

2011b, p. 11-11).

USCG official social media sites. The USCG enterprise social media program is

based on five main social media platforms: Facebook as a social networking site; a blog

hosted by the Department of Defense; a Twitter account for short updates; a YouTube

channel for video-sharing; and, a Flickr photostream for photo-sharing. Table 2 provides

an overview of official USCG social media sites and the enterprise-level site activity.

Because the USCG team is most active on Facebook, the Compass blog, and Twitter

page, more context is then provided for those three platforms.

Table 2

Overview of USCG Enterprise Social Media Sites and Activity

Enterprise USCG Site	Total USCG Official Sites[a]	Enterprise Site Activity[b]
Coast Guard Compass Blog – hosted on DOD server	1 USCG-wide official blog; 7 other blogs at district and program level	In most recent reporting period, total number of unique visitors was 574,443; 7% increase from previous period; 4,710 average daily visitors
Facebook – social networking platform	1 official USCG-wide Facebook profile; 44 other USCG pages for various programs, areas, districts, sectors, units, stations, detachments, cutters	120,558 fans; 7,373 users sharing or commenting on USCG content[c] 28% increase in active users on page; 20% increase in fans of page since previous reporting period
Flickr photostream - photo-sharing platform	1 official USCG-wide photostream with 17 collections; 1 USCG academy photostream	Went through nationwide consolidation during spring 2011; 1,755 average daily views, a 17% decrease from spring reporting period
Twitter page – micro-blogging platform	1 @USCG official Twitter handle; 1 @uscoastguard media relations news feed; 13 other Twitter profiles at program, area and district level	@uscg official profile has 23,392 followers; 10,416 tweets (i.e., posts) since joining in 2008[d] 44% growth in followers during most recent reporting period
YouTube channel – video-sharing platform	1 USCG imagery channel; 1 USCG Academy channel 17 playlists for programs, districts, campaigns (video of the year), memorials, responses (Deepwater	Went through nationwide consolidation during spring 2011; 448,000 views during summer quarter reporting period

	Horizon)	

Facebook is the team's most successful engagement tool (personal communication, April 20, 2012). The team aims to post at least once daily. In December 2011, the team posted 46 updates, including links to YouTube videos on its channels, photos on its Flickr photostream, and stories on the Compass blog. According to an internal evaluation report provided by the social media team, the Compass blog serves as the "primary resource for posts on Facebook" and is considered the program's "second most popular tool for public education and outreach" (personal communication, April 20, 2012). The "About Us" page of the Coast Guard Compass describes a dialogic mission:

> Coast Guard Compass is the Service's flagship social media product and the centerpiece of our effort to engage the public in an ongoing dialogue about the Coast Guard's people, missions and the issues that impact America's maritime safety, stewardship and security. The official Coast Guard blog allows us to "listen" to what you have to say and consider your feedback (and the occasional criticism) on how we do business as part of a larger organizational growth process. This engagement is at the core of why the Coast Guard operates in the social media world.

The Coast Guard Compass is maintained by the USCG headquarters social media team who also rely on other USCG communicators across the organization for content. The Compass feeds directly to the home page of the main USCG website. According to a preliminary internal report provided by the USCG social media team, in December 2011,

the team posted 38 stories on Compass, averaging one to two posts per day. Reflecting an operational, mission-driven tone, the list of content categories include community, environment, global, history, humanitarian, leaders, modernization, preparedness, safety, search and rescue, security, and shipmates.

Twitter is used for short updates with 140 characters or less. According to a report recently provided by the team, the team uses Twitter's short formats or tweets for "quick collaboration and information sharing" and considers Twitter "a less gated method of communication, meaning a user can share information with people that wouldn't normally be 'listening'" (personal communication, April 20, 2012, p. 8). The team uses its official handle (@USCG) to post pictures (twitpics), forward or "retweet" others' tweets as well as slightly modify tweets and forward them. The team sends two or three tweets daily. For example, in December 2011, the team sent 102 tweets using the @USCG account. USCG team members use Klout scores as a "well-established industry measurement of overall online influence" that range from one to 100 with higher scores representing a stronger influence (personal communication, April 20, 2012, p. 8). The current @USCG Klout score is 57 which Klout labels a "broadcaster" level and defines as: "You broadcast great content that spreads like wildfire. You are an essential information source in your industry. You have a large and diverse audience that values your content" (personal communication, April 20, 2012, p. 8). The USCG social media team aspires to be a "thought leader known for sharing pertinent information while providing valuable opinions and insights" (personal communication, April 20, 2012, p. 8). The social media team noted that the Federal Emergency Management Agency,

another DHS component, has a score of 70 and is considered an influencer (personal communication, April 20, 2012).

USCG social media engagement. Whenever engaging online, USCG personnel must take into account legal, security, and military policy requirements, and be accountable for the accuracy and appropriateness of their content. Official uses of social media like these take place in an official capacity while on duty and can be done by headquarter staffs, areas, districts, sectors, and units (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b). Because some social media sites may be blocked by USCG firewalls, units are permitted to use their funds to purchase stand-alone computers and web access to work around these restrictions. When participating in an official capacity on a non-official site, including a unit site, personnel are required to include the following disclaimer in addition to a signature: "This is an official United States Coast Guard posting for the public's information. Our posting does not endorse this site or anything on it, including links to other sites, and we disclaim responsibility and liability for the site and its content" (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b, p. 11-9).

Unofficial use of social media describes communication while off-duty but speaking about official duties and is distinguished from personal use that also takes place while off-duty in a personal capacity but does not involve speaking about official duties (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b). The disclaimer to use with unofficial postings is: "The views expressed herein are those of the blogger and are not to be construed as official or reflecting the views of the Commandant or of the U.S. Coast Guard" (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b, p. 11-10). In a personal capacity, personnel are urged to think about how their comments and participation may reflect on the USCG since content is easily searchable

online and difficult to remove. As the manual warns, "It is difficult to separate yourself from the USCG in the public's eyes" and social media "present new challenges for privacy and reputation management" (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b, p. 11-10 - 11-11).

Summary

This chapter has described both the USCG's high-risk missions and complex identity as both military and law enforcement agency operating within DHS, its interdependence with its local communities, and its balance between command-and-control and on-scene initiative. The USCG is "locally based, nationally deployed, and globally connected" (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011d, p. 6). With limited resources, assets, and personnel to meet these multiple missions, the USCG values its personnel's flexibility and adaptability: "We do all of this with the same people and assets, ready and agile to shift among missions as needed. We have the impact of many agencies in one. We are a unique, effective and efficient instrument of national security. No one else can do all that we do" (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011d, p. 6).

The USCG's legacy, mission landscape, and structure have grown even more complex since the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Allen, 2008). For example, a USCG commissioned report released in April 2011 on the investigation into the 2010 BP *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill response found that agency preparedness for environmental crises had suffered significantly since 9/11 when the USCG's security responsibilities expanded (Robertson & Rudolf, 2011). This new post 9/11 world "resulted in significant coordination and communication problems during the spill response as well as a lack of familiarity with long-established procedures among many of the response workers" (Robertson & Rudolf, 2011, para. 2). The USCG has acknowledged its need for improved

preparation, communication, and coordination within a current complex, high-risk operating climate. While communication via social media may challenge some of Phillips' and Loy's (2003) recommendations such as maintaining face-to-face communication or presenting a united voice, it may also be used to enter into recommended dialogic, conversational relationship-building communication with internal and external key stakeholders (e.g., Phillips & Loy, 2003; Eriksen, 2004).

The USCG's stated enterprise social media strategy as described on the Coast Guard Compass blog indicates that USCG public affairs and the social media team at headquarters also see social media's relational role. The USCG manual has reported how it empowers and trains employees to communicate generally and via social media that can enhance access to and "opportunities to educate and engage ever-growing and influential new audiences" and strengthen the ability to listen to and dialogue with such audiences, including taxpayers, communities, and other constituencies (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b, p. 11-1). Yet, the USCG has recognized significant risks inherent to such social media communication. The USCG's high-risk missions raise the stakes for better understanding how and why, if at all, social media are used. Within such a climate, participant observation of the social media team at USCG headquarters' office of public affairs will allow me to better understand:

- Factors USCG communicators perceive as influencing their risk communication and social media communication
- How, if at all, the Coast Guard communicators view the role of social media in risk communication
- To what extent they engage in relational risk communication via social media

- How, if at all, they plan, execute, and manage their social media efforts

By using participant observation to study USCG's social media team and its

efforts within a complexity and relational theoretical framework, this dissertation

addresses important research gaps in government communication, risk communication,

social media, and relationship management.

Chapter 5: Results

The purpose of this chapter is to present the research findings from the ethnographic study of the USCG's social media program. Quotes and paraphrased notes are included from the data collected in 156 pages of field notes based on the 205.25 hours in the field, 240 pages of interview transcripts with 10 key individuals, and 49 USCG documents to illustrate the findings and themes within each research question. Some punctuation changes were made to improve readability while maintaining the integrity of participants' words and ideas. While participants gave permission to be identified by name in the report, real names and/or titles are used only when such identifications are critical to the context of the quote. Otherwise, participants are identified based on their program (e.g., social media team, media relations team, strategic communication team) or role (e.g., team member, chief). If a quote or paraphrase is not dated, it was obtained during a recorded interview with the participants. Quotes, paraphrases or descriptions of specific incidents described in field notes include the date of observation. Evidence from internal documents references the document and context. Over the course of member checks with the social media chief and director of public affairs, they offered additional context and clarifications. Where appropriate, this evidence is included and dated as personal communication.

Rather than organizing results in numerical order, this chapter is organized conceptually in order to give a fuller picture around the major intersections in this dissertation: government risk communication and social media. Therefore, RQ1a, RQ2, and RQ3 are first presented to explore perceptions of public sector influences on USCG risk communication (RQ1a), perceptions of the role social media play in USCG risk

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communication (RQ2), and the extent to which USCG engages in relational risk

communication (RQ3). The chapter then answers questions more closely focused on

social media communication at USCG: perceptions of public sector influences on USCG

social media communication (RQ1b) and the strategies and tactics used to execute social

media communication (RQ4). In sum, the results address the intersection of risk

communication, social media, and government communication in a high-risk

environment at the USCG.

RQ1a: How, if at All, Do Government Communicators in High-Risk Environments

Perceive the Public Sector Context Influences Their Risk Communication?

Before discussing the public sector influences, it is important to note that USCG

communicators, and especially social media team members, generally distanced

themselves from the role of risk communicators and did not explicitly distinguish their

everyday content from risk content. As the public affairs director explained:

> We use the term risk communication in terms of how we structure
>
> communications during incidents, in most cases. Oil spills…a tanker hitting
>
> something - how do we structure our communications to tell the public about this
>
> incident so that they don't have to worry or they do worry when appropriate and
>
> control rumors and all those other things?

The director went on to differentiate public affairs at headquarters as "dealing more with

organizational issues and missions and that sort of thing" whereas in a situation requiring

a joint response from the USCG and other federal or non-federal agencies, "you have that

kind of classic risk communication thing." The director of public affairs went on to

further explain the integration of risk communication and larger everyday strategic messages:

> We have a risk communications mindset in all things. It's in our policy: Tell the truth, tell it fast. Tell people information that they can use. Most of our command messages are safety messages or are preventative [search and rescue] messages so we're always bridging to that. What do you know, what don't you know, and what can people do about it, which I think—when I think of risk communications, that's what I think. Tell them what you know, tell them what you don't know, tell them what they can do about it. That's kind of just the way we do it anyway.

Given this definitional difference, USCG communicators identified several public sector influences that impact USCG public affairs communication about risks. These factors, discussed below, could be organized under six general categories: parent organizations (DOD and DHS); complexity of missions and roles; history and culture; constrained resources; diverse audiences; and, government regulations and policies.

Parent organizations. As a multi-mission military and law enforcement agency, USCG communicators answer to two parent organizations, DHS and DOD. Given that they have been a military agency that has bounced around from various executive agencies outside the DOD, they identify more as a military agency than a civilian homeland security one. As one participant described the social media communication context, "We are a .mil in a .gov world." This co-parenting environment has specific implications for USCG risk communication that result in other factors discussed below such as constrained resources and regulations and policies. Such a process can limit the speed and dialogic nature of USCG risk communication. The most prominent influence

identified within this category was that of a military organization. This included a military chain of command and military security and sensitivity issues.

The military chain of command that makes up the USCG hierarchy was a strong influence on USCG risk communication. This included the power of USCG leaders and their top-down influence. As one social media team member described, "I would say the very first thing that comes off the top of my head and I don't know if that's in order of precedence of importance or just the reality I live with is senior leadership. So what they view as risk, what they view as important to communicate about that risk" informs how the team approaches and evaluates content. Given the strict chain of command that structures the USCG, it is difficult for junior officers and communicators to challenge leaders. As one social media communicator described, "So that's a challenge in the military because there is a rank structure, command structure and a respect structure, in which case we can't necessarily influence them…" This rank structure can be particularly limiting when leadership's view and stance to communication about risk may conflict with a communicator's desire to address risks openly and transparently. A social media team member explained that a USCG communicator may choose not to write about a vessel self-righting after capsizing (i.e., a knock down). "So I would consider that the same kind of conversation that we would have about a knock down and I would say probably in today's climate with Admiral Papp and how he's really focused on professional competency, he would not want that released. But for me I would say social media strategy-wise, it would be a good idea with all of our tools, video, to tell the story." While that was the social media team member's perception, the director of public affairs

believed it was not accurate and that the Admiral has no problem talking about "lack of proficiency" (personal communication, April 20, 2012).

In addition to the command structure and leadership, general military sensitivity and security issues also influenced risk communication. USCG communicators use SAPP (i.e., Security, Accuracy, Propriety, and Policy) as a lens through which to evaluate content, particularly when communicating about risk. Operational security (i.e., OPSEC) is especially important when communicating about risks – and these security issues also create risks when communicating. During observations, OPSEC, SAPP and other situational risks were common conversation topics regarding public affairs content and lent itself to a security consciousness within the public affairs directorate. This security consciousness affects all USCG communication, including risk communication. As the director of public affairs described, USCG communicators do not tend to go "over the line" in a "security arena because we're all really security conscious." Being security and risk-conscious also means when communicating about operational issues via social media, communicators must be sensitive to the risks that USCG operators face in the field. As a social media team member explained,"…We have to think about almost every aircraft case we talk about because of what you define as risk communication. It's an inherent risk our air crews take…So, in that case, for social media, one role you don't want it to be is to potentially make light of what the very serious, real situation is."

DHS, USCG's direct parent agency, also brings its own security and sensitivity issues that influence risk communication. A USCG social media communicator explained in an October 18, 2011 phone call with a field communicator how DHS takes on a different role when the USCG finds itself in a joint response mode:

It's all about that one DHS approach. We come from one voice, one approach. We

learned that lesson…when we're in a national level response that's jointly being

coordinated. Otherwise, if it's a Coast Guard lane, they let us speak freely. On a

couple sensitive issues, we weigh in with them. That's from a social media

perspective.

Complexity of missions and responsibilities. The USCG's high stakes, public

service missions and responsibilities also influence risk communication. As the USCG

Communication Framework described in one of its strategic themes, "The Coast Guard is

America's 24/7 maritime first responder, with the mandates, legal authorities, capabilities

and bias to act in response to any maritime crisis" (2011, p. 8). As such, risk

communication is often a component of everyday social media communication. In this

way, USCG communicators do not necessarily separate out risk communication from

their everyday communication. When asked about this blurred boundary, the public

affairs director said, "Yes, they're inherent to what we do." For example, as one social

media team communicator noted about a hypothetical picture of rescued distressed

mariners that could accompany a blog post, "Even if they were all wearing life jackets,

they were saved because they wore life jackets. A lot of what we do no matter what is

risk communication." Other times, risk communication may drive content. As another

social media team member said, "Cases, drug runners, people who do stupid things on the

water, security risks – anything that threatens the maritime border of the United States is

a factor that will influence what we write about."

USCG's high stakes, public service role and responsibilities influences its risk

communication with publics. As the social media chief explained, "In a public service

role, the feedback is how can I be a better public servant and give you what you need to be safe…" The fact that USCG has always been closely engaged with its constituents and locally deployed in communities also influences its risk communication. This close engagement with constituents separates the USCG from the other military branches. As a social media team member distinguished, "…Our job is to communicate at the very low level with external publics that what we're doing matters and what we're saying matters because it will save your life. We don't share that public with the other military services."

Despite the importance of these missions and roles, USCG communicators perceive a general lack of public understanding and valuing of their work. As one social media team member said, "I think America takes what we do for granted. It's not flashy. It's not exotic. It's not fun…From the very beginning, we've had to communicate a mission that has over time been taken for granted…And as a whole, America doesn't understand the military." USCG communicators see part of their role to translate the importance of these missions and the risks associated with them. As a social media team member asked, "…when I talk to you as an average American citizen, do you think it's important that the port complex is open, free-flowing for commerce? Do you understand what the implications for that are?"

History and culture. The history and culture of USCG and public affairs also influence USCG risk communication and closely connect to the agency's public sector missions and responsibilities. The USCG public affairs directorate prides itself on a decentralized, open, transparent communication environment. Communication, including risk communication, is pushed down to the lowest operational level. That does not mean, however, that there is never conflict between the public affairs policy and some USCG

leaders who may be uncomfortable with such an open, transparent communication of risk and crisis information. As a media relations team member explained about the importance of telling the truth in the face of difficult circumstances, "It's hard to really give them this kind of comfort in saying that this is the right way to go especially in a risky situation or one that's perceived to be…In public affairs our policy of doctrine is really simple. If we can talk about it, we do. Period."

The motion picture division chief described the organization as "forward leaning" and "transparent." When referencing the Deepwater Horizon response, the member compared USCG to the other agencies involved as "the most proactive and the most inclined to just get the information out to the public and let them have opinions on what was going on versus them wondering what was happening." As noted earlier, this openness and emphasis on pushing communication, including risk communication, down to the lowest operational level in the field was connected to the agency's public service mission and close local engagement with its constituent communities.

Constrained resources. While the USCG prides itself on an open, transparent public affairs culture and high-stakes risk communication environment, communicators described many resource constraints that challenge their risk communication efforts. These constraints include limited budgets, personnel, training, and a technological infrastructure that affect access and real-time risk communication engagement. The current budget climate presents many challenges to USCG communication, including the ability to hire additional personnel. This limited capacity leads to what one strategic communication team member described as limited "bandwidth" that hinders how much real-time, engaged risk communication can take place leaving "up to the minute

messaging" as a future opportunity versus a current reality. The small size and constant

transition of personnel means that subject matter experts may not always be available

when needed in a communication context, including a risk communication one. For

example, when the social media team wanted to conduct a communication campaign

during sexual assault awareness month, the team quickly realized they did not have the

subject matter experts needed to "do the effective communication and authentic

communication" needed, "nor was there enough staffing to become familiar with the

tools and by not enough staffing, I mean only one person was in charge of sexual assault

prevention policy in the entire Coast Guard."

In this way, budgets constraints may also contribute to limited USCG-specific

training available for USCG communicators. The social media chief explained that the

Defense Information School (DINFOS) exists as a military public affairs training clearing

house. Every enlisted public affairs specialist (PA) at the district or regional level who is

part of the public affairs professional corps goes to DINFOS at least once. There are also

specialized courses for these PAs, including in graphic and web design. Because

collateral duty public affairs personnel[2] are not part of the professional PA corps and are

appointed by a unit's commanding officer to do public affairs as a collateral, additional,

duty, they have the option of attending a one-week introductory USCG public affairs

course specially designed for collateral PAs. Only the optional collateral duty one-week

course is specific to the USCG. Public affairs officers (PAOs), not part of the PA

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[2] As noted in a previous chapter, collateral duty public affairs personnel do not have
public affairs as a primary duty and are not part of the larger "public affairs community"
made up of public affairs officers and enlisted PAs. Collateral duty PAs exist at the unit
level and assist with communication as needed in addition to their primary
responsibilities.

professional corps but part of the public affairs community at the district, regional and national levels, are eligible for public affairs qualification courses (PAQC) offered through the public affairs leadership department. PAQC courses are not specific to the USCG, and the USCG has limited numbers of seats it can fill in those courses. During this dissertation data collection, the USCG chief of social media and one other public affairs team member were in training at DINFOS and were the only two USCG communicators in the PAQC classes at the time. The chief of social media explained that it can take six months to a year to get a seat in one of these classes, and USCG PAOs may only receive four to five days' notice that they have a seat and need to report to DINFOS (personal communication, April 12, 2012).

Budget constraints that limit personnel and their training can also constrain USCG's ability to fulfill its statutory and operational missions and roles – potentially putting the American people at risk. Yet that particular risk makes for a challenging story to tell. As one social media team member explained, "It's hard to tell the American public we're going to go out and save you, but the fact that the aircraft is broken and we can't get funding is going to affect the rescue. We might not get there fast enough or whatever. It's hard to tell the people who support our operations that we can't do our jobs because of a risk."

In addition to budget and personnel constraints, the USCG's structure and technological infrastructure also present access barriers that can limit how effective communication to people can be. Many USCG communicators and internal stakeholders may be deployed on vessels or in places that lack consistent and immediate access to online risk communication messages.

From a response mode perspective, when risks manifest and USCG communicators must stand up a crisis communication effort, these technological infrastructure barriers become more problematic. As one social media team member explained, "We don't have an infrastructure that can support deployed responders, last minute deployed responders. Meaning that we can't issue everybody a USCG protected laptop and email so that they can conduct business over that. So most people use purchased Gmail and handhelds and things like that."

Diverse audiences. As a military multi-mission public sector agency, USCG communicators must consider diverse internal and external audiences that do not always interpret their risk communication in the same ways. Over the course of the study, the blur between internal and external audiences was a near-constant influence on USCG public affairs and social media policy and content, including its risk communication. Based on observations and interviews, I organized audience constructions as:

- American taxpayers - "Joe Q. Public"
- Influencers - Congressional authorizers and appropriators and their staffs, think tanks and academics, members of partner agencies, major marine groups, influencers on key USCG issues
- Media – Gatekeeper to American taxpayers and influencers
- USCG personnel - "Joe Coastie"

During observations, the emphasis within the influencers audience was on congressional authorizers and appropriators and their staffs due to the congressional budget season where agency leaders were asked to testify as to their budgetary and operating needs. The

director of public affairs recognized the congressional emphasis that occurred during my time in the field and explained:

>One main job of [headquarters] is to communicate with Congress; however, Congress often gets used as a short hand title for key stakeholders that are more engaged, which include think tanks and academics, members of partner agencies, major marine groups, and other influencers on key USCG issues. While [Congress is] among the top tier as the organization that provides the people's oversight and funds the agency, there are some other top tier, highly engaged audiences that are more specific than the other three groups you mention...perhaps we just don't talk about them as much. (personal communication, April 22, 2012)

In addition to the internal and external audiences listed above, other audiences that blurred the boundary between internal and external, and leaned more internal, included USCG families, former USCG personnel/retirees, auxiliarists (volunteers) and reservists. As the social media chief pointed out, USCG's diverse missions and operations mean that a story on an aviation mechanic would still have USCG personnel who could be considered external audiences because they work on a boat and have no idea what aviation mechanics do. In that case, internal and external distinctions may be more characteristic of content than audience categories.

These diverse audiences influenced social media risk communication since messages would be interpreted differently based on audience members' perspectives. For example, during a December 19, 2011 discussion, social media team members debated whether to choose a particular individual for the "Shipmate of the Week" feature. There

was concern over how the story would be interpreted differently by internal and external publics:

> How are we going to explain he got tangled up and lost a rescue swimmer? Yes, it was a good risk assessment by the crew, good teamwork, good outcome, but how do we tell the American public that? This is a risk that every air crew has when they do a search and rescue on a sailboat. It's a very real risk, but how do we tell the American public that it's good what ended up happening? (December 19, 2011)

Because risks are inherent to the work they do, and they are also mandated with mitigating and responding to public risks, these diverse, yet overlapping, audiences present risk communication challenges.

Government regulations and policies. USCG risk communication is heavily influenced by a myriad of government regulations and policies – some DHS guidance, some DOD policies, but most significantly federal government rules and regulations. Most prominent in this study were rules preventing the release of official information on third-party sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), records retention requirements, privacy rules, and a burdensome clearance/approval process in many risk or crisis situations.

While discussing using Twitter to retweet someone else's tweet, one social media team member explained how cautious she must be when said tweet addresses a risk, crisis or incident (October 18, 2011). She described learning a tough lesson when she assumed that a news source had vetted a story, and she retweeted it on the official USCG Twitter account. It turned out that the USCG had not yet released any of the details of the incident. It had been leaked to media. By retweeting the news story using the official

account, the USCG was essentially endorsing the news story's account of events –

violating policy.

Outside of a headquarters social media team context, records retention rules also

pose a challenge for risk communication, especially in an emergency response context.

While policies and procedures are in effect for such communication in an ongoing way,

when an emergent operational need arises, risk communication via social media is

particularly challenging. A social media team member expressed concern for how one

would "document" and "retain the records and make sure that everything is in

compliance with federal communications." As another example, the team member

described that in events like Deepwater Horizon, "…records management, documentation

are legal nightmares once things are over. What do you do with them? These third party

sites don't just let you get rid of them." In the face of ambiguous, ill-fitting policies and

procedures, social media team members are left to improvise and innovate. A social

media team member described the effort to disestablish sites after Deepwater Horizon:

Since then I've been trying to pursue proper disestablishment, proper

documentation and proper record keeping of all of that material and I'm not

getting any progress. I put together a three-page plan to analyze each tool, each

email that was being used to access that tool, and how much the email was used

for public engagement, and I still haven't gotten approval on how to go, but I am

archiving it the best that I can.

When risks and crises are imminent and the USCG might wish to use social media

channels to conduct two-way risk communication, privacy rules also become

problematic. The social media team member described that the team currently places

disclaimers on its social media platforms that the tools are not meant to be emergency

communication channels, but the potential remains for the public to use them that way.

And yet privacy rules would prevent them from using Facebook to search for private

information. In a "life and death" situation, it may be justified but in general "using the

tools to gather private information about people" is not allowed.

The approval or clearance process can also present challenges for risk

communicators. It may often involve concurrent clearance across programs within the

USCG and potentially with both or either the Department of Defense and the larger

Department of Homeland Security. One USCG communicator described that in an ideal

world, they could conduct more two-way risk communication, but an approval process

often limits that as does the fear of sending out something unapproved. "You don't want

to send out anything that's wrong or that's misinformed or that doesn't follow Coast

Guard messaging…" For example, team members occasionally referenced getting in

trouble with USCG lawyers for blog content that had inadvertently violated commercial

endorsement policies. In some cases, lawyers may ask team members to take down

content or avoid such language in the future (chief of social media, personal

communication, April 12, 2012).

In sum, USCG communicators perceived various public sector context influences

on their risk communication, including their dual parent organizations, the complexity of

USCG missions and responsibilities, the agency and public affairs directorate's history

and culture, resource constraints, diverse audiences, and government regulations and

policies. This high-risk culture with its various public sector influences contributed to

how the USCG viewed the role of social media in a risk communication context that is described in the next research question.

RQ2: How, if at All, Do Government Communicators in High-Risk Environments View Social Media's Role in Risk Communication?

As noted in RQ1a, USCG communicators somewhat distanced themselves from the role of "risk communicator" and did not explicitly distinguish their everyday content from risk content. However, based on observations, interviews and document analysis, social media's role in risk communication can be organized into four general themes: social media as a channel for ongoing, external, strategic organizational public affairs; social media as a channel for operational risk/emergency communication to/with publics; social media as a channel for potential dialogic real-time risk communication and engagement; and, social media communication as risk(y) communication. USCG social media communicators are not using social media to communicate to internal audiences about risks, as an incident-based emergency communication tool, or to facilitate dialogic engagement – though participants recognize the normative potential to do so and the challenges that stand in the way of utilizing social media in that risk communication capacity. Evidence to support and expand on these themes is included below.

Channel for ongoing, external, strategic organizational public affairs.

Participants mostly saw social media's current role as a "public affairs communication tool" (social media team member) and an "ongoing risk tool" (strategic communication team member). Social media are viewed as a channel for various ongoing strategic functions including planned communication about two general categories of risks: (1) USCG operational or budgetary risks and sensitive issues and (2) risks and threats to the

publics the USCG serves based on its missions (e.g., boating safety risks, environmental risks to living marine resources, drug-running threats).

First, social media communication is viewed as a way to strategically message sensitive USCG issues and risks like suicide prevention or budgetary risks such as recapitalization needs for an aging cutter fleet. So that the social media team does not "make light of what the very, real situation is," a social media team member explained that planned, strategic messages have to thoughtfully balance messages about USCG risks with messages about how the USCG is fulfilling its statutory missions and responsibilities to address risks and threats to the public. Social media are mostly being used to communicate risks (e.g., boating safety, national security risks, etc.) to external audiences (e.g., influencers like congressional budget makers and their staffs, American taxpayers, etc.). The external focus holds true for all official social media communication at this point, though as will be discussed later, internal communication uses are currently being debated and explored at USCG headquarters. Despite the external focus, as was discussed in RQ1a, internal audiences sometimes differently interpret USCG risk messages communicated via social media. While the internal audiences may applaud and encourage social media team members to include messages about the need for recapitalization funds, that makes for a difficult story to tell the American public. As the director of public affairs explained:

> So if you look at the cutter campaign, we tell people what the cutters are doing.
> We try hard to tell people what the cutters are not doing, and that's a difficult
> message to convey…And we tell them what they can do about it, which is, "hey,
> support cutters."…it's always a tradeoff. But if this activity is what you want

done and the way to do that is large cutters, particularly those with flight decks that can support an aircraft, then you need to build those cutters. At the end of the day, you have decisions about how many you can build, how quickly you can build them, and how big they are and how expensive they are. But that's a dialog right there that you're having with the public.

In addition to social media's role in communicating about sensitive USCG issues and risks, USCG social media content also integrates risk messages such as seasonal-based boating safety risks. As a social media team member described:

> What I've termed them is, you've got pre-planned type campaigns, seasons, and you know seasonally what messages are important. So we forecast those, and we think ahead of how we can creatively use social media to enforce that important message.

The team member described the Wear It national campaign last spring that focused on wearing a life vest:

> We used social media to help carry that message through. And one of the things was "send us your pictures of you wearing your life jacket, and we'll post them on Facebook. We'll have a special album." We tried various things…Things like that are to help reinforce that messaging outside of a maritime environment. Obviously, the messages and boating statistics and things like that, we use all of that stuff to help reinforce why it's important. But, I mean, that's easy with social media…those kind of messages are easy, and we definitely use social media because we have full control.

The campaign was viewed as successful because it resulted in audience members

sending a "few dozen images," but without a baseline in place to measure relative success or effectiveness, the social media chief recognized that future campaigns might show that this campaign was the least successful of all of them (personal communication, April 1, 2012).

While some messages and social media campaigns may be more explicit, other risk messages are more implicitly integrated in everyday content – including photos. Another social media team member described how a simple photo included in a social media story about a successful USCG search and rescue case could contain risk communication: "Even if they were all wearing life jackets, they were saved because they wore life jackets. A lot of what we do no matter what is risk communication." As such, official, organizational social media at the headquarters level is being used in a risk communication capacity as more integrated into overall messaging. Through written and visual content, the team reinforces risk messages. In addition to using social media in an ongoing, planned way to communicate about risks facing the USCG and its publics, USCG communicators identified a second operational role of social media in a risk communication context.

Channel for operational risk/emergency communication to/with publics. Participants distinguished operational use of social media as outside the mission and boundaries of the public affairs directorate and function. During observations on November 8, 2011, a media relations team member talked about the additional distinction between risk management at headquarters versus in the field in an operational capacity: "Risk management here is very low. It's not like standing watch at a district where what you immediately say or don't say translates into an operational thing." While social-

mediated risk communication was seen as outside of their public affairs contexts and

outside the headquarters context, participants recognized how social media could play a

role in risk communication within a large-scale emergency response and also in a more

ongoing operational risk capacity.

Incident response. As described earlier, the USCG Public Information Assist

Team (PIAT), outside of the public affairs directorate, exists to offer interagency crisis

communication assistance and experience to incident commanders or federal on-scene

coordinators in an emergency or crisis situation. Similarly, a Joint Information Center

(JIC) may also be set up when interagency public information needs to happen around an

incident. PIATs can be activated in a USCG-led JIC response that includes other local,

state, tribal or federal parties or in a larger federal response where the USCG is merely

one player (social media chief, personal communication, April 1, 2012). In non-federal

USCG-only responses, USCG social media still applies in a public affairs capacity, but,

again, this policy only applies to public affairs uses of social media as opposed to

operational uses (social media chief).

The Coast Guard Social Media FAQs document provided to the field addresses

this distinction. As the document explains (n.d., p. 6):

> There have been a number of conversations at the CGHQ level on the need to
>
> address social media in a response structure (JIC) setting. While we all agree that
>
> needs to take place, the general consensus is that the Public Affairs Manual is not
>
> the place for that content. While the general rules found in the PA Manual (need
>
> for a comment policy, Privacy and OPSEC concerns, records management,

waivers/site approval, etc.) will all still apply, response specific site authorizations and release approvals should go into an updated JIC manual.

While USCG communicators can see how social media tools can be translated in a USCG incident or emergency response mode, they do not believe that role is currently being utilized. While nothing in current policy prohibits or supports such uses, social media has not yet been a focus of JIC responses – particularly in large-scale, ongoing crises like the Deepwater Horizon BP oil spill response (social media chief). As the public affairs director explained:

> I think there's probably work we can do in terms of better leveraging the tools as part of the response. We're still very JIC media-focused with an online presence. Deepwater, we started to try, in some cases, to focus more on the social media aspect, but the enormity of that response and the other pressures, political, local, the fact that you had a huge BP communication thing going out as well, it really wasn't a focus. I mean, Deepwater was a fight for survival because we stood up a Coast Guard in the matter of 60 days, and it was stood up with contractors and civilians and volunteers. It's just on another level, Deepwater was.

One social media team member pointed out that better incorporating social media into the JIC model could satisfy the public's need for direct, immediate information – and could do this better than the current media focus of twice-a-day press releases that quickly become outdated. By following an event on Twitter, affected publics can get "up-to-date information" and more quickly than through press release messaging. As the communicator noted it is important "especially with risk management…to get that information as quick as possible."

Despite these opportunities, another social media team member noted that the challenge is to identify where the social media personnel would fit into a JIC structure and "who should staff them because there's not enough social media experts out there to be able to come in, in a crisis" and respond quick enough since "you need to do it the day after the crisis hits, because the conversation starts." Hopefully, though, the team member noted, "over time as people get more and more comfortable with social media" there may be more people with these skills because "You don't just grab somebody and say, 'Hey, I need you to do social media.'" In a JIC setting, social media "should be more of a skill set" and "somebody higher up" should have the ability to approve social media use (social media team member).

A strategic communication team member also described USCG's small size and limited personnel "bandwidth" as a reason it will be difficult to realize the "opportunity to have up to the minute messaging of events-related information." Another challenge includes the lack of clear policy for how to "stand down" such specific social media channels and platforms after an incident has been resolved. Social media team members are still struggling with how to handle the aftermath of Deepwater Horizon social media. As the team member tasked with this effort described, social media use can leave persisting records management, documentation, and legal issues long after the initial incidents are resolved. "What do you do with them? They're third-party sites. They don't just let you get rid of them" (social media team member).

Despite the many challenges facing the integration of social media into real-time emergency management channels, task forces have been organized to help the USCG explore more operational uses of social media in an incident response capacity. With

these distinctions in mind, it is useful to think about how social media could best be used in a response capacity (social media chief). The social media chief noted that the headquarters social media team could potentially offer their experience to PIAT professionals who could "take, embrace and replicate and advocate in conversations how social media could be used in federal responses" (social media chief, personal communication, April 1, 2012).

Operational capacity. Outside of large-scale JIC responses, social media may also be used in an operational capacity as channels and tools through which to push and pull risk-related messages within a public information, emergency or crisis response communication role. As of now, when social media are used, it is mostly used in a push perspective where USCG pushes risk-related messages out to publics. As a social media team member described:

> An example I saw recently that I was semi-involved in was the Army Corps of Engineers when they had the new Madrid flood plain…So basically it's the entire Mississippi River system, and when it was flooding, they created a Facebook page for the new Madrid flood plain and they said almost 10-minute updates of the flood like this, "These are the communities that are being evacuated. If you're in this community you're not evacuated, but this is when we're blowing up the dam. This is when we're blowing up the dike. This is when we're putting up sandbags. If you need sandbags come here."

The team member went on to distinguish push communication from dialogic communication where "Joe Q. public affairs officer" could "go to a place to answer people's questions." If the officer received questions via Facebook about the flood level,

the officer "can go somewhere and say, 'According to the Army Corps of Engineers, the flood level is 20 feet, and you can get that information here.'" Currently, though, USCG tools are not facilitating that role – despite the recognition that social media can play an important information role for the public. As one social media team member described:

> That's where everyone gets their information…You know when the earthquake happened, people didn't shelter in place. They didn't go find shelter and safety. They tweeted it out. It was that crazy. What role it plays? It plays *the* role.

From an emergency communication channel perspective, real challenges exist for USCG operators such as liability for monitoring Twitter and Facebook and other social media for emergency or distress messages and responding in a timely manner. A social media team member worried that as an agency, the USCG is "not prepared" for operational social media in an emergency response, "so we'll have to continue to use them as a non-emergency communications channel. I can see that as being an expectation. If you've read some of the Red Cross surveys of the public, it is a public expectation that we would be doing that." During observation on December 20, 2011, the same social media team member pointed out that while the potential for these tools exists for them to be used as emergency communication channels, the USCG adds disclaimers to its Facebook and Twitter pages that these are not emergency communication channels. For example, the @USCG official Twitter account profile includes the message that "This is not an emergency communication channel. If you are in distress, use VHF Ch. 16 or dial 911." Despite the disclaimers, they could still be used that way which raises concerns for the team. "And then there's so much noise. Are they going to send people out looking for anyone who says on social media, 'Help. Boat going down.'? And then

there's the idea of using these tools for search and rescue – listening – but there's so much white noise." The team member also noted concerns over using Facebook to search for private information about the audience members interacting on its social media platforms such as the USCG Facebook and Twitter pages and the Compass blog: "We don't do it. We don't even have access to people's Facebook…"

Aside from government regulations and resource constraints, current lack of social media policy to cover operational uses of social media may also pose challenges for field communicators wanting to use social media in an operational capacity. As noted earlier, current USCG social media policy as included in the public affairs manual only formally extends to social media used in a public affairs capacity. However, the USCG public affairs social media policy is based on federal restrictions such as privacy laws that would also apply in operational uses of social media (social media chief, personal communication, April 1, 2012). In this lack of policy, operational use is not currently utilized. As one social media team member described:

> So you know the same station I was talking about… I think they should have a Twitter account and they don't…but maybe even at the district level, "I'm looking out my window. It looks nasty. Be safe out there."…Those are daily risks, but they're not communicated to the public in that way.

While the USCG may not be using social media in a dialogic capacity, which is discussed more next, social media may also be playing a limited listening role. As a social media team member described:

> I think it's not about me putting information out there, but more about listening to the conversations and trying to discern what is true and valid and legitimate

versus what's garbage and noise. So listening, I think, because, I mean, as you know, sometimes the first time you hear about things is through Twitter. The first time people heard about the [Haitian] earthquake was through Twitter. I mean, a lot of times that's where you discern and you find other people saying, "Yes, I think it was an earthquake" and then you can validate it a little bit better. So I think the speed of which you can listen and be informed of various things going on, and then I also think that there is an—I don't want to use information gathering in the wrong sense, not to be used against people but to gather and inform a response as to public opinion, as to the gauge of perception out there as to what's going on. So I think that those tools, in my opinion, are not so much about pushing information out but as to listening and pulling but we don't do it as good as I think we could.

USCG communicators recognized that social media tools are being used in more dialogic ways than they are currently able to utilize. They acknowledged this potential use – though normatively and with a recognition of the barriers limiting their application.

Potential for dialogic real-time risk communication and engagement. Despite the current uses, policies, and challenges that stand in their way, USCG communicators spoke about the ideal role of social media as a way to facilitate real-time, dialogic communication and engagement that could foster relationships between the USCG and its external publics.

As one social media team member described, the tools have improved enough that they can be used in a more sophisticated operational (i.e., non-public affairs) capacity: "…Instead of just counting numbers, you can use those things to assess public

sentiments." These advances mean it can be used in an "intelligence gathering capacity" that goes beyond listening and "using the tools to disseminate and gather information back from the public, " allowing for "truly dialogic use of the tools." As the team member explained: "'You need water? Yes, I need water. Where are you? I'm here. Okay, on our way.'…That can happen on Twitter. But I don't know if we're ready for that." Another social media team member also worried that "they don't have the proper things in place to have that happen" when referring to more real-time engagement. The team member compared it to the more traditional media relations typically used: "You have your regular press release you're going to send out, but I think it's recognized that you do get a lot more engagement if you can be a little more creative in how you get that messaging out through social media." Another team member noted that social media could allow USCG operators throughout the organizational, not just at headquarters, to localize in real-time their risk messages. For example, the member, said: "Boating safety in Miami is very different than boating safety on the Great Lakes, on the Mississippi River, in the Bering Sea. So, it's not—so to say, 'I've been in your shoes is really…they miss they point, because it's what's happening in real-time, now, which is where…you'll get your advantage on social media." A media relations team member pointed out the relationship-building potential of using social media in a risk communication capacity by offering a direct channel with the public:

> And it's about the relationship, sharing information, that gives them a way to submit their concerns and how can we engage them and allay their concerns and be empathetic and let them know that we care. But it's no different than any other tool we use. We want to do that with all the tools. It doesn't change with social

media. The only thing social media changes in terms of what we're trying to accomplish is that, again it's the biggest value, they're not hearing it on the six o'clock news from a stand up spokesperson. They're directly engaging us.

While the normative potential for dialogic, real-time, engaging relational risk communication via social media was identified by many USCG communicators, as has been mentioned in the first two themes descriptions above, lack of authority (e.g., policy) and resources (e.g., budget, personnel, skills and knowledge) in addition to the potential liability, may limit the current dialogic use of these tools. Aside from the three themes discussed around the role social media play in risk communication, another important theme emerged from observations, interviews and the documents about the connection between social media and risk that helps explain the uses and perceptions described thus far: USCG communicators view social media as risk(y) communication.

Social media as risky communication. Participants seemed to perceive social media channels and tools as inherently risky to USCG missions and operations. Communicators recognize and seek to mitigate this risk through policies and standard operating procedures. When a public affairs officer in the field sought to establish a social media program, he was asked to include a "risk matrix" that showed how the program would limit risks from social media content and use (November 18, 2011). A media relations team member described the risk posed by personnel inappropriately using social media like Twitter:

> In public affairs there's this thing called the "strategic corporal" where a good example of it is those four guys in Okinawa that got drunk and raped some girls. By those corporals getting drunk and doing what they did they endangered the

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entire U.S. foreign policy, and the entire relationships between U.S. and

Japan…Real strategic implications to the actions of a very, very tactical

person…There is such a thing as a strategic tweet and mostly in the negative

connotation of that, rarely the positive connotation. You're not going to issue a

tweet that is a positive game changer for the entire Coast Guard. You may issue a

tweet that is a negative game changer for the Coast Guard.

In addition to the risks posed by field personnel using social media in a personal capacity,

the social media team feels the pressure of how their messages may be interpreted by key

audiences. As one team member said: "That's not to say that we're so self-centered that

we think one stupid blog post we write is going to have an impact. But who's to say that

that one post isn't going to end up in some staffer's folder that they hand to their

Congressman. You know?" While USCG communicators recognize that there is risk

inherent to all communication and that no communication, social or otherwise, can be

controlled, the risk is magnified with social media because, as the media relations chief

described, it's "just more immediate" and "global" in today's "global information and

environment." A story is never internal and can now "get traction or get legs" wherever

the event happened and "the next thing you know you're watching your [Twitter]

feed…and all of a sudden the BBC is reporting about something that one of your crew

members did in California." Despite these risks, though, the media relations chief said:

I think the challenge with it is that you have to give up a certain sense of control.

We did it to get to the point where we are today. There's no reason to stop. There

is reason to say, "How do we keep managing that process? How do we keep

providing the tools, the policy, the training that allows people to continue their

role as spokespeople for the service in the digital environment?"

Just as described, the social media team has worked to formally and informally mitigate

risks. For example, throughout my observations, team members often mulled aloud with

one another informal risk assessments of social media content. In specific instances, a

team member would phone a Coast Guard member's commanding officer to see if there

was any reason a particular service member should not be chosen as Shipmate of the

Week (November 10, 2011). In another case, a team member would ask the social media

chief or the director of public affairs about any "sensitivities" they needed to consider

about a particular post given a certain context (e.g., congressional budget hearings)

(November 10, 2011). Even when assigning off-hours social media duties, they chose

personnel based on limiting risk of something going wrong during the posting of content.

Over Christmas weekend, when there were a great deal of posts and small details to

attend to during the 2011 Video of the Year campaign, social media team members

posted all content and asked the watchstander who was less experienced with social

media to focus on moderating comments and monitoring the ongoing conversation. This

approach was discussed in a December 21, 2011 email from a social media team member

to another social media team member and the media relations team member who was

officially the watchstander. As the social media team member explained:

> As discussed, because of the complexity involved with publishing each post with
>
> each video, the fact that the post of the president's phone call will not be done
>
> until after the phone call and the holiday season, we will stick with the plan of
>
> delineating responsibilities. This is not how it will "normally" be…but again, this

is not a "normal" week. The best way to understand this schedule is that [a social

media team member] and I will be responsible for content, and [the media

relations team member] will be responsible for monitoring all sites and keeping

the bubble of situational awareness. This is a very important time of the year that

we maintain a solid web presence so let's keep the communication flow as open

as possible.

In this way, the social media team worked to mitigate risks of anything going wrong.

Other risks could be caused by unofficial or personal uses of social media. During

a December 13, 2011 conversation with a non-public affairs Coast Guard staff member

who was contemplating writing a personal blog about USCG issues, another social media

team member and I talked about the risks associated with such a blog. While the

compliance manager said a blog would be fine as long as it included required disclaimer

language that these were not official opinions or an official blog, over the course of the

conversation, it became clear that there would be many risks to consider. While the blog

would be exempt from 508 compliance and records management rules, the blogger would

still need to consider larger SAPP issues and how the opinions would be viewed by the

blog's target publics, including other Coast Guard personnel, congressional staff, and

think tank personnel. The USCG staff member wanted to be able to "think deeply about

policy" but these discussions would be "pre-decisional" and might even contradict

current USCG policies and positions. USCG personnel are restricted from using social

media to discuss pre-decisional matters in an official capacity, but this blog was not

meant to be official. Pre-decisional was a term used to describe issues that had not yet

been conclusively determined. In this way, an expert wanting to offer a personal blog

thinking through undecided complex issues related to USCG, or issues that might run counter to current USCG decisions, posed a risk to USCG official communication. During the exchange, I noted to the staff member: "Your authority, expertise, knowledge, identity and role are what would make your audience interested, so that becomes a problem when you want to write about the Coast Guard." The staff member responded, "So, if I were writing about food, that would be fine…but I can't write about this" to which the social media team member responded, "Exactly." While the rest of the conversation included ways the staff member could accomplish the goal of thinking deeply about pre-decisional policies and issues that were not necessarily in line with USCG messages (e.g., internal blog, private e-journal), personal judgment and common sense would still be required. The staff member left the meeting saying the issue would require more thought.

In this way, social media policies exist to help address risks inherent with social media communication, and the staff can serve as resources for thinking through such risks and whether certain uses fall within or outside policy. Compliance with the policy also requires personal judgment which the USCG social media team cannot control.

In sum, this research question's results found that USCG communicators viewed social media's role in risk communication as a channel for ongoing, external, strategic organizational public affairs, as a channel for operational risk/emergency communication in both an incident response context and in an operational capacity, and as a channel for potential dialogic real-time risk communication and engagement. Additionally, social media tools and channels were viewed as risky communication. The next question looks at how, if at all, the USCG engages in relational risk communication given the discussion

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thus far of the public sector influences on USCG risk communication and perceptions of social media's role in risk communication.

RQ3: To What Extent Do Government Communicators in High-Risk Environments Engage in Relational Risk Communication Via Social Media?

While the normative potential for dialogic, real-time, engaging relational risk communication via social media was identified by many USCG communicators, they do not currently see themselves as using (or able to use) social media to engage in relational risk communication. Rather than relational, dialogic risk communication, USCG communicators are currently highly limited in their consistent engagement of audience participation and involvement via social media in a risk communication context.

When social media are used in a risk communication capacity, they have helped disseminate or broadcast one-way risk messages. This is not to say that the team has not attempted to use relational, engaging approaches in their risk communication efforts. A social media team member gave the example of a sexual assault awareness campaign that was planned to include five blog posts and incorporate the president of the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network as a third-party validator. However, soon after launching the campaign, the team quickly realized it did not have the subject matter experts available to support dialogic campaign:

> We had lots of lessons learned. Basically, we cut it from social media as far as real-time engagement, and we just put it on the blog. So, it didn't really serve a purpose to engage people, but we did broadcast our information.

Another social media team member explained that in a crisis, communicators are just "putting out information" to "tell the public" about a situation and what they can do.

"All this stuff is happening and you're just pushing content and information out – but dealing with public questions coming back through that mechanism is, I think, scary." What was clear from conversations and on-scene observations was that these ideas were not "scary" for the USCG because of a lack of interest or perceived value in such feedback, but rather a concern that USCG operational personnel would not be able to respond in an effective real-time feedback loop. Three primary factors contributed to a lack of relational risk communication via social media: (1) resource constraints; (2) policy limitations; and (3) culture and structure.

Resource and policy constraints. Resource constraints and policy limitations affecting USCG risk communication were described in results to RQ1a. These resource and policy limitations were referenced when USCG communicators recognized their risk communication via social media was not dialogic or engaging. Constraints noted earlier that apply include lack of personnel (often due to budget constraints), and particularly individuals knowledgeable about social media, and access to program-level subject matter experts and expertise. The sexual assault awareness month campaign was addressed in the 2011 Spring Quarterly Report. The report noted that the Facebook link to the Compass post "Preventing sexual assault is everyone's duty" had generated the second-highest amount of comments of any Facebook posts in that quarter. However, no other sexual assault awareness month posts were added "due to difficulties in providing real-time engagement between [subject matter experts] and Facebook as well as concern over a small, agenda-driven group creating an environment contrary to the interests of other members of our community" (2011, p. 6).

During a social media cross-training meeting with the media relations team, a social media team member described cautioning a district public affairs officer about using social media during an incident response, "…Your [incident commander] may want [social media]. Until you can get me a body and somebody can do this right, you shouldn't touch it" (October 20, 2011). The privacy policies and regulations described earlier that limit USCG communicators' ability to know their audience (e.g., can not track people) may limit how relational or conversational USCG communicators can be via social media. Ironically, policies may also restrict USCG social media communicators from leveraging any relationships and trust they have built pre-crisis with audiences. During one observation, a social media team member talked about such "one-voice" restrictions in relation to the USCG response to the earthquake in Haiti:

> The only thing worse in social media than no news is old news. You have to pick and choose. Get your commanders information quickly, advertise, plan, measure success. You want to operate so that when Haiti happens, you don't have to surge trust, surge trust in the organization with your audience. You want maximum disclosure with minimum delay. The goal is you want one voice, but you're choked when you have a national incident commander. You have a slowed process. (November 29, 2011)

Culture and structure. The social media team strives for engagement as a strategic and everyday tactical goal. As the chief of social media described:

> It's the immediacy of publishing, but it's also the immediacy of listening. One of the things that [the director of public affairs] and I really zeroed in on very early—to me, when I drafted the white paper, I was very focused on engagement

and two-way conversations. And I specifically use the word conversation, because

it's very proactive.

Given that the USCG social media team does attempt to foster dialogic engagement with

external audiences, a third factor limiting relational risk communication via social media

derives from a USCG structure and culture that has delineated what risk communication

is and is not and who is tasked with it.

When asked about risk communication, one social media team member said, "I

can't speak to it as well as I should because I don't do risk communications in my job."

When asked if she saw risk communication "in your lane at all," she replied, "I do, but I

don't do it often." While waiting in line to enter headquarters one morning, I struck up a

conversation with a contractor who, after asking about the dissertation, remarked that he

had helped develop the USCG risk-based decision-making policy. After sharing with him

the observation that USCG communicators do not see social media as related to risk and

risk communication, he responded, "Yeah, there's very little integration here at Coast

Guard" (December 8, 2011).

While USCG social media team members may not have seen themselves

engaging in dialogic social media communication, they did see their efforts to engage

with audiences in an ongoing strategic way as connected to successful risk

communication when it was needed (e.g., in a crisis):

It's an everyday thing that we're used to communicating about, but then when

things elevate, it's all hands on deck and everybody is working towards that

shared goal of making whatever that crisis is better…if you're out there already

having the conversations every day, non-risk conversations every day, you're

developing those relationships through social media with your listeners. Then when things do go bad, it doesn't have to be a crisis. It's just communicating like you always did; it just may not be on such a hot topic…So, it's like you can't use it as a risk communications thing. It has to be every day, it has to be an engrained part; otherwise people are just going to think that you're just trying to message them.

From a larger CG public affairs perspective, the culture and structure has been more decentralized, pushing communication down to the lowest level of responsibility. As the chief of media relations described about risk and crisis communication, "They have to flatten that line of communication but at the same time respect the chain of command." During a November 8, 2011 qualifying exercise for a social media team member to stand the combined media relations-social media after-hours watch, the social media team member asked the media relations personnel about the role of headquarters media relations in a crisis. The following conversation took place:

Media relations chief: "We'll do the lead and say, 'You do the bridge. You localize it here. Then here's the command message.' We want them to do it."

Second media relations team member: "You've seen our releases. It's rare that we're doing ones like that. Here it's all regulation, policy. Fatality stuff, that's very rare. Our releases are snore city. It's all regulatory."

Social media team member: "So, typically they're planned?"

Media relations team member: "Yeah, we don't do [search and rescue] or response."

Social media team member: "I know this isn't going to happen. It's the once every five year thing, but let's say someone calls and says…we killed somebody."

Media relations team member: "That would be handled at the lowest level. You would start situational awareness notifications. To be honest, you'll likely hear it from [the director of public affairs] or the National Command Center. It's counterintuitive. We should hear it first. But we're top-heavy around here. The Admiral, Captain are often the points of contact, and they'll reach out to us. But that's so rare. Really, everything's [routine questions]."

While the public affairs structure is decentralized, pushing communication down to the lowest level of responsibility, the structure posed a challenge to relational risk communication via social media by limiting the view of who is tasked with risk communication responsibilities at the same time that the social media team is still struggling to cultivate content and full compliance from field public affairs personnel. One social media team member said a goal was to make sure that "every Coastie could go into a crisis mode or go into a specific event and be able to use the [social media] tools to communicate." Due to a lack of focus on social media within the limited public affairs training available, the skills may not be taught. A social media team member explained that the field may not be "comfortable using social media to its full potential" and that while "it's being used," it is not being taught within the limited training opportunities available. "For instance our tech school…it's not taught, so we don't have that foundation when we go into the field." Without that foundation, the team member remarked that "I think for some people in the field, [social media's] just an extra thing they have to do" on top of the many responsibilities they already have.

As stated, the USCG communicators were highly limited in their ongoing relational risk communication via social media. Results indicated this limited engagement was due to resource and policy constraints and the USCG and public affairs culture and structure. Having answered the research questions focused on USCG risk communication, the chapter now shifts to answer questions focused on the USCG social media program.

RQ1b: How, if at All, Do Government Communicators in High-Risk Environments Perceive the Public Sector Context Influences Their Communication via Social Media?

Participants reported several influences on their social media communication. However, rather than seeing these as all falling under a *public sector context*, the influences could be categorized under various contexts within and including the "public sector." These contexts include: USCG, military (DOD), DHS, federal government, and the U.S. public sector. While the sectors can be visualized in nested or concentric circles as depicted in Figure 2, the boundaries between them are permeable, and their influences on one another, and ultimately USCG social media communication, often overlapped or intersected. These category-specific influences are discussed in more detail below from the inner-most circle (USCG) to the outer-most circle (U.S. public sector).

Public Sector

Federal Govt.

DHS

Military (DOD)
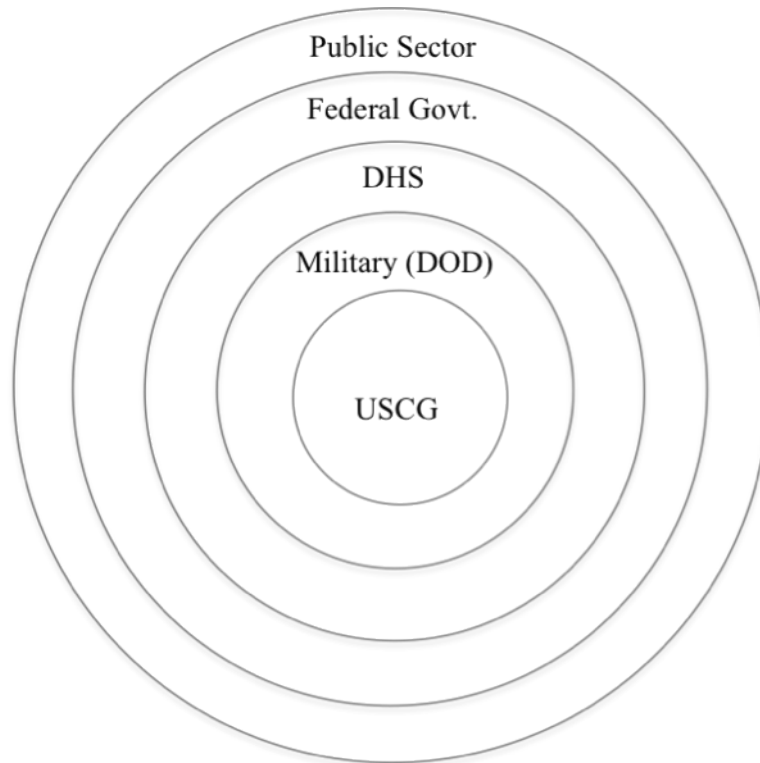
USCG

Figure 2. Public sector contexts that influence USCG social media communication.

Organization context. Within the USCG context, important influences that surfaced included history, leadership, complexity of missions and responsibilities, decentralization, transparency, resource constraints, and transient nature. Those influences, and evidence supporting them, are described below.

History. The USCG's long and proud history and various legacy agencies (e.g., Revenue Cutter Service, U.S. Lifesaving Service) included in that history play a significant role in USCG social media communication. The USCG's history affects social media policy, content and intersects with other factors that influence USCG social media such as USCG complexity of missions and roles, the role of USCG public affairs, and the agency's limited resources. As one social media team member explained:

We've been around for so long – since 1790. We've had a lot of shifts in missions

and roles as far as – we've always had the same statutory authorities, but we

haven't always balanced them the same way, nor has the country thought they

were so important. Keeping commerce and ports open back in the 1800s was so

important when you had tariffs and trade. That's when we were part of the

Department of Treasury. That was how important it was. Our government was

like, "To get money, we need you." Then we went to the Department of

Transportation. We started getting ports that were so self-sustaining and city-

owned and private entity-owned that people take for granted how these ports

work.

In addition to USCG history influencing the need for communication and social

media communication, history even drives some of the standardized content. For

example, because the USCG's birthday is August 4, the team published a history post on

the Compass blog on the fourth of every month, though this practice recently ended in

order to organically integrate content about USCG history (social media chief, personal

communication, April 1, 2012). "History" is one of the 12 category tags used to organize

Compass blog content. The USCG historian's office (CG-09224) is a division of the

office of public affairs (CG-0922) at headquarters. History also intersects with leadership

in that previous Commandant Admiral Thad Allen's enthusiasm for social media drove

USCG's early social media communication beginning in 2007, including the

Commandant's iCommandant blog and Twitter feed and a short-lived Facebook page. In

addition to its historical significance, USCG leadership also plays an influential role in

USCG social media communication and how it has developed into the enterprise-wide strategic program it is today.

Leadership. Social media communication efficacy is dependent on USCG leaders' endorsement of the approach and the program. Leadership influence is more infrastructural, including the program and team's existence, than it is editorial (social media chief, personal communication, April 1, 2012). After it was announced that Admiral Papp would relieve Admiral Allen, the fledgling social media "team" needed to earn the support of incoming Admiral Bob Papp who was not perceived to be as focused on public affairs or social media. As the social media chief explained, "The perception was that Admiral Papp didn't personally use social media, wasn't interested in social media, and wouldn't want to be part of it, but that didn't end up being the case" (personal communication, April 12, 2012). Admiral Allen had used the tools personally, including maintaining an iCommandant blog, but had not put a program in place. He had said, "go be social" (social media chief, personal communication, April 12, 2012). The team used the leadership transition between Admiral Allen and Admiral Papp in May 2010 as an opportunity to standardize content. Prior to Admiral Papp taking the command, he signed off on a new "look and feel" and discontinuing Admiral Allen's iCommandant blog (social media chief, personal communication, April 13, 2012). Over the course of a week surrounding the change of command, the social media team rebranded the USCG website, Compass blog, and Facebook page to include a standardized, official look. Later that summer, the now-chief of social media and the director of public affairs met with USCG leadership including the incoming Commandant and Vice Commandant and briefed them on the proposed strategy and program using the white paper they had

written in February 2010 and a corresponding PowerPoint presentation. They encouraged the Commandant to take the opportunity to evolve and mature the program (director of public affairs, personal communication, April 20, 2012). "We would not have been as clear on the strategy and what we wanted to do had we not had the earlier experience. And really this was the first time we approached senior leadership with a cohesive plan" (director of public affairs, personal communication, April 20, 2012).

After the presentation of the proposed program and policy, the leaders asked many questions related to how the plan would be tactically executed. Questions included how many people were reading the blogs currently available and how the proposed streamlined national and regional and district blogs would be similar or different. Questions also focused on what program support and structure would be needed to sustain the effort. After answering the team's many questions, it took a week before the director of public affairs heard back. The Commandant and leadership were on board with the approach. They said, "Okay, give it a try" (social media chief, personal communication, April 12, 2012). The fact that Admiral Papp, who had not been perceived as naturally interested in social media, had endorsed the new enterprise-wide approach provided the budding program valuable credibility. As the chief of social media described:

> When you see somebody come in, like Admiral Allen, who saw an opportunity as the Commandant of the USCG to build the USCG brand, and he was highly focused on and entirely engaged in very tactical level public affairs - in some ways you get that buy-in from the field. Whereas with Admiral Papp, who is looking at some very hard realities with an aging cutter fleet, with potential

budget cuts…and he says, "We need to refocus on core competencies"…Now, ironically, that means when Admiral Papp does talk about communication sometimes, that does carry more weight.

With the Admiral's support in hand for a new policy and program, the public affairs director and social media chief began the process of securing DHS approval for the expanded program that they received in October 2010. By January 2011, the new policy had been approved by the necessary USCG legal and program authorities and the social media chapter was officially added to the public affairs manual.

While the leadership is more influential on the overall program than overseeing editorial content, the strong military command structure and the need to keep leadership buy-in and support means the social media team sometimes includes content or a voice they would not normally use. During several observations and in interviews, I witnessed the Commandant's office and staff influencing specific content. After one such occasion, a social media team member explained that the Commandant's communication staff often wants to write the content and when they do, they tend to talk in a more traditional, formal, policy voice that is different than the more conversational, external-focused voice the social media team uses. The team member distinguished leadership's voice as focusing on a policy audience or internal audience and stated that the social media team is not often in a position to push back on these pressures. For example, during observations, the team was still doing the history post on the fourth of every month to fit into the Admiral's "honor our profession – tell the story" vision (November 1, 2011). The team member explained that the risk in using such a voice and talking to an internal

audience is that "the American taxpayer doesn't understand a lot of this" (November 1, 2011).

Despite that the leadership may not always use the voice or content the social media team prefers, the team credits the Commandant's support for the existence of the team and the program. That support has influenced other USCG senior leaders and programs. As the director of public affairs noted:

> People come to us, not necessarily with the story ideas that are right for the channel, but they realize that the channels are there and that they can serve a purpose…I think having demand is the success. There's buy-in at high levels for the use of social media.

Leadership support is important to the team even within the larger governmental and public affairs directorate that oversees the office of public affairs. When the head of the governmental and public affairs directorate, Admiral Karl Schultz, spoke on CSPAN on November 10, 2011, social media team members informally gathered with other multimedia team members around the office television to watch. They reflected on the Admiral's impressive inclusion of the strategic communication framework messages and his use of facts. They cheered when he made a plug for the USCG website and Compass blog. Later, when the public affairs director came into the office, he asked the team if they had liked the Admiral's "plug" for the blog.

Complexity of missions and responsibilities. USCG's 11 missions add to its organizational complexity by making it a "military, multi-mission, and maritime" agency. These missions are a challenge and an opportunity for USCG social media communication. The better-known missions such as search and rescue give the USCG a

communication advantage. As one social media team member explained, "People love us so it's much easier to communicate." The chief of media relations explained that these missions may be loved, but the USCG's multiple roles can also conflict with each other:

> The average person knows maybe three things about the Coast Guard and number one is always search and rescue, and that's a great story. It's got drama. It's high visual impact. Most of the time it has a happy ending and that's easy to sell. The service enjoys a unique reputation among the armed forces, and people generally like us. We're just kind of approachable and kind of friendly…And that reputation goes a long way. People like the missions that we do. They may not know all of them, but the ones they know they like…We're a regulatory agency. We're a law enforcement agency. We are a military agency. We are a search and rescue agency, and sometimes those roles conflict with each other.

USCG missions provide a content advantage. The chief of social media considered "diversity of mission" and the fact that USCG social media can feature "real people doing real things" rather than just "all produced content" as one way they are able to build credibility with audiences. Another social media team member considered the fact that content, especially rescue stories, can be "entertaining and interesting." "Everybody loves to watch somebody be saved." The USCG has "a lot to write about…or show."

While the public may generally love the USCG for what it thinks it knows about the agency (e.g., search and rescue), the missions also provide social media communication challenges. For example, many Americans may not fully understand the USCG's many missions and needs. As another social media team member explained:

From the very beginning, we've had to communicate...missions that have been

taken for granted. And as a whole, America doesn't understand the military…So,

add to that the misunderstanding that people still don't know what the Coast

Guard is or does unless they live in Chatham, MA or San Diego, CA, and you've

got a big mission for Coast Guard communications professionals.

The missions are woven into content. For example, several of the blog's 12 categories

closely align with USCG missions and operations (e.g., environment, global,

humanitarian, preparedness, safety, search and rescue, security).

Multiple missions and roles also mean the social media team has to consider

many audiences. As the chief of social media explained, there are "half a dozen

audiences" alone for the port security mission. Another challenge that comes from the

USCG's multi-mission environment stems from the fact that public affairs, including

social media communication, is a support function rather than a mission. As one social

media team member explained about USCG public affairs, including social media,

"Public affairs is not a mission. Our people first go to the mission, just like a collateral

duty. The mission is always going to come first."

As such, while the USCG has important missions and the potential for them to

generate valuable and compelling content, the missions themselves, and the limited

personnel available to perform them, may paradoxically stand in the way of producing

that content. In addition, the nature of USCG missions can create access constraints

where personnel are underway on ships or stationed places with limited access to social

media and online communication, further limiting their engagement with and ability to

provide content for it. On the flip side, the multi-mission environment gives the USCG a

need for collaboration and relationship-building. As the chief of strategic communication emphasized, "The Coast Guard is a very collaborative organization just because of the responsibilities we have. We have relationships with everybody under the sun—all the industry groups, all the other agencies."

Finally, these multiple missions mean that the USCG has two agencies to answer to. While it is a DHS component with DHS missions, it is also a branch of the armed services and, as such, answers to the DOD. During conversations in the field on October 18, 2011, a social media team member described the complexity of working for the USCG within DHS as the "only .mil in a .gov family." During this conversation, the team member agreed with the analogy that the USCG situation could be compared to a child of divorced parents who has to live by different parents' rules, depending on whose house the child is currently living in. The influences from these agencies will be discussed later.

Decentralization. The USCG's decentralized operational and public affairs structure often emerged as an influence on USCG social media communication. As the chief of media relations relayed, "culturally…we're very decentralized as an organization" and "communication-wise, we're also very decentralized." This overall structure presents opportunities and challenges for social media communication. As a social media team member said, "One of the things the Coast Guard prides itself in is that everyone is a spokesperson." That decentralized function of public affairs means that the headquarters social media team has to think about "everybody else because everybody is using social media, so that's where the handbook comes in" (social media team member). The chief of media relations articulated the need for a balance between this decentralized model and a need for an enterprise-wide approach:

One of the things we've struggled with is, as you're now managing either the

organizations tools or the employees' use of those tools, there needs to be some

level of centralization – some level of being able to move information up and

down the organization for awareness and to provide guidance when…needed.

And so that's been something that we struggle with, not only with social media,

but in external affairs because the world has shrunk so much in the last 20 years…

USCG communicators point out that this decentralized public affairs model also

stems from and contributes to the USCG's limited number of public affairs officers. As

the chief of social media explained, unlike the other military services, "public affairs is

not a profession for officers." The chief went on to say that this is both good and bad. It is

tough in that unlike the other services, the USCG does not have individuals "thinking

about, living, eating, breathing public affairs" and therefore "know" their "stuff."

However, the decentralized model does have the advantage that: "in our public affairs

manual, being part of the Coast Guard's public affairs program is part of your contract. It

is a condition of your employment." Therefore, the chief described:

The other military services, you have people who have been doing public affairs

for 15 years but have been sitting at a desk doing public affairs. You now have

people who have commanded Coast Guard cutters and have dealt with the

media…but have also done their job, who are now much more credible.

The limited number of public affairs officers and public affairs billets (e.g.,

assigned role versus collateral duty) in the USCG mean that the public affairs directorate

at headquarters is "much more flexible, much more nimble, and designed to support the

objectives and the goals, not to support any one function" (media relations team

member). The director of public affairs also described the model's strengths and weaknesses as it applies to social media and the ways the USCG tries to compensate for the weaknesses while leveraging the strengths:

> You get the Admiral, who's our chief communicator…He's running three ships. He's a very credible person. Then you have the officers' corps, and that is made up of the warrants who have grown up and done that their entire career, and they've done all the [joint information centers] and all the oil spills and all the hurricanes and that kind of thing…Then we bring in people like me, operators to do public affairs as a sub-specialty…And so we bring—well, we don't have all of that expertise and all of that time in communications. We spend some time in it. Many of us go to grad school and study it, but we also bring the field expertise…We've done it ourselves; we have credibility with the operators in the field and with leadership…And then we have the civilian public affairs officers, who, depending on their pay grade, would have spent more time in public affairs.

This operational focus and emphasis on missions and roles can be an adjustment when new public affairs personnel arrive at headquarters. One media relations team member described such a transition during observation on December 8, 2011. Most people, he said, are used to operations, which is a different pace of having to always be on the move. Then they get here, and the pace is just as fast in terms of work to do with limited people to do it, but you sit in one place, so it gets people wound up. They're trying to do more without moving. He said they call headquarters "the puzzle palace" because it is like chasing down the rabbit hole, a skewed reality. You "feel like you're running through quicksand. It's also a puzzle in terms of figuring out how things get done

and it's also a puzzle in terms of the building itself. Everything looks the same. You get

lost for a like a year." In that way headquarters is unique from the field in that there are

very specialized roles and functions. For social media this can create a challenge in terms

of trying to incorporate lateral programs to engage in social media content about their

areas of responsibility and expertise. One social media team member described trying to

recruit non-public affairs program participation in headquarters social media:

> "I have this long persistent thing going on in social media about your program.
>
> Can we get you up to speed and you go there every day and engage and have that
>
> dialog?" It's only been a few people that have been willing to do that at the
>
> program level…there's some people that do that but that's the exception.

The decentralized public affairs function also means that public affairs officers and

personnel do not answer to the headquarters public affairs directorate. They have their

own chains of command they answer to. As the chief of social media described, "It's an

enterprise-wide strategic approach, but we're not in charge of the whole enterprise.

That's the centralized/decentralized paradox."

Decentralization also contributes to the USCG's need for relationships or

collaboration at the local and community level. One of the four themes in the USCG

Communication Framework emphasizes that the "Coast Guard is part of the fabric of

U.S. maritime communities" (2011, p. 12). One of the social media team members

described USCG social media as needing to inform but also engage:

No other military service works with citizens on an hourly, minute-by-minute basis. We

do our missions for individual citizens. We interact with citizens every day… I think [the

social media team has] a huge role to play in communicating that importance.

One talking point in the Communication Framework is that the USCG is "locally based, nationally deployed, and globally connected" (2011, p. 8). Decentralization has also contributed to and is strengthened by perceptions of an open/transparent USCG culture.

Transparency. Throughout the project, USCG communicators referenced their open and transparent culture and its influence on public affairs and social media communication. The chief of social media described one of USCG's greatest strengths as being "extremely unfiltered" and "not afraid to talk about what we do." Additionally, the USCG encourages "our people at the most junior level to get out and talk about what we do." The media relations chief described USCG communication as "very forthright and open about our communications and how you maintain that in a digital environment." The motion picture division chief noted that the agency's transparency was clear during the Deepwater Horizon response "where of all the federal agencies, I thought we were the most proactive and the most inclined to just get the information out to the public and let them have opinions on what was going on..." While acknowledging that leaders' discomfort and a post-9/11, operational security risk-averse environment pose challenges to such an open, transparent culture, a media relations team member said, "our culture is still pretty open."

Resource constraints. The organization's many missions are challenging to fulfill given the USCG's very limited resources (e.g., personnel, budgets, time). As a social media team member noted, "We're small. We're barely two percent of the U.S. Armed Forces." As the chief of social media noted, "It's humbling, it's inspiring, it's gratifying and it's frustrating that the rest of government tends to look to us as leaders and models

on social media when I look at the budget that the Army has just for social media, let alone public affairs."

While not all communicators agreed that resources constraints included limited number of personnel, most participants referenced personnel as one of the resource constraints affecting the USCG, its headquarters and decentralized public affairs function, including social media. A social media team member explained, "Our big constraint is the human resources, not just technological resources…I mean, we usually have in our office three public affairs persons and they're not staffed to [facilitate consistent, real-time engagement]." The same team member saw this as a problem for field operators who were being asked to help provide social media content. "Our small boat crews are three, four people…They're out there to save the life and just conduct a search in the safety of that vessel and…crew, so they all have a very critical job. They can't stop to take video or pictures or tweet about it."

Given resource constraints, the social media chief was grateful to the USCG and public affairs leadership for supporting the social media team. "I've been more successful in going to bat for bodies than a budget thus far. But I think those bodies have made a difference." This shoestring budget means the social media team must get creative to effectively do their jobs. For example, during my observations, team members successfully lobbied for a small portion of funds that had become available to pay for iPhones so the team could fulfill their responsibility of after-hours social media monitoring and engaging. While there were many competing needs for the funds, the compliance manager explained to the deputy director of public affairs that the team had (1) been using their own personal resources and (2) had not always been able to meet the

one-hour response time requirements because they had not had immediate access to a computer. As such, the team was prioritized to purchase iPhones that would allow them to better manage the USCG social media channels after hours and on weekends (October 18, 2011). The chief of media relations also articulated the USCG's challenges for effectively using social media versus more resource-rich private sector organizations:

> I really do like the example of GM and the CEO having these personal conversations with people. Where do you find a CEO willing to do that? I'm pretty sure the Commandant is not doing it or anybody on the second deck for that matter. I don't think my Admiral is going to do it. I know I'm not doing it. I don't have the time for it. But at the end of the day how do we as an organization have that kind of personal conversation? You can say the…Coast Guard is going to have a personal conversation with people. Well, that requires a lot of dedication, a staff, the resources that we don't have.

Lack of resources has forced the social media team to make trade-offs in terms of its focus and audience. The chief of social media argued:

> We were laser beam focused with a two-to-three person…Laser beam focused on external communication…and I would argue that even if there is a transition in priority to communicating internally with social media, the team we have is just as bare bones as you can get to the external, so you can't combine the two.

Resource constraints facing the USCG also influence social media content in that the team is charged with helping bolster the USCG's case for the resources it needs to fulfill its missions. As a member of the social media team said:

> Then you have the fact that right now we're in a recapitalization environment and

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we've suffered deeply, negatively, for some of the repercussions of how that

program has been handled so we're doing everything we can to try and show

America that we're doing it right, we're doing it the best we can and we need

your support.

As noted earlier, other resource restraints affecting the social media team involve lack of

available, USCG-specific higher-level public affairs training. One public affairs team

member who had just returned from the Defense Information School and was temporarily

working with the social media team remarked that it was a "shame that the USCG only

gets like two seats" in the public affairs qualification course given that DOD has an entire

school for training (January 3, 2012). Resource constraints have also contributed to the

public affairs structure and overall "do more with less" mentality the USCG must

contend with. These resource constraints and the public affairs structure that supports a

highly limited number of public affairs professionals (in comparison with other military

services) has also contributed to a culture of internal transition and transience.

Transient nature. The social media team was not immune from the "transient

nature" (social media chief) of the USCG. One social media team member stressed that

the team has often had a team member absent either due to temporary deployment (e.g.,

Deepwater Horizon response), training (e.g., DINFOS) or other reasons. In terms of field

public affairs specialists and officers, frequent transition and transience includes shorter

rotations and a mentality that if you do not agree with something (e.g., social media

policy), you can just wait until the next person comes along and changes the policy.

When this comes to getting buy-in from the field for the social media program, the chief

of social media described that if Coast Guard personnel do not agree with a policy,

including social media ones, there is a mentality that you can just "wait it out" until the next leader comes along who might change it. However, once a new leader comes who endorses the policy, the social media chief believes the field may accept that the policy is here to stay and become more active in fulfilling the policies and procedures that make up the program design (personal communication, April 12, 2012).

This transient culture may also link back to the military nature of the USCG. As the chief of social media described, the "biggest challenge" to USCG communication is that "by its nature the Coast Guard is—and all military services are—dynamic from a leadership perspective." He went on to explain, "In the Coast Guard, your leadership changes every two to four years, wholesale…and public affairs is a great example." After this summer's coming rotation, it is expected that the "only two divisions that will stay intact from a leadership perspective are social media and community relations and that's because [their chiefs are] civilians."

Military context. As noted earlier, the USCG sits within DHS but considers itself first a military service. As a branch of the armed services, the "overall military context" has a stronger influence on USCG social media than do the DOD and its policies (social media chief, personal communication, April 1, 2012). Specifically, the following influences are discussed below: military culture and command structure, operational focus, and security-related regulations and policies.

Military culture and command structure. The military culture results in a highly structured organization, hierarchical command structure and sense of duty. The military-civilian mix in terms of personnel and parent organizations creates particular opportunities and challenges for USCG public affairs and social media communication.

Challenges include difficulty questioning orders, despite that the agency values on-scene initiative. As a strategic communication team member remarked about the command structure, "It takes a brave person to look [an admiral] in the face and say that we can reach more of your people than you can and to sell them on the concept of 'us' and not 'mine.'" A social media team described this conflict:

> At the end of the day, I'm optimistic, but I'm not going to say the Commandant's going to all the sudden switch the light bulb and say, "Oh, this is a great idea!" So, I have to prove that to him. But in our very structured organization, especially in the military, it's hard to do that because you are so used to getting orders and direction and guidance. And they do talk about initiative…I need to take the initiative and do it. I still have reservations.

One way the team attempts to demonstrate the value of the program that will be discussed later is through internal quarterly reports that highlight accomplishments.

The military chain of command also influences social media in terms of who is tasked with internal communication. In this case, the Commandant tells the admirals who tell the captains who tell their commanders who pass on the message at all-hands meetings. That model is based on the principle that your supervisor is the best source of information. In describing this model, the chief of strategic communication explained its benefit as achieving "high message penetration" but its challenges as "low message control" because the message changes down each rung of the communication ladder. In theory, though, the command structure benefits social media when USCG leadership signs off on it. As the chief of social media explained:

When something bears the Coast Guard's name, the Commandant's name, our

Admiral's signature, I mean, the biggest pro is that this is now policy. So buy-in

has multiple layers to it. On the surface level, everybody's bought into this

because it is service policy; this is what we do.

However, surface-level buy-in does not always translate all the way through the

organization. And simply because social media exist does not mean that the military

culture and command structure has embraced the open, transparent nature of social media

feedback. The chief of strategic communication described how the military culture may

limit feedback from internal social media engagement:

Basically there's got to be two-way communication in order for it to be social

media. If we just post things on our website…that's just a one-way venue. Even

though we sometimes get comments, they're not really truly social. The military

has a fairly hierarchical rank structure so that your comments aren't always

welcome. So, the military structure kind of deters candid feedback.

Aside from a military structure and hierarchy, the military environment also affects the

larger public affairs mindset. According to the chief of social media, military public

affairs to date has been organized around three main functions: command information

(internal communication), community engagement, and media relations. Within that

model then, the chief of social media described social media as "its own thing because it

covers command" and "the biggest benefit is probably community engagement when

done right."

The military-civilian mix of personnel at USCG headquarters also influences

overall communication. For example, social media team members often remarked that

having a civilian chief of social media (1) gave the team someone who could speak back to the command structure in a way they could not as military personnel within a military rank and command structure and (2) brought a unique perspective and extensive experience from outside the organization in terms of strategic communication.

Operational focus and security-related regulations and policies. The military context also brings with it a focus on operations that has translated into USCG's public affairs structure and social media strategy and content. The social media team tries to link its stories and content to operations and ensure an operational focus. Even the white board in the office used to depict the week's editorial calendar would put an asterisk next to "ops-centered" content to visually underscore the importance of these messages (October 18, 2011). Of course the operational focus also challenged the very nature of keeping an editorial calendar and meant the team needed to stay open to emergent operational content. As a social media team member described:

> I think with the military, with our emergent operations, it's hard to plan [content]. But that is why when we think about our strategic messages that we are trying to pass as an organization, those are planned into the calendar, and then we can fill in the gaps with emergent operations like a drug bust.

The operational focus of the USCG also contributes to the public affairs structure and value placed on public affairs. As a social media team member said:

> That's why the Coast Guard's public affairs program doesn't usually accept people who have not had an operational tour. Operational, meaning you would have been on a boat or you've been at a unit or you've been doing the operations,

hands-on, because it's very hard to sit here at headquarters and say, "I told you so

or you have to do it this way" when you have no idea where they're coming from.

An operational focus also reflects operational security (OPSEC) concerns and policies.

Ones that surfaced in terms of their influence on social media procedures, policies and

content included rules such as not being allowed to release official information for the

first time on a non-governmental channel (e.g., USCG Facebook and Twitter pages) and

having to hold back on content when military operations or security could be at risk. As a

media relations team member said about social media:

> There is a lot of fear, because government organizations, especially the
>
> military…is charged with only certain informational secrets…The media wants it
>
> all; how do you find that balance?...There has always been this perception that we
>
> have to control the information…It becomes less viable to control it…and it's not
>
> a bad thing.

In one instance, a social media team member was working on a Compass story regarding

the Caribbean Border Interagency Group and was concerned about releasing names. She

explained that in the past, the team has resisted releasing actual names of USCG

personnel who participated in activities like drug or gun busts due to "retribution risks"

on the named Coast Guard members by drug or gun runners (January 3, 2012). Security

risks also limited the visual imagery coming out of such sensitive operations. As the team

member noted, "Other news agencies didn't pick up on [the story] because it was over

Christmas and probably because there was no imagery. There's no way to tell the story."

Yet, these are the very stories the social media team has to translate and make relevant to

an external audience while limiting risks to USCG personnel.

Even something as simple as the social media team's request that the field send in New Year's Eve poems from their ship logs – a USCG tradition – required reminders to think about security, privacy, and other concerns. In some cases, submitted poems had locations of vessels mentioned in the poem, and the team took them out or replaced them with marks such as "XXX-XXX" to protect the operational security of the vessel and its personnel. Throughout observations, "OPSEC" was raised as an issue either when a social media team member was asking about a potentially operationally sensitive post (November 10, 2011), or a team member was trying to get clearance from the "OPSEC guys" for a social media handbook (December 19, 2011), or a discussion of how the laws needed to catch up to the operational security challenges posed by social media (December 8, 2011). In another observed instance, a social media team member was working on a story about the USCG's partnership with the Canadian navy and wanted to use a past example of the partnership (December 8, 2011). While there had been a timely example that week, the other social media team member noted that the one from this week may not have been officially released and, therefore, could not be discussed. The social media team member writing the story ended up finding a press release form the Canadian navy that talked about the partnership that was safe to use.

Parent organization context. As a newer agency, a civilian agency, and one the USCG joined in 2003, it played a less significant role in USCG public affairs culture, structure, and social media than did the military culture and context. DHS's most direct influence was on actual USCG social media policy and the program's right to exist at all. As a federal agency, DHS is also held to larger federal policies and regulations and has offered its own guidance for its component units like the USCG (social media chief

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personal communication, April 1, 2012). For example, DHS guidance prohibiting the use of externally-facing social media for internal audiences was referenced on several occasions including in discussions with communicators from the field who wanted to use social media and in meetings at headquarters. As a social media team member said, "The DHS mandate says that we cannot use third-party outward facing tools to convey internal messaging."

DHS has made exceptions for the USCG due to its unique nature and history, yet DHS guidance (e.g., regarding 508 compliance and records retention) does apply in many instances and must be navigated. As a strategic communication team member said:

Coast Guard is so different and so much more advanced [than other DHS agencies] and it's not to brag. It's just so much more robust and involved because we're so much older than a lot of these agencies and we have all of these asterisks for Coast Guard. "This applies to everyone except for Coast Guard and Secret Service." It's so complicated, the policies to wade through.

USCG communicators are proud of the fact that they earned a DHS waiver and support to continue their social media program despite a then-moratorium on DHS component agencies expanding their social media use. As a social media team member remembered, they had to propose a policy in order to earn a DHS waiver to continue and expand its use. While that policy was approved, the social media team continually works to maintain the department's favor. The social media team chief serves as the DHS liaison and sits on a DHS enterprise-wide web council. In a meeting with representatives of USCG reservists who wanted to use social media to communicate in a one-way manner with their reserve members, the social media chief described DHS as "hands on but not

unreasonable" and described that the social media chapter in the public affairs manual and the fact that USCG districts and regions have a social media presence was because the social media chief and public affairs director made the case to DHS leaders that they would use social media for two-way engagement and worked to get sign off on the policies USCG was proposing (January 10, 2012).

In order to stay in good standing, when the social media team puts together new supporting documents such as field guides, the team shares them with DHS. A social media team member explained:

So that doesn't have to go through concurrent clearance, but because we want DHS to see us as good and not rogue social media users and an agency that's leading this effort on behalf of the department, we will probably share it with them before we ever go public with it.

Given DHS's strict guidance on internal communication via public-facing tools, USCG conversations about potentially using social media for internal audiences are particularly challenging. As a strategic communication team member said:

We are a Fortune 500 company that cannot operate—have a digital presence— like a Fortune 500 company by nature of policy and our parent organization. That's not to knock DHS…They have their reasons for doing that.

DHS has also further complicated USCG missions and subsequent communication, including via social media. As a media relations team member explained, the USCG has "drastically changed" since joining DHS in 2003:

And it's a much more challenging environment, much more demanding and a lot more scrutiny of everything that we do. They keep taking things away but then

piling things on. Taking things, as far as people and resources and money, but

piling on more statutory responsibilities. It's definitely a much more complex

organization.

The director of public affairs clarified that, while the "sentiment is appropriate" in the

above quote, the USCG has received a budget increase each year since DHS was created

except for the most recent fiscal year 2013 budget. The director clarified:

The issue is that we started in a hole with not enough resources for then-current

responsibilities, the rate of growth has not kept up with the rate of mission

growth, and our need to replace the fleet is at an extreme point. (personal

communication, April 20, 2012)

Federal U.S. public sector context. While most public sector influences were

referenced to specific contexts within the government sector (e.g., DHS, DOD/military,

USCG) rather than the federal government or government more generally, there were a

handful of influences that were mentioned in relation to the larger federal government:

slow speed of change, government regulations/policies/laws, and a political election

cycle.

Slow speed of government change. The fact that government change (e.g., policy,

technology) happens slowly has influenced USCG social media – if anything because it is

out of touch with the speed at which technology is evolving. A media relations team

member explained the challenge of a slow-moving government in a social media context:

Social media and the technology and the…use of it is moving way faster than

government doctrine will ever move. It takes two, three years for something to get

changed policy-wise. It takes two, three days for something in social media to

change.

The slow speed of change was also mentioned in relation to another federal government influence: policies, laws, and regulations that have not kept pace with the social media communication landscape.

Federal regulations/policies/laws. Common laws, regulations and policies referenced in interviews, observations, and planning or training documents included Section 508 compliance that regulates web content accessibility, bans on government endorsements, privacy laws, records retention laws, use of third-party sites, and Freedom of Information Act requests. These regulations, policies, and laws affect USCG social media in terms of team structure, enterprise-wide policies and procedures developed by the headquarters team and actual social media content.

Team structure. The team itself is structured with one of the four full-time social media team members being dedicated to policy and compliance. In addition to policies that come with being a government agency, specific DHS, DOD and USCG policies and guidance also apply. A social media team member described that one team member "works on compliance and protocol. That's a big job. We're a government agency. We have a lot of offices for FOIA and 508 – and DHS and DOD and all these different policies coming up with different policies and records retention."

USCG social media policies and procedures. Other laws like the Freedom of Information Act and various records retentions regulations are often on social media communicators' minds. As one social media team member noted, the threat of lawsuits against members of the team or the larger USCG are constantly on her mind:

What I tell people is, "Great, go ahead, moderate the comments, but think about this, if you remove that comment and you don't properly archive it and you get a Freedom of Information Act request, how are you going to justify your—you can't really."

Even something as simple as a web address shortener needed for condensing long web addresses to fit in tweets is affected by federal policy. After asking the team why members used a particular address shortener, a team member explained that as government communicators, they were limited in third-party sites that may not be vetted (October 13, 2011). According to the team, the only free address shortener owned by a U.S. company that has a stated privacy policy is offered by Google, so they use that one. USCG audiences are also affected by federal privacy laws that limit how well USCG social media communicators can track and understand their audiences. As the chief of social media explained, privacy laws mean they cannot "work backwards and say, so that guy who left that comment, who is that person?"

Content. Endorsement laws that prohibit the federal government from endorsing commercial entities and products also constrain USCG social media content. For example, during observation, television episodes were airing that featured the USCG (e.g., *NCIS*, *Coast Guard Alaska*). When writing about the episodes, the social media team had to be careful not to use language like "tune in" or other directives that USCG lawyers frowned on since it was the government directly endorsing a commercial entity (November 8, 2011). This challenge also surfaced in a conference call between the Weather Channel communication team and members of the USCG social media team regarding upcoming episodes of *Coast Guard Alaska*. As the chief of social media stated:

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When it's about promoting the show specifically, there's certain language we can

and can't use because of endorsement issues…But with our video series, we'll

take two-minute clips from a case and then get on Skype and have them talk about

what was going on. "During this mission, we were doing x, y, and z." What they

can't say is "I encourage them to tune into this channel to watch this show."

Political election cycle. While not as large an influence on the USCG since it is

a non-political agency and has a command structure that does not include politically-

appointed leaders, the political election cycle did surface in terms of an influence on

USCG social media – at least during an election year. During a January 5, 2012 morning

meeting, the director of public affairs noted that they would all be receiving election year

guidance from DHS that would remind the team what they could and could not talk

about, but that it would be more focused on events such as not doing media availabilities

with candidates at military installations. Because this political influence comes up

cyclically, public affairs personnel were encouraged to review the 2010 election year

public affairs guidance document since likely not much had changed. Otherwise, formal

politics and elections do not seem to have a strong influence on USCG social media.

Influences at the federal level are coupled by more general U.S. public sector

influences that backdrop the previously discussed contexts. The more general "public" or

"government" sector versus private, corporate sector, brought with it three influences that

were identified in this study: public service role, taxpayer concerns about government

spending, and public expectations. These influences are explored below.

Public service role. USCG communicators saw their "public service role" as

unique from a corporate, for-profit role. The chief of social media described that in such a

public sector role, feedback from audiences should be used by helping the communicator answer the following question: "How can I be a better public servant and give you what you need to be safe, or in the case of the global maritime system, profitable?" The social media program, including its strategy and evaluation, are driven by being a government agency in the public sector. As the chief explained: "Being a permanent government agency, there isn't really the same [return on investment] on Twitter for us that there is for the private sector, which is literally brand credibility and pure existence. For us, that isn't necessarily the priority." The media relations chief also distinguished the public service role and how it differs from other roles or uses in the private sector:

When I go to a PR News event and I listen to a lot of discussion about how to use Twitter…it's always about marketing and branding when you're dealing with corporate people or image management. And I don't do image management. I don't do marketing. I communicate about our service. I communicate to build support and understanding of and for the service and its missions. I communicate because, as a member of the Coast Guard and a public affairs practitioner, I'm bound to communicate to the people who pay for this, the taxpayers. They have a right to know what the Coast Guard does. It's my job to keep them informed. I don't think if you ask your average public relations person working at…large corporate-public relations firms or work in corporate communications in a company, I don't think that they're going to give you that response.

Taxpayer concerns about government spending. As the media relations chief's quote indicated, taxpayers and their concerns influence USCG public affairs and social media communication. In addition to direct references to taxpayers and their expectations

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or concerns, they also showed up in policies, content and responses to content. After helping the team choose a title (Not Your Average Sleigh) for a December 6, 2011 post about a former USCG vessel being used to transport Christmas trees to families in need, we monitored comments on the Compass blog and to the USCG Facebook page post about the story. After reviewing Compass comments on December 19, 2011, I noted that several of them criticized the use of taxpayer dollars to transport Christmas trees. On another occasion, the Department of Justice became the center of negative news stories about wasteful spending at conferences for offering $16 muffins at a legal conference. In response to the September 2011 story, President Obama had ordered federal agencies to review conference expenses. Even though it later turned out the $16 covered other food and beverages in that cost, the story had still made headlines and the USCG sent out a memo to all personnel (ALCOAST) limiting USCG personnel's ability to participate in and host some conference-like activities. The message was a hot topic at the December 14, 2011 meeting where public affairs personnel expressed frustration that such a policy would be developed in response to one negative incident by another agency, particularly one that later reports had shown had been exaggerated in the first place. Given taxpayer concerns, a social media team member explained the tough, but important, job of making the value case to the American taxpayer that their money is being well-spent:

> Especially in the budget climate we're in now, you have to justify your value. And there's no better way to do it—whether you call it marketing…in a business or you call it us getting new icebreakers and us getting new cutters to help support the men and women who need to do the job in a safe manner. It's all part of messaging; you've got to do it to be able to justify your value.

The team member explained that for a government agency, justifying this value is even more important because "it's not even the marketers, it's not even an advertising dollar, it's not a, 'I bought your product dollar.' It's a taxpayer dollar." One intervening audience between the American taxpayer is Congress and its members who make budgeting decisions. The USCG social media team also often referenced congressional staff or members of Congress as audience members of USCG social media, though as the public affairs director indicated, "Congress" is also shorthand for other influencers such as think tanks and academics. As the chief of social media noted, "We have heard both directly and indirectly that staffers on the Hill, when they're prepping their guys to question our boss, are printing off stories from Coast Guard Compass…if you say our job is to educate the American people, well, I mean, who more represents the American people than members of Congress?"

Public expectations. In addition to taxpayer expectations of government, more general public expectations of government also surfaced as influences of USCG social media communication. Even though the USCG has a decentralized public affairs model, the expectations of government communication may require some balance of control. A social media team member described these stakes: "It's about balance and also about control, because can we trust every 22-year-old who is out in a small boat to make the official voice of the Coast Guard? Because…that is a federal authority that you're enacting."

In some instances, though, these high expectations of government communication may be more lax for government social media communication. As a social media team

member explained, these allowances for social media provide opportunities the team can use:

> What works for social media is completely different than what works other places…When it comes time for Thanksgiving, we can do something about Thanksgiving. We can do lots of different things that the Coast Guard as an organization shouldn't be doing at a media relations or…strategic level but can be done in a plan for social media.

One specific area in which both government spending and expectations are particularly challenging for USCG communicators is a perceived public devaluing of government public relations or strategic communication as spin or propaganda. Though they did not explicitly define public relations, in observed discussions and interactions and interviews, USCG communicators distinguished public relations or "PR" from the public affairs they considered themselves practicing. For example, after learning that the USCG Communication Framework was going to be printed and sent to all the districts, one social media team member worried aloud that the frameworks would be treated like "coffee table books" and that might "look bad" because, if seen by external audiences, the perception might be that "we're just doing messaging" (December 20, 2011). I noted in my field notes that her tone indicated concern about the perception of government spin or propaganda. During a January 4, 2012 discussion between a social media team member and myself about how the team distinguished the official blog from USCG-related external blogs that could talk more critically about USCG policy, the team member noted the unofficial blog writers' criticism of the Compass and its writers:

> When we won a [military blog award], [the other blog] had this conversation about us on their blog. "The Compass has this [lieutenant] who writes through rose-colored glasses." We don't do PR because we are the military obviously. But we do public affairs for the Coast Guard. We're there to say what the commandant says about it. We're not the one to have a discussion about it.

In this context, "PR" seemed to be compared to writing about your organization through "rose-colored" glasses. While the social media team member distinguished public affairs from that, she recognized that their role is not to have a discussion or disagreement but to represent the commandant's and Coast Guard's official viewpoint. Still, the team was conscious of the need to avoid what the American public would view as spin or propaganda.

This research question addressed five public sector contexts and their included influences: USCG, military (DOD), DHS, federal government, U.S, public sector. USCG communicators perceived these contexts as having overlapping, intersecting influences that affect USCG social media communication. Having discussed these myriad public sector contexts and influences, the next research question explores how USCG communicators plan and carry out social media communication given these public sector influences.

RQ4: How, If at All, Do Government Communicators in High-Risk Environments Plan and Execute Social Media Communication Strategies and Tactics?

Given the influences described above, five themes describe how the USCG plans and executes its social media communication strategies and tactics. These themes include decentralized centralization; ground spring of content; coaxing compliance; *Semper*

Paratus to adapt; and engaging a faceless audience. Each theme is described in terms of both strategic planning and tactical execution.

Decentralized centralization. The USCG strategy and program could be described as decentralized centralization. As has been noted in answers to previous research questions, the USCG's operational functions are decentralized. This history and culture has fostered an environment and command structure that produces many "flags" or admirals who each control their own domain. In addition to a decentralization of power and operations, the public affairs function has also been decentralized in terms of actual public affairs officers and public affairs detachments as well as a public affairs doctrine that dictates all personnel as spokespeople. With that contextual background, it is perhaps not surprising that the early days of USCG social media were also highly decentralized. Over the course of observation and interviews, social media team members discussed the history of the program itself from the early experimentation days to the policies, programs, and platforms currently in place.

While decentralization is a tenet of the overall policy and structure of the public affairs function, and the social media function within it, public affairs leaders saw a need to move from a decentralized, rudder-less program to a more decentralized centralization that had an enterprise-wide strategy and approach. The chief of social media referred to this as the "decentralized-centralized paradox" (October 7, 2011). Team members are both proud of the service's early entry and also distinguish that free-for-all, tactical focused era from the current emphasis on effective strategy and tactical execution.

Early adoption and experimentation. That first era was largely driven by then-Commandant Admiral Allen's enthusiasm for social media at a tactical level. As the Right Tool, Right Level, Right Audience white paper noted (2010, p. 1):

> Over the past several years, the Coast Guard has been engaged in a social media experiment. As an early adopter of social media tools, the service has seen the social media landscape evolve…During this time, best practices have emerged and this document is aimed at articulating a strategy that will allow the Coast Guard to adapt its social media program accordingly.

While this early entry is a point of pride and earned trade publication recognition that "Coast Guard is at the forefront of social media" (social media team member), there was a growing sense that this tactical focus was not ideal. The director of public affairs said this first year of social media was about addressing "the immediate tactical need to get involved and to produce some discussions." After that point, it became about getting "organized" and because the "information environment had progressed; organization communications had progressed" and it was necessary to "get a program going." There was also a realization that the fully decentralized effort may not have been following best practices or in compliance with some government policies. As an early team member described:

> I started what I called a checklist, a social media checklist. I started to jot down all the things that would come up in meetings and conversations with other social media experts, things that I was like, "Oh man, we're not doing that. We're not doing that. We're not doing that. I have no idea if they're doing this, and I didn't even think about that."

The emphasis, then, on getting a program going was an effort both to gain some sense of control and also to harness the power of many spokesperson voices active in social media channels. The team moved away from following trends and doing social media because everyone else was and began thinking about more strategic ways to use the tools. As the chief distinguished: "We try not to follow…trends. We try not to follow what's up and coming. We don't switch tools every five minutes…We're driven by communication goals of the organization."

The struggle for finding the right balance of control was also driven by DHS' decision at that point to halt all new external-facing social media among its components while the agency studied the issue and developed guidance (social media team member). The USCG efforts led to the white paper strategy that was approved by the Commandant and DHS leaders who then let the team move forward. The strategy document now features a quote by the Admiral expressing his support for the program and its philosophy: "My command team will embrace the use of social media. Our plan is to take a centralized, focused approach to social media…" Based on the approved strategy, the team drafted the new chapter for the public affairs manual that was officially inserted on January 27, 2011. According to the document, it applied to "all Coast Guard unit commanders, commanding officers, officers-in-charge, deputy/assistant commandants, and chiefs of headquarters staff elements" (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b, p. 1).

Implementation and compliance-gaining. With the inclusion of the new chapter in official public affairs doctrine, the maturing program was official policy and allowed the USCG social media team to shift to its second era, one of implementation and compliance-gaining. As a social media team member pointed out, 2011 marked the first

full year of the program. Even with a plan and program in place, social media still necessitate a certain flexibility and lack of control. As the same team member said: "Within the year we've had the policy in place, it's like trying to get momentum and into a daily battle rhythm of sorts. There's no rules of engagement for social media. You just go out there and do it." Another social media team member juxtaposed the difference as: "Before, we were just doing social media to do social media. Now it's more focused. There's more of a plan. Whereas before we just felt like we should be doing it, and now we've been seeing results…"

Some of those results were highlighted in the 2011 Spring Quarterly Report that the social media team puts together for the directorate and to share with the Commandant's staff. The summary noted (2011, p. 2):

> Throughout spring of 2011 the social media team honed in on ways to strengthen our brand identity. This process began with the introduction of the Coast Guard's first enterprise social media policy and included bringing five new district blogs online, consolidating YouTube and Flickr identities and focusing on operational content across all mediums.

> The chief of social media believes that the model works and is sustainable and now "needs to be fully embraced." The team has survived the "viable threat at the leadership level to the existence of the program." When reflecting on the team's results, the chief of social media noted that the team's own social media successes can be viewed outside of the larger USCG service's social media, again emphasizing the need for the program to be more completely adopted and integrated into a larger public affairs and strategic communication function. As the chief said:

If you're looking at the social media team as a team with a mission and a set of priorities, I would argue that we have been incredibly successful. If you look at us as a function of our directorate of Coast Guard communication, I'd think there are opportunities to be more successful. If you look at us as a construct of the service as a whole, I think we have a long way to go.

During observations, leaders implemented a combined media relations-social media watch to balance the after-hours and weekend burden that had been shared by two to three social media personnel to expand to the larger social media and media relations teams. Such an effort required that the social media team compile and record explicit Social Media Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) and Record of Performance Qualifications documents that would be used to qualify personnel to stand the social media watch. During observations, I participated in these social media area familiarization meetings where the standard operating procedure was discussed and media relations team members went through the qualifications.

The Social Media Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) incorporated lessons "learned and workflow procedures" developed and was designed to ensure that USCG personnel who "monitor, moderate and engage on the Coast Guard's official social media sites in an official capacity are acting in a consistent, aligned and standardized manner" (n.d., p. 1). Part of my participation was to help edit this document in advance of these watch meetings and to offer suggestions for what had not been included. Suggested additions included how to handle a crisis or emergency versus just breaking news as was currently addressed in the draft. The qualifications document lists 27 specific knowledge areas related to USCG social media and 20 performance tasks that must be mastered in

order to qualify for the watch. Some of these knowledge areas demonstrate USCG's social media uses. Knowledge examples include:

- Explain how social media complements media relations
- Know the briefing matrix and thresholds for engagement and notifications outlines in the social media standard operating procedure
- Discuss how to make command or internal messages externally relevant
- Discuss using sound judgment to determine whether to engage, moderate or notify chain of command [with regard to] social media comments or concerns

Given the team's strategic integrations, the director of public affairs found that, in many ways, the social media team is ahead of other USCG communication efforts:

> What was occurring in social media before we came up with our own tools was the agenda was being set for us…And so we said—and with leadership support— this is the vacuum that needs to be filled. This is where we need to be communicating and then…the fringes will have their rightful place, but it won't be the only voice out there. So I think we're actually more strategic in social media than we are in other areas because of that ability to define the conversation and set the agenda. That said, we're still lacking some of the overarching strategic objectives, organizationally and communications-wise that would drive this.

The next, third era, then will include integrating and planning that strategic messaging and gaining full compliance from the field and national programs.

    Strategic storytellers. The Communication Framework that was developed by the strategic communication team for the governmental and public affairs directorate includes five themes (2011, p. 4):

- America's maritime first responder

- The Coast Guard protects American prosperity

- The Coast Guard is part of the fabric of our maritime communities

- The Coast Guard is a sound investment in homeland security

- Stay ready

Like all teams and divisions within the larger directorate, the social media team is considering its role in integrating those command messages in its communications. Social media tools are seen as helping "tell the Coast Guard story" (Record of Performance Qualifications, 2011, p. 9). In particular, a Facebook government page is viewed as an ideal tool for USCG sectors and units. As the Social Media Field Guide explains:

> This chosen site is the ideal tool for building a network at a unit level among both an internal and external audience including family members, employees, and the community. Social networks represent a "one-stop shop" enabling an administrator the ability to use text, images and video in one place to tell the Coast Guard story. (n.d., p. 2)

Telling the Coast Guard story means weaving in strategic messages to the social media content. As the chief of social media said:

> Balancing [the strategic messages with social media content] is going to be a challenge and it's one of the things that I'm going to spend a lot of time thinking about…and plugging in the team on, but it's actually taking that framework and saying, "Okay, how do we operationalize this in social media vice operationalizing in other areas?"

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The chief described the team's job: "Our job is to say, 'Here are the stories we have to tell or the messages…we've been asked to communicate and what is the best way to translate those in a way that's receivable but also purposeful for a specific audience?'" This storytelling balances the organization's transparent nature with its strategic needs and with legal or policy constraints. For example, during a January 10, 2012 discussion with the researcher, a social media team member called the USCG a "super transparent organization" and noted that even with that transparency, the social media team generally avoids retweeting or covering controversial or unflattering stories (e.g., negative reports about lack of equal opportunities for civilian employees, military trials about personnel actions). Sometimes this avoidance is due to team members trying not to "impede" the legal or judicial process. Even by retweeting a story about this, the concern was that it could be considered "official government correspondence" (January 10, 2012). In other cases, the stories themselves may not be controversial. The team member explained: "Anything that says we're good at diversity, I get nervous. They're not negative stories. They get negative responses." It is not that these stories are avoided; it is more that team members are conducting informal risk analyses of the topic, the story itself, and what the response will be.

While the USCG social media program has been approached strategically, the tools are not in themselves viewed as strategic, or even unique, but instead rest within a larger strategic framework. The director of public affairs described the strategic nature of tactical communication at the USCG:

We have an enduring communication need brought about by the external environment and brought about by our operations, and that is 80 percent of our time, probably

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more. But the size of our communication enterprise dictates that about 80 percent of our time is spent on things that are coming to us or that we're doing and we've just got to talk about. Nothing strategic about it, although, sometimes tactics can make an effective strategy in communication.

As noted there, constraints and challenges stand in the way of the full implementation desired in this phase of social media integration at the USCG. The social media chief noted:

> That's kind of the next stage in evolution for us is that we know what we want it to look like and, frankly, it's the same thing that any organization wants it to look like…But actually making it happen within the very specific and real constraints of military public affairs and USCG public affairs being a military agency working under a very political, very civilian umbrella agency, that's…the next step.

Decentralized team roles. Decentralized centralization can also describe the social media team's roles. They are decentralized so that each member plays a different function in carrying out the enterprise-wide program. Discussed in a previous chapter, the team currently includes:

Social media chief – strategy and management

Compliance manager – compliance, policy and protocol

Content manager – editorial planning and content manager

Content assistant – multimedia content (graphics, photos, videos, HTML)

Yet the current split of responsibilities also centralizes the strategy responsibility under the chief of social media, rather than distributed across the team. A social media team member explained the chief's role:

> While we're going out and doing tactics – and we're operators of these tools – he can really guide us as far as where we're going, using a strategic communications plan that was just developed by [strategic communication directorate]…using those so we're doing social media with a purpose not just broadcasting whatever we feel like.

The team will sometimes debate and discuss tactical issues such as content moderation and story ideas, as well as more strategic issues including protocol, policy and its enforcement. One social media team member described the strengths and challenges of this approach, in this case related to enforcing the field's compliance with policy and procedures:

> You'll see how we are a good team, but…how we also butt heads because what's important to one is not as important to the other. And so we sometimes get heated and we do not see eye-to-eye on things, but my perspective is [field communicators are] using the tools. They're up and running. They're getting it, and they're going to get better.

Their various perspectives also help translate the team's policies and messages to the field and to USCG leadership. In several interviews and during observations, participants mentioned that a lieutenant with prior enlisted experience brought a perspective from the field and from an operational view about how a message would translate with the rank and file. As a civilian, the chief was viewed as being better able to translate a message to

the external non-USCG public. In this way, a civilian-military mix may be a strength balancing authentic voices and content from the field with the ability to translate these stories to a non-Coast Guard public. Both perspectives were valued.

Despite the roles that are distributed among the team, the general strategy and strategic conversations are mostly centralized to the chief of social media and director of public affairs. In this way, management and leadership is centralized and decentralized. The strategic conversations are happening outside of the tactical team. This can create a disconnect between the strategic planning and tactical execution. As one team member said:

> Strategically, [the chief of social media] doesn't convey messages that - the concept of what the division should operate. I don't think he conveys it enough. I think it's spinning around in his head so quickly that he can't get it out.

The chief of social media acknowledged that the size of the team and its decentralized centralization approach can have the effect of creating "silos" where the compliance manager and content manager are "focused in on what they're doing" and working to "keep us on track with meeting deadlines for comments on DHS policy or other division directorate policy or their own policies" as well as keeping "content flowing out." While the chief said he tries to "translate down some of those strategic conversations," it can still be a challenge when, for example, the chief is out for two months at the Defense Information School, and team members are suddenly thrust into a strategic role with other program leaders (e.g., planning meetings). In those instances, it becomes clearer that the centralized silo of strategy can create a vacuum when the social media chief is away and there is not a consistent communication mechanism in place between the tactical team

and the director of public affairs. A public affairs director whose approach is to empower

divisions, rather than micro-manage them, is compounded by a tactical team that may not

be used to utilizing a hands-off director's open-door policy. This combination can create

a perception of disinterest in providing direction and guidance. As one social media team

member said, this hands-off approach is both a strength and challenge:

> Part of it is because we've had very few crises or errors or mistakes. We're across
>
> the hall. We put out content every day. The content is good…We don't create
>
> problems, so he doesn't have to deal with it. So, he doesn't have to manage at all.
>
> I'm like – I can't be doing things that right. I can't be that self-sustaining. I like
>
> leadership. I like guidance. I like orders. I like checking my boxes that somebody
>
> tells me I have to get done today. But I don't get that from him. So, it's frustrating
>
> sometimes, because I want – you say management – I took it as leadership. I don't
>
> get that leadership from him. Maybe there's other more important problems.
>
> Maybe I think social media's too important and I think he should be paying more
>
> attention to it when really it's not.

Despite these challenges, it was encouraging to the social media chief that he could

"disappear for two and a half months and literally see that we have a self-sustaining

operation." Over the course of observations and interviews, I did see several important

roles that the director of public affairs played in supporting the social media program.

One of the public affairs director's roles was to ensure the social media content is on

message with the larger strategic framework. As one social media team member said:

> He'll look at something that we wrote and he'll say, "WIIFATP"…or American
>
> taxpayer. So what's in it for them? Where is the value added? Why do they need

to know? Who cares? Not who cares, but why does the American taxpayer care

because it's not a corporate dollar. It's a taxpayer dollar.

Sometimes the director of public affairs determines a story is not on message. The

director gets to hear from the social media team at the start of most days during the

morning meeting in which all directorate teams report the highlights of what they will

work on that day. These meetings were designed for "situational awareness and

information sharing" (October 28, 2011). The director might have one to two questions in

response to the team's report and on a handful of occasions asked to be looped in on

something the team was working on. For example, during the October 20, 2011 morning

meeting, a social media team member noted the team would publish a Compass post

regarding a first-person account of a collision between the USCG Cutter Cuyahoga and a

freighter that happened more than 30 years ago. The public affairs director asked to "take

a quick look" at the post following the meeting (October 20, 2011). After asking team

members about what the public affairs director might be wanting to look for, a team

member explained that the director generally wants to glance at posts that could be

sensitive or controversial – not to squash them, but will take out what he does not think is

relevant to the story or could get them "in trouble" (October 20, 2011). For example, if

someone speculates the cause or reason for a collision, by posting in the Compass, it

becomes the official account of the incident. Later that afternoon in the meeting with the

director and the social media team member publishing the story, the director expressed

concern that he wanted to make sure "it's externally relevant" (October 20, 2011). After

reading the post, the director asked, "It's a nice story, but so what? I get that it's behind

the scenes. Insider access. Be on scene. But can we give it a 'so what'? Move the 'so

what' further ahead to top…The real 'so what' is talking more about these memorials" (October 20, 2011). He then asked the team member to pull a quote form the ALCOAST message traffic from the Commandant talking about "honoring our people" and "why we honor our profession, why we remember. It's more than an interesting story."

As noted above, it was rare that the director or social media chief killed a story, but one such occasion was observed when congressional budgeting was taking place (November 1, 2011). While USCG members are prohibited by law from lobbying Congress, the governmental and public affairs directorate "strives to create understanding and context with stakeholders and influencers including Congress on what the resources invested in the [USCG] yield for the public" (director of public affairs, personal communication, April 20, 2012). During congressional budgeting, the director nixed a story focused on the USCG living marine resources mission that told the story of an endangered seal the USCG was transporting via helicopter after rescuing it and ensuring it was nursed back to health (November 1, 2011). While a social media team member made the case that past stories on turtles and whales "went well" and were "very engaging," the director of public affairs was not dissuaded and the story did not run. The incident was an example of the balance noted earlier by the social media chief between what might work best in social media and integrating strategic messages as part of the larger communication framework for the USCG.

The director of public affairs also plays another critical role in managing and leading the social media effort from a tactical perspective. He occasionally steps in to help encourage field compliance and participation. For example, in a January 9, 2012

email reply to an email from the social media team's content manager detailing that week's proposed editorial calendar, he wrote:

A quick note to field PAOs...I have seen a range of interesting feature releases go out from the districts in the last couple months. Some we have been able to adapt for Compass. Few have been picked up by main stream [sic] media. Please encourage your PAs to email [the lieutenant] with some of those interesting stories for the blog. Feature releases focus on the same story telling context and color that blog posts do. There is no reason they cannot easily create a feature release and a blog at the same time. In addition to telling the CG story, your folks get a by line [sic] on the leading military service blog, which is also regularly replicated by leading niche websites like Maritime Professional and Military Times. We are also seeing more of our Compass blogs lead to main stream [sic] media queries and other cross over placements. Journalists, particularly those who are interested in more substantial stories, are increasingly using social media for ideas rather than press releases. Our national social media properties become another way to market our writing.

In other occasions, the director of public affairs might be the one to request content from the field in order to increase potential buy-in and responses. He did this in a November 10, 2011 email to field PAOs and PA community leaders that explained the Your Coast Guard in 2011 campaign.

While the current team setup may work better once the policy has been fully implemented, as it stands now, it puts a large burden on the content manager and the compliance manager. A social media team member expressed gratitude that the team had

grown from its original size of one to its current state, but believed that more personnel are needed to complete other functions (e.g., more research and evaluation of the team's efforts).

The centralized approach is not without its questioners even from an internal perspective. The media relations chief deferred to the social media team's vision and noted:

> They have a very specific view on that and how they want the units to engage in Twitter or on Facebook or have a blog…To me it's just another tool in the toolkit, so if everybody is using [an online news portal] to issue news releases, to me everybody ought to have their own Twitter account, everybody ought to have their own Facebook page. And if every unit had their own Facebook page, I don't see that as a problem. If everybody had their own blog, I wouldn't see that as a problem. But I think the idea was to not introduce so much noise into the environment and so if we consolidate some of that it does a better job of representing the service and maintaining a service presence. I get that. There are other constraints as well. The department certainly putting some brakes on us and getting us to reduce our footprint in the ".com" environment.

For now, though, the social media strategy is policy, and social media team members, across all their roles, are currently engaged in a push/pull with the field in terms of executing the decentralized strategy, complying with the policy, and providing the content, which are discussed in the next two themes. The overall decentralized centralized approach is built around the decentralized public affairs personnel providing content from the field.

Ground spring of content. The decentralized approach to USCG public affairs discussed previously in this dissertation is apparent within the decentralized, yet centralized, USCG social media strategy. The USCG official social media program is built on content bubbling up from the field. This could be described as a ground spring approach. A ground spring describes water that flows to the surface of the earth from an underground source. This analogy helps explain the USCG strategic approach described in the Right Tool, Right Level, Right Audience strategy white paper.

Spring as rich source. The field is recognized as the richest source for USCG social media content, particularly operational content that highlights "locally deployed" USCG personnel performing their many missions. The field is seen as having the most credible, authentic voice for sharing the Coast Guard story. During a phone call between a social media team member and a communicator from the field, the team member strongly encouraged the communicator to send content: "It's frustrating because we want to tell stories of enlisted personnel, because they're the ones doing the work…but we're just not hearing from the field" (December 13, 2011). "Doing the work" links back to the fact that the social media team is constantly seeking to emphasize the operational message, and operational content. Even the informal white board in the office that displays each week's proposed content and assigned team members puts asterisks next to the posts that will emphasize operations or "ops" (October 18, 2011). Because most operations are taking place outside of headquarters, the strategy is built around the flow of operational content up through the command levels, and the area, district and unit levels (i.e., field) are considered the ideal and richest source of USCG social media content, particularly the most engaging content (i.e., images and videos).

As the 2011 Spring Quarterly Report noted, the "Coast Guard Photos" album that features five new photos each week highlights "a broad spectrum of service missions" and has the "highest amount of engagement of any post on our page" (2011, p. 5). While on the official USCG homepage, the team is dependent on the field for supplying these missions-focused images that can then be highlighted at the national level through cascading content. The "Your Coast Guard 2011" campaign was designed to highlight the USCG's diverse work and national impact. The director of public affairs explained the campaign to public affairs officers and public affairs community leaders in a November 10, 2011 email:

> The campaign will consist of one 600-word blog post for each district/area in which you can highlight a particularly exceptional operation…or a collection of stories about the sustained support your Coast Guard men and women have provided in their region. We want to stay away from the traditional numbers and stats this year in review, and really tell a story of the exceptional Coast Guard units in your district. While Compass traditionally tells stories about the Coast Guard as a whole or specific units or individuals rather than internal organizational entities such as districts, in this campaign we actually want to promote those regional identities and the pride that Coast Guard men and women feel working in their unique part of America.

Cascade of content. To continue the analogy, then, the ground spring should flow into the stream and cascade up various locks from the lowest command level (e.g., unit stations, sectors, cutters), to the middle command levels (e.g., area and district), to the enterprise-wide highest command level (e.g., national and programs such as the

Commandant, public affairs directorate, acquisitions directorate). In addition to describing the actual content, this analogy also helps understand the cascade of content across platforms.

Cascading command levels. At the lowest command level, units were given the opportunity to have a Facebook page that would give them a direct link with the local communities and service members' families. Content, then, should focus on "unit level stories, images and video" that could then be used on district and national level social media sites and even media outlets (Right Tool, Right Level, Right Audience, 2010, p. 2).

The area and district level social media strategy calls on the middle command level to create content "related to regional operational initiatives and/or regional policy" (Right Tool, Right Level, Right Audience, 2010, p. 2). This level is able to maintain a district-level blog, Facebook and Twitter. This command level was also tasked with working with unit commanders and PAOs to solicit this content and to "shop that content to mainstream and social media sites" via their own approved social media sites (2010, p. 2). Districts were also tasked with helping their respective area and national teams repurpose or adapt unit content.

The national and program command level then were tasked with content focusing on "national level policy discussions, incidents of national significance, whole of government messaging, USCG history, and feature content from the district and unit level" (Right Tool, Right Level, Right Audience, 2010, p. 2). They are given the full suite of official USCG social media tools (e.g., Compass blog, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube channel and Flickr account). The rest of the levels' content was meant to feed into the Flickr and YouTube channels (and complement the official Coast Guard Visual Imagery

at http://cgvi.uscg.mil). This strategy and the policies that go with it were critical to DHS

signing off on the USCG social media program. As a social media team member

explained, its strict policy governing externally-facing social media is driven by DHS

guidance and the fact that the social media team had to "convince" DHS to let them use

social media down to the unit level to build community – rather than just having a

national voice and platform.

The Coast Guard Social Media FAQs document meant to help the field

understand and implement the policy described the reasoning behind the cascade of

content in answer to the question, "Why can't units have a Twitter, or other non-

Facebook account?" The answer reads:

> It isn't that units can't have a Twitter account, but it is not part of the USCG
>
> strategic organizational approach to using social media tools for public
>
> engagement. The strategy takes into consideration the limited resources at the unit
>
> level, search engine optimization, and building a collaborative online presence.
>
> The strategy encourages a flow of content from the easily managed unit Facebook
>
> page up to the PA-managed district collaborative blog and Twitter account.
>
> Having district-wide units collaborating on one blog and one Twitter account not
>
> only builds a larger following but also makes the unit-level content more
>
> accessible to that larger audience. (Social Media FAQs, n.d., p. 3)

The FAQ document also states that units who strongly believe that Twitter or another

account would better assist them in achieving their public affairs goals and has a public

affairs serving office that agrees with that belief can submit a waiver through the public

affairs directorate. The "What is the waiver process?" question notes that concurrent

clearance will also be needed from DHS public affairs (n.d., p. 7). Waiver requests must include several elements, including a statement of purpose, description of the site and proposed names, unique need and/or audience that explains why the content cannot be hosted on an existing site, proposed content and comment management plan, as well as any collaboration potential with other USCG sites or DHS component agencies (p. 7). During observations, the public affairs officer at the USCG Training Center at Cape May was going through the process of securing a waiver for its proposed social media efforts. The chief of social media and director of public affairs expect to approve a waiver based on the training center's unique needs and audience and submitted content and comment management plan (personal communication, April 12, 2012).

 Cascading platforms. The second level of cascading content involves the platforms themselves. At the national level, the Compass blog drives content. These stories are approached from a journalistic perspective. Just as the media relations team does, the social media team follows both the Associated Press and USCG style guides. Much of my participation was tactical, helping to edit and brainstorm content wording and titles and providing Associated Press guidance. The team is content-dependent, and most of this content starts as a Compass blog post that is fed directly to the USCG homepage and is translated into a Facebook update, usually with a link to the story and an image. The 2011 Spring Quarterly Report noted that "Coast Guard Compass, our primary resource for posts on Facebook, is our second most popular tool for public education and outreach" (p. 2).

 Facebook sits at the center of the strategy as the most engaging platform (e.g., Right Tool, Right Level, Right Audience, 2010; 2011 Spring Quarterly Report).

Therefore, Flickr, YouTube, CGVI, and other non-headquarters USCG social media content is meant to be mined and posted on the national-level USCG Facebook page and Twitter account, and even the Compass. Yet, the strategy is stymied by a lack of content flowing upward from the unit level to the area and district level and finally to the enterprise-wide platforms at the national and program levels.

Low-flow spring. As described in the previous theme, the program is still young and in transition toward fully implementing and executing the strategy. Keeping this in mind, it is still worth noting that the metaphorical ground spring is currently putting out a very low flow of water, and this low flow has consequences for the headquarters social media team.

This low volume of content may result from the push/pull with the field described earlier as well as with other headquarters programs that have resisted implementing their own approved social media tools in compliance with USCG policy and also been slow to provide content ideas and actual content (e.g., blog posts, pictures, videos) to USCG social media or USCG-related social media. This low-flow spring also makes for a dry stream of content. The problem was especially apparent early in the program's existence. A social media team member described the evolution from the early days.

> For about the first three months—well for the first year we did whatever we could get a hold of and usually run those stories the day they happen. That's hard, very stressful. But we could barely think a day ahead let alone a week ahead. Then we started working on every Friday putting out an editorial calendar. And then [the chief] started to highlight…the operational stuff… the stuff that is policy related…the stuff that the Commandant's office may be giving us, and…some

potential other things that may happen next week and we may end up writing

about it. So that started to take a little bit more of an advanced form but that's still

only a week out.

At this point in the program's maturity process, the proposed calendar is done two weeks

ahead and offers an estimate of proposed content that gets updated and then sent to the

larger public affairs community. While the team would like to plan months or a year in

advance, it has been difficult to do that with the emergent nature of operations. A team

member hoped that the Communication Framework and its strategic communication

priorities might make planning easier, though the team will always have to focus on

breaking news, because timeliness is so important in social media, "so we have to wait

for those things to happen to be able to use the messaging to write it."

This dependence on timely, breaking information also explains why planning

cannot make up for a low flow of content from the field. For example, an October 28,

2011 Compass post had been planned in advance about a USCG service member who

was one of the 125 citizens being naturalized in a major ceremony that morning at the

foot of the Statue of Liberty in honor of the statue's 125th anniversary. The day of the

event, the team anxiously waited for images from the event. When significant time had

passed after the event without anyone from the field posting the images to CGVI or

sending them to the team for the post, team members started to hunt down non-official

sites where they were being posted. A social media team member found some on a

personal Facebook page and said, "Social media shouldn't be where official photos are

being released." Finally, at 1:23 p.m., another lieutenant found pictures of the ceremony

posted on Twitter and was able to use photos from there. Throughout the day there was

discussion about the frustration with the field not acting with urgency on getting content on their own social media sites or pushing it directly to headquarters so that the team can be timely and relevant to the national conversation taking place (October 28, 2011).

On other occasions, content managers were disappointed by missed deadlines. For example, one social media team member expressed frustration when a field public affairs officer had a post on the calendar for three months and did not meet the deadline. As the team member said:

> They're telling me they can't meet [the] deadline. Nothing's changed. They have her bio. They have knowledge of Pearl Harbor attacks, of the war, so the story should already be written and just waiting for the imagery…I don't even know what to say. I even said I'd help write it if they sent bullets. (December 6, 2011)

With the lack of content, the social media team content managers were often in the position of trying to determine if they could even write a story. On January 3, 2012, a social media team member had to explain to a public affairs officer over the phone that a story could only be taken at the national level "if it's releasable" and since the team member was unfamiliar with the field communicator's area of responsibility and the sensitivities within it, the national team could not determine for them if the story should be written. As the team member reiterated, "We just repurpose information" (January 3, 2012).

Sometimes that means taking a story idea generated by the field or a national program office and trying to make it work for the Compass or another national USCG social media audience. For example, in a January 4, 2012 email, the social media chief

responded to a story idea that a media relations team member had forwarded to social media team members. The social media chief wrote to a social media team member:

> Seems like a good story, the trick is figuring out our angle…what are the benefits to the environment and how will the [Coast Guard] better protect the environment as a result. Any chance [the media relations team member] can write this for you? We probably don't want to task the program as we'll get a story on the [memorandum of understanding] signing and the actors vice the implications and benefits to taxpayers who care about protecting maritime ecosystems and marine life.

While military rank and command structure made it difficult for junior officers to push back on leadership about content, during observations, there were times where social media team members did gently and respectfully push back in some cases in terms of the timing of a post or adapted a request to better fit the Compass audience. After one such case, the social media chief sent an email to the director and deputy director of public affairs in which he highlighted a social media team member's "exceptional work"…"turning a tasking from the [vice commandant of the Coast Guard] into a great Compass product." In describing the email, the chief wrote that the email would help the researcher:

> (Further) appreciate the role the team plays as a counsel for [Coast Guard] leadership on how to make the stories they want to tell relevant to and accessible for our external audiences. [The team member] took a request for a 'grip and grin' photo-op release and turned it into an impressive year-end tribute to the USO for their efforts to support our deployed shipmates.

This low flow from the field may not be confined to the social media team. During the course of observations, a week-long government affairs and public affairs officers meeting or retreat took place that brought officers from the field together with headquarters government affairs and public affairs staff. While I did not have the opportunity to observe the retreat, I was provided a copy of the executive summary and agenda for the retreat. The theme was "Unified External Affairs Action" and included the following goals:

- Gain situational awareness of CG strategic issues (finance/budget, acquisitions, etc.);

- Understand/reiterate strategic guidance;

- Understand External Affairs processes (vertically/horizontally) by level and coordination across disciplines to promote effective, timely sharing of information and analysis;

- Understand web of communication, chain of command, and level of responsibility;

- Review communication/messaging processes, outreach, strategic planning, surge support and ways to improve processes throughout the [external affairs] enterprise and within specialty areas.

Despite the goal of aligning the larger field and headquarters regarding external strategic messaging, the social media team was not a focus of programming. A social media team member expressed to a media relations team member that the absence of social media in the program was evidence that public affairs leadership sees "social media as a tactical tool – not strategy" and that it was "disappointing" that leadership missed the opportunity

to demonstrate how social media are changing the media landscape. The media relations member disagreed: "You're being myopic about where social media fits in the plan. It's a tool." The social media team member said the conference missed an opportunity to stress to the field the strategic value of an aligned social media plan, and that the team could have had "30 minutes" during the three days to present. While they both agreed that the director of public affairs is a supporter of strategic uses of social media, the media relations team member stressed that the social media team members presenting would not have solved the problem: "You going there is not going to make a difference. Talking about it is not going to make an impression on them until the Captain talks about it." The media relations team member felt that the purpose of the conference was to get the field's "buy off on the idea that we need to move in one direction" and that right now the organization was somewhat "tactically and strategically misaligned, missing opportunities to communicate where we stand on things." After I entered the conversation and asked more questions about where social media fit – strategically or tactically, the media relations team member noted that social media could certainly be used strategically, but that the conference was more focused on getting back to the basics of the external affairs function and used the example of a professional baseball player in a hitting slump: "You have to go back to the fundamentals, go back to the basics" (November 8, 2011).

While the misalignment may have been larger than the social media team, and the volume of content was low, there were examples of field communicators who were both helpful and responsive in supplying local, operationally-focused content. The next day, on January 4, 2012, the same team member called a chief warrant officer about helping

write the story for a shipmate of the week under the officer's command. The story was meant to be a surprise. Normally, the team tries to start the process much earlier to make sure the standing Friday feature post gets written. However, this week had been particularly challenging to identify a shipmate of the week. It was already Wednesday, and the team member had only now settled on featuring the reservist petty officer who had organized a toy drive in the community. The team member was pleasantly surprised by the enthusiasm from the chief warrant officer who offered to get the quotes and images needed by the next day. The team member exclaimed, "That would be like a miracle. That's so good to hear!" (January 4, 2012)

But those instances were rare in the ongoing struggle for content. While observing one of the social media team members speak at a panel on military social media for a class at the Defense Information School, the three social media panelists from various military agencies all agreed that content cultivation from the field is one of the most challenging aspects of their jobs. As one panelist said, "Getting content from the field is the toughest job. We've put a lot of time into it. We task product. Then we get it and it doesn't meet editorial standards. Do we run it because we don't want to turn them off or run it and turn off our audience?" This balancing between nurturing the field's ground source of content while also trying to bring the field into compliance is a constant struggle and challenge for the team. As described by the social media chief, "There is reason to say how do we keep managing that process? How do we keep providing the tools, the policy, the training that allows people to continue their role as spokespeople for the service in the digital environment?" This effort to balance policy and compliance while trying to fully implement the strategic model is discussed next.

Coaxing compliance. Part of the implementation phases discussed earlier involved trying to coax the field into compliance and enforce the policy externally with non-USCG social media. The team clearly struggles with how aggressively and quickly to enforce compliance and recognizes the risks that come with both enforcing too quickly and aggressively or being too lax in doing so.

External compliance. From an external perspective, the team would like to go after "the impersonations and the sites that say they're Coast Guard, and they look and feel official, but they're not" (social media team member). But the same team member discussed the complexity of control:

> How far and what are we willing to do that could both help our credibility but then hurt our credibility because, sort of, enforcing that stuff—the way I look at it, anybody that's talking about the Coast Guard, good, bad or indifferent, is talking about the Coast Guard, great. And everybody is entitled to their opinion so I'm not here to say you can't talk about the Coast Guard…because I think everybody should be…Do we just ask them to put on the unofficial disclaimer that says that this is not an official site? Can you really make somebody do that? You can't. Can we use the legal authority of protection of words and symbols like the U.S. Coast Guard? Yeah, we can but lawyers don't really like to throw that in people's faces. So I don't know what we'll do there; I don't really know at all.

Trademark and copyright protections fall under the community relations division of the office of public affairs. During observations, the USCG community relations team looped in DHS counterparts and the community relations team issued its first cease and desist letter of a blog representing itself as official Coast Guard. The social media team member

quoted above was uncomfortable with the decision to issue the letter at that point in the process. In particular, the team member expressed concern that the letter was "very brief and not very informative" (November 8, 2011). She felt that the lawyers had been included too soon and that the social media or community relations team first needed to verify that the blog writer is not Coast Guard personnel. At the time I left the field, the blog had not been disestablished.

External compliance is also a challenge in terms of working with third-party sites to disestablish inactive USCG social media. As the social media compliance manager explained:

> There's maybe two Flickr sites, a Blogger site, a Word Press site and two Twitter sites that we have lost access to. They're official; we no longer have the passwords. There's old, outdated information, but I need to clean those up. So, obviously, these third-party sites are very protective of their content, and I don't know how yet I'm going to go about officially requesting them to disestablish those sites because we've tried everything. We've tried resetting passwords, we've tried contacting support, we've tried everything and now we're at a point where—I don't know. I don't know what to do with those.

Internal compliance. Internal compliance is more important to the success of the program itself and is a different challenge to overcome. It is a careful balance to maintain in order to fully implement the Right Tool, Right Level, Right Audience strategy. While the headquarters program developed branded district-level blogs, few of them are being populated or used in compliance with policy. As one of the team members described while pulling up an example one, "Many of them have too many links and bad

formatting, but they are totally not open to hearing from national headquarters," and the team has to be careful to "deal with tensions about taking turf (compliance) of content" (October 18, 2011). It is critical to recognize that the districts have many other responsibilities (October 18, 2011).

Additionally, the decentralized nature of USCG leadership and commands also influences the social media team's compliance-gaining efforts. When asked about consequences for violating policy or not fulfilling policy, the chief of social media explained that "consequences are commanders' responsibility" (personal communication, April 12, 2012). Therefore, field communicators answer to their own commanders. Given the structural and cultural realities, the social media team does not take an aggressive stance of pushing the field into compliance with the policy. Instead, the compliance manager had chosen to take a two-prong "pull" approach of (1) coaxing field communicators into compliance and (2) visually standardizing official social media channels and platforms so that non-compliant sites would look obviously unofficial.

During a October 13, 2011 conversation, a social media team member explained this approach as making personnel aware of compliance and regulations and seeking to make sure they register authorized sites and make them "look and feel [authorized and official] so it's clear" (October 13, 2011). For example the social media policy asks that when creating a USCG Facebook page, personnel click that they are the official representative and also that the profile picture should include the word "official" (October 13, 2011). The Social Media Field Guide described this conformity requirement to help units set up pages "in a manner consistent with Coast Guard branding and to meet policy requirements" (n.d., p. 2): "Your site name shall include 'U.S. Coast Guard' and

your unit name or district regional title (same as the district blog title). Avoid using unclear acronyms or shorthand except when necessary due to space limitations" (n.d., p. 3).

During observations and in interviews, the social media compliance manager was focused on closing the headquarters-field gap by developing e-learning training that would address "how to deal with public affairs aspects of social media like dealing with controls and dealing with moderating a page…and how to effectively use these tools" (social media team member). During a December 13, 2011 meeting between the social media compliance manager and a staff member from the USCG's e-learning support office to discuss potential online social media training for the field, the training expert explained that knowledge and skills are only one piece of the puzzle when understanding why a system or program is not working. The e-learning staffer said that training is often the most expensive and least effective option. When the social media team member expressed surprise at hearing this, the e-learning representative explained there were four components: skills and knowledge, motivation and selection, incentives, and environment (including policies and tools). As the representative said, "If I can put a gun to your head and you can do it, it's not skills and knowledge. It's motivation" (December 13, 2011).

In interviews and observations, evidence surfaced that the social media disconnect between the field and headquarters may have resulted from all four components. To date, the struggle for internal compliance had revolved around an emphasis on providing the training and resources to help the field get into compliance (skills and knowledge, environment), as well as counsel and encouragement (skills and knowledge, motivation and selection), to do so. There had not yet been an emphasis on incentives, and some

aspects of the environment (e.g., resource constraints, limited personnel, diverse

responsibilities, technology and access constraints) could not be changed. The social

media team member tasked with compliance had taken a deliberate approach of trying to

be a "yes" person rather than a "no" person and had relied on past enlisted experience to

earn the respect of the field.

Training and resources. Early emphasis was on setting up resources such as

frequently asked question guides, a field guide handbook, and a headquarters team that

could serve as a resource for the field. As discussed previously, there is a current gap in

the already limited formal training environment when it comes to social media. The petty

officer on the social media team explained the technical school (i.e., A school) is not

teaching social media, so the enlisted personnel do not have a social media "foundation"

when they go into the field. The team member thought this may have resulted in

personnel not being "comfortable using social media to its full potential." The frequently

asked questions document addressed lack of training resources (Social Media FAQs, n.d.,

p.17):

> Currently, there is no exportable training provided but some level of social media
>
> training is required [in accordance with] Chapter 11 of the Public Affairs Manual.
>
> While we know it is not always possible, we recommend that you encourage your
>
> commands to send collateral PAOs to DINFOS [Coast Guard public affairs
>
> course]. If that is not an option, your social media strategy should require all unit
>
> personnel receive an in-depth briefing from the District PA shop. This briefing
>
> should be your standard briefing for all Coast Guard spokespersons (e.g., -
>
> command discretion, release of information, SAPP, OPSEC, personal security,

awareness of CG PA Manual – particularly Chapter 11 – and other references –

Social Media Field Guide, etc.).

The next question in the FAQs document acknowledges that there is no formal social media training for USCG public affairs specialists and that DINFOS is "working social media into their curriculum and raising students' awareness and understanding of how to use these tools to officially communicate" (n.d., p. 17). Yet, as noted previously DINFOS can take years to work new material into its curriculum. During a December 19, 2011 conversation between the social media chief, who had just returned from DINFOS, and a social media team member, the curriculum gap was addressed:

Chief: "This is also what they're lacking up there at Fort Meade. The social media stuff was painful."

Team member: "We gave them all that to add in. We did that whole white paper proposal on that."

Chief: "They said it would take three years to get it into the curriculum."

In the meantime, DINFOS instructors are trying to bring speakers such as USCG social media team members to speak to students about social media as a topical discussion as I observed on November 29, 2011.

Access restrictions on USCG computer work stations means that even the headquarters teams have stand-alone work stations that sit next to their USCG work stations. They constantly go back and forth between the official work station that is on the USCG network and the stand alone work station that can access social networking sites. The Social Media Field Guide explains that field offices must decide if they can appropriately manage a Facebook account in accordance with the public affairs manual

chapter on social media before requesting a Facebook page. Due to access restrictions, units can use funds to purchase and use "stand-alone" computer terminals and Internet connections outside the USCG network so they can maintain greater access to the blocked Facebook site. Units are warned, however, to be careful of "operational security, property authority to release information and the capacity to adequately monitor the page and follow-on comments" (Social Media Field Guide, n.d., p. 2).

The updated field guide focused on responsible use of social media was being developed during observations. The compliance manager had whittled down and personalized to the USCG other services' 30 to 40 page handbooks into an eight-page USCG handbook that addresses how-to issues and checklists for managing official, unofficial, and personal uses of social media (social media team member). The handbook incorporates privacy protection, operational security, SAPP, information releases, and an imagery decision tree dealing with security concerns of posting images (e.g., Facebook pictures). When discussing the updated field guide with the social media team, the compliance manager said she was "trying to reinforce strongly everything we've learned. We'll see if it goes over" (December 20, 2011).

Part of training and resources meant educating the field on the new policy and letting them know the resources available to them to accomplish their intended goals. The social media chief provided an email chain that showed the difficulty of towing the line between pushing and pulling the field into compliance. There was one remaining cutter that had not yet discontinued its blog in compliance with the new public affairs policy. The chief had offered to help the servicing public affairs officer address the out-of-compliance cutter. After better understanding the context, the chief wrote in a April 28,

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2011 email to the servicing PAO: "You are correct in thinking there is less than zero chance that a blog will be approved via waiver…That being said, there are still great options to get their content out." The email went on to detail two specific ways the cutter could still be heard, including adding a news stream to the cutter's website and submitting content that had significant regional or national interest to relevant blogs at the district or headquarters level. As the social media chief explained in his April 28, 2011 email:

> We're not trying to control information or stifle creativity. We're trying to bring the Coast Guard into 2011 and adopt social media best practices. Having 200+ blogs read by 20 people each is not the best use of Coast Guard unit resources or national branding to the public at large and does nothing to help the Coast Guard push a cohesive set of command messages. On the other hand, having a dozen strategically coordinated blogs read by tens of thousands (or hundreds of thousands as is the case with the Compass) that is fed content from 200+ sources is a powerful toolkit to engage the American public in an ongoing dialogue about the service, our missions, our people and our history.

Motivation and counsel. The team, and the compliance manager in particular, has taken on the role of consultant and evangelist. For example, after the compliance manager finished a phone call with a field communicator in which she had been encouraging them to use social media effectively, she explained the team's role is to be "evangelists to get the public affairs specialists on social media" (October 18, 2011). These are "typical" phone calls. While they only get one a week now, the team used to get many more calls and were initially "hostile, fearful, clueless" and called the social

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media team because they were the most advanced in terms of online communication (October 18, 2011). As such, the social media compliance manager considers herself a "consultant for 42,000 people" (October 18, 2011).

The compliance manager tries hard not to play the role of "no lady" (November 29, 2011). Instead, the staffer tries to "help them, hold them, cuddle them" and appeal to their desire for efficiency by asking them, "Why should you start from scratch? You want collaboration" (November 29, 2011). To avoid being the "no" lady, the compliance manager said:

> I don't say, 'No." I say…"What can we do with that content? Hmm, it doesn't really fit our editorial policy for the Compass blog. It doesn't really fit what's appropriate for Facebook and what people want on Facebook. So I suggest you think about maybe doing it on this or doing it on that or doing this or doing that or changing the wording so your approach is more on this theme than that theme. And whatever you decide let me know and we'll see what we can do." But I try not to say, "No"…And then I also have to use the, "It's not about starting your own site. It's about collaborating with others and if you're looking at having control, control is not what social media is about. So if you're looking to show your boss that he can have his own site, go to your boss and tell him—even better for your boss, for your evaluation or for your support of a Coast Guard program is to collaborate."

The team member also points out to the field the added incentive of collaboration being a better talking point on an officer evaluation report. Other incentives and motivations include emailing the field and program personnel who help the team

complete a story and thanking them for their help or story tip. In addition to thanking the participants, the effort is also meant to promote the post "so it doesn't just sit there" (October 18, 2011).

In some cases, even when the team wishes it could say, "No," questionable content that does not violate policy is allowed to stand. While reviewing USCG's Twitter dashboard, I had noticed a personal use example that included a risqué photo of a USCG service member in lingerie and communicating about the USCG with a Twitter personality and his 200,000 followers (October 18, 2011). After pointing out the questionable personal use of social media, the compliance manager reviewed the Twitter channel and determined that it did not specifically violate any current policy. While the hope was to eventually engage service members like this and try to coax them into using social media more professionally and productively, that was a "long way off" (October 18, 2011). This approach has not always been the case. Throughout the program's development and implementation, the team had worked to incorporate lessons learned, including why an overly aggressive approach can backfire. One social media team member felt that early efforts to reign in bloggers about the USCG had meant a "a lot of bloggers were burned by headquarters." While the director of public affairs does not recall any bloggers who were told by headquarters to stop blogging about the Coast Guard, he was:

> aware of some USCG personnel blogging unofficially who were warned by their local commands about their activities. In some cases this was because the [activity] made the local commander uncomfortable and in others it was because

the bloggers were breaking policy on releasing non-public information. (personal communication, April 20, 2012)

Despite the discouraging disconnect that is hampering USCG full implementation of the social media strategy, there are glimmers of change. One of those glimmers is the new Cape May USCG Training Center PAO who is making social media a top priority and working closely with the headquarter social media team to develop its own strategy and compliance document (November 18, 2011).

External engagement/comment policy compliance. The team also takes a balanced approach to enforce engagement/comment policy on USCG social media platforms. Being a government agency means the team has a "high bar" for enforcing its Facebook page interaction. While the environment often "self-polices on what is and isn't appropriate," the team still has to moderate, and each team member has a different approach to enforcing the comment policy (social media team chief). The chief went on to explain:

> That's one of the areas in which it is my responsibility to make the call, and I'm not going to argue that my call is always the right call but my call is probably the safest call. And I am always going to try and balance the right to information, right to self expression but also with what is good for the service and appropriate for the audience.

The team has learned from past enforcement efforts. It is no longer standard policy to block any users from the Facebook page. One team member noted that they one time blocked an offensive user and it backfired because the negative conversation and comments are "still happening, just not on your site" (October 18, 2011). A media

relations team member noted that the "Facebook policy…is a little more liberal. We will watch our comments on the Compass a little more than Facebook as long as it's not a personal attack…It is negative, when it's critical, we absolutely have to let it stand." The USCG's many resource constraints as well as a disconnect with the field means the strategy is not yet fully able to be implemented on a daily basis and the team must constantly adapt.

Semper Paratus **to adapt.** The USCG motto *Semper Paratus* means "always ready," and this team is always ready to adapt. They adapt by balancing strategic initiative and flexibility with a planned, strategic approach to social media. Flexibility was built into how each field operation's social media would look. While some standardization has been implemented (e.g., district blogs that match Compass template), the social media chief described letting each district and area imbue their social media with their own personality:

> What we needed to do was demonstrate that this can be done. To set up a model that was not set up absent of consideration for the fields and give them the opportunity to test run it, give them the opportunity to have their own successes or make their own mistakes and feed those back to us. But the ideas, again, as a decentralized organization and when you talk about things like voice and buy-in and credibility, does success and successful deployment of social media for the Coast Guard mean that we've got the headquarters operation and every district looks the same? Personally, I mean, I hope not because I don't think it works.

The team may recognize the value of planning and need for more of it, but they also recognize that the emergent nature of USCG operations and the current dearth of

content flowing up means they often have to scramble to fill their content needs. This adjustment was addressed in interviews, and I also witnessed firsthand throughout my observation how adaptable this team was. Some of that came from an understanding of the emergent nature of their operations. A social media team member described how editorial planning has improved over the last six to eight months:

Captain has always said there's no reason we can't have an editorial calendar for the next year. There's no reason we can't foresee Hispanic Heritage Awareness month, sexual assault awareness month, Coast Guard's birthday. We know all that stuff is happening and this all needs to go on the calendar. And then we need to think about what themes we will have and what things we can post, put them on the calendar, reach out to historians, reach out to the people that we know are going to be contributing to that and get the skeleton of a post together and wait for imagery.

Lack of resources like budget, personnel and equipment mean the team is also adapting and innovating in order to effectively do their jobs. The very limited tools available are identified in the Coast Guard Social Media FAQs document. The document explains that blog managers can access Urchin 6 that is managed and run by Defense Media Activity through DOD. The software only works on ".mil" sites meaning it cannot be used on non-DOD-hosted blogs or other social media platforms (e.g., Flickr, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter). Additionally, as the document notes, "While this software is not the easiest to use, it is what we are provided" (Coast Guard Social Media FAQs, n.d., p. 13). In the vacuum of evaluation tools available to USCG social media

communicators, the team has created its own research and evaluation metrics. As the chief of social media described:

> So I think where it's harder to quantify, and a lot of that's probably resource constraints, because it's probably quantifiable, is the engagement side of it...And you'll see in [the quarterly research reports] we've literally created metrics...so we can look at those and tangibly we can say that we are maintaining or increasing our level of engagement but what we don't have is what's the opportunity cost of decisions we make…And we can demonstrate that literally every quarter...if our engagement metrics of percentages stay the same, but the population is growing, then we are increasing our engagement along with our population.

Even looking through the Flickr account and its comments, a social media team member noted that because the team is not allowed to give a third-party vendor access to the account because it would raise privacy concerns, the team must manually enter the numbers when doing statistical evaluation reports (January 13, 2012).

In addition to innovating in terms of research and evaluation, the team has also found creative solutions to meeting government policies and regulations. Because many of these regulations were not designed with social media in mind, the team must sometimes retrofit and innovate to comply with the policies. As the compliance manager said:

> And unfortunately that's how [DHS] looks at it…The records management schedule proposed is that nothing shall be original [on a third-party social media site] but everything shall be a reproduction or a copy of something posted elsewhere...I have workarounds because the blog, thankfully, is a .mil. So I don't

even consider it a blog…Now if it wasn't a .mil because a .mil is an official

domain so I don't have to worry about that because that is all original and pretty

much everything else that we put on Facebook is just the blog's or it is

regurgitation or it is a reproduction of something else because it's an image that

was already released officially or it was a history post or it was something or it's

not ours, so in which case I don't care. It's not my content so I don't have to—

I'm not responsible for it. We're just reposting somebody else's stuff and giving

them proper credit. Nothing is really original on Twitter.

Whether formally or informally, the team works to constantly adapt to meet the

requirements facing the team while also increasing social media engagement. In a

November 1, 2011 email between three members of the social media team, including the

chief, a social media team member reviewed a recently released e-Government

Satisfaction Index report and highlighted best practices and tips from the report that the

team was and was not yet following. In addition to the list, the team member included

ideas for how they could incorporate the other best practices (e.g., use favorites on

Twitter to highlight useful content or users). This informal evaluation focused on

improving audience satisfaction with government online and social media

communication within the policy restrictions the government faces. One of the policies

the social media team must adapt to is the DHS requirement that externally-facing social

media be for an external audience only. Adapting to this guidance has posed challenges

for a program focused on engaging its audiences. This challenge is discussed next.

Engaging a faceless audience. The social media team is very focused on engaging its social media audience, and yet there is very little emphasis on determining and segmenting those who make up this audience.

An engaging strategy. The team itself is focused on fostering "real-time engagement with somebody as an American taxpayer" and to "make social media effective and create real-time engagement" (social media team member). The 2011 Spring Quarterly Report noted that Facebook is the team's most "successful engagement tool" and measured this by those who "like" the page or are active users on it (p. 2). Active users were described as those who "engaged with, viewed or consumed content" from the USCG Facebook page (2011, p. 4). The 2011 Spring Quarterly Report noted that "the most engaging posts have proven to be photos and video posted, followed by status update and link posts" and that the biggest challenging will be maintaining a "high level of engagement while continuing to build the size and scope of our audience" (p. 2).

The Effective Engagement on Facebook document acts as a field resource for understanding and implementing an engaging Facebook strategy. The comment policy welcomes comments and says they will be moderated. USCG reserves the discretion to determine which comments meet or violate the comment policy (e.g., contain personal attacks, refer to Coast Guard or other employees by name, contain vulgar language or offensive terms targeting ethnic or racist groups). The document also gives examples of comments that were hidden because they violated this policy. For example, one such comment read: "The ship seized was probably put to sail by the Obama administration to continue to blind the American people. All to 'justify' Obama's gun control bullshit" (n.d., p. 7).

In addition to moderating comments for their adherence to the policy, the engagement guide also encourages the team to take a "conversational, engaging, friendly" tone when replying to comments and to "always sign your response" (p. 5). In another example of "good Facebook engagement," the document gives examples of social media team members replying to comments posted on the Facebook page. For example, one such response comment started out, "A few of you had questions related to this case and we wanted to respond to a few of those questions. The U.S. Coast Guard conducted this boarding pursuant to its law enforcement authority, codified in 14 USC 89…" (Effective Engagement on Facebook, n.d., p. 7). The response was five paragraphs long and concluded with a link to read more information about USCG's law enforcement authority.

Social media strategies and policies are built around fostering "engagement and authenticity" (social media team member, October, 18, 2011). Though the team recognizes that it does not yet "capitalize enough on the engagement component of social media's potential" and that even the evaluation reports do not yet present the "engagement component" (social media team member). As the team member explained, the reports could include:

> This is what our people think. This is how we went back with them. This is what we came up with. I would love for us to come up with a case study where we put something out about life jackets. And somebody was so moved by that that they went out to their community and taught life jacket safety and told us. That's making change. That's making our jobs easier as an organization, and it's saving

lives which is – so creating those ambassadors. And that goes for all of our missions.

As the team works to integrate the watch with the media relations team, engagement expectations differ and are difficult to build into a standard operating procedure document. During a January 10, 2012 meeting to discuss early successes and challenges with the integrated watch, the social media chief noted that the social media program differs from media relations in that it is "24/7 with an emphasis on the 7" and that "there's a slight difference around the care and feeding of the audience." The chief of media relations then asked how much "engagement and timely interaction needs to happen." The media relations chief also noted that the social media watch would take a different mindset than the media relations watch. "In [media relations], it's fire and forget or fire and wait or fire and adjust fire. Social media seems different." The social media chief agreed and noted that a standard operating procedure document is inherently flawed in that it can lead to "box checking" where people do the minimum, while the model is "to increase frequency of posting" and "the reality is we have the content we can post." Another media relations team member noted that while the standard operating procedure was thorough and accurate, it assumes a "certain amount of comfort and understanding" and that to some PAOs it would not be comfortable. It would not be a "box-checking exercise." The chief of social media noted that when moderating, engagement can be as simple as saying, "Awesome question. We'll look into it and get back to you."

While the above interaction took place at a formal meeting to discuss social media engagement as part of the watch, more anecdotal and informal engagement discussions occur often among the team in conversations and emails. As one social media team

member said, "We're always discussing why did a lot more people hit on this story than this story? Or why did we get 50 comments on this post but only two on this post?" The team's engagement on Twitter is hamstrung by the fact that the most recent six tweets sent from @USCG automatically feed onto the official USCG homepage. Because the nature of engaging, conversational Twitter is to retweet, or respond to tweets, and these actions often take place out of context or order, the team has limited its engagement on Twitter to reduce confusion on the USCG homepage. The social media chief noted that a social media team member had pointed out a year ago that the team was "not using Twitter the way everybody else" was (January 13, 2012). As the chief said:

> Sometimes that's ok. We don't use a lot of tools the way others do. But here, it was a problem. If those five tweets on the homepage are all completely out of context, it forced us to use the tools one-way. (January 13, 2012)

The chief of social media has indicated that the team is seeking to disconnect the automatic feed, to lift these constraints on more natural engagement on Twitter (personal communication, April 1, 2012). In addition to constraints listed here and previously to USCG social media engagement, perhaps the one that loomed largest was the faceless audience.

Limited engagement. As it stands now, the target audience is largely constructed generically as four large publics. As noted earlier, these constructions include: the American taxpayer (Joe Q. Public), influencers, Joe Coastie, and the news media. The media are not viewed as an engaging public on social media; they are seen as consumers of the social media content as a potential source of news. Across all the publics and social media, there is very little effort made to segment out the actual audience and who is

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engaging to what end. The social media chief expressed that research and evaluation constraints meant that he could not quantify who was in the larger population being reached or targeted. This was a problem, he thought, because "the most naïve statement anybody can ever make is my audience is the public." In many ways, the USCG audiences are four generic publics.

Resource constraints like limited time, personnel, and the current burden on the national team to source, write, and edit content also means that once content is posted on Facebook or Twitter, the team only steps in to engage again if directly asked a question or if the community does not first answer a question. So, while the team may "host" engagement and may write in a conversational, engaging voice, they are not often able to actual carry on an engaging conversation with their audiences.

While there is an intellectual understanding among every team member that the line between internal and external is increasingly blurry, there is also recognition that currently policy limits their engagement with an internal audience and that resource constraints would also make it too difficult to take on the internal audience at this point. As the director of public affairs said:

> We've developed the external communications aspect of social media. What we really haven't developed is the internal. And I know, and we know that those are linked so closely that it's almost false to make a distinction, but we had to do that just for capacity and capability in getting started.

For example, the Coast Guard Auxiliary might be considered an internal audience, but it is a "unique component of the U.S. Coast Guard and falls under different legal and procedural rules and regulations" (Coast Guard Social Media FAQs, n.d., p. 8). The FAQ

document states that while it is not the social media team's "intent to require them to comply with our policies and procedures, it will be beneficial for them to align their social media presence with the U.S. Coast Guard's" (p. 8). The document said that the team was working with the Auxiliary Program to "identify impacts this policy has on Auxiliary communications and achieve the best mix of alignment and autonomy between Active and Auxiliary sites" (Coast Guard Social Media FAQs, n.d., p. 8).

When the compliance manager called the Cape May PAO to discuss the social media strategy plan the PAO had developed that included internal and media audiences, the compliance manager communicated that the director of public affairs and social media chief had raised "eyebrows about the various publics you're targeting" and that she had "stressed to them – these are just potential audiences" (January 4, 2012). She continued, "You'll want him to know that you're talking to external publics. He might ask you to amend this plan that they're potential but not target. He just wants to know that that's in your head" (January 4, 2012). While the focus may be on externally-facing content and telling the Coast Guard story, those who are most interested in those stories seem to be members of the USCG family – either personnel, retirees, reservists, auxiliarists, and spouses and families. As a media relations team member said:

> It seems very internally focused if you look at our Facebook affairs. You look at what we call the Compass. It's very family of Coast Guard if you will. It could be a lot more impactful and effective if we really gave it forethought as to how we could engage…people that influence, the media, the politicians and whomever, voters.

Results of the fourth research question illustrate that the public sector contexts influence USCG social media communication and its strategic and tactical planning, execution, and management. These intersections resulted in themes including decentralized centralization; ground spring of content; coaxing compliance; *Semper Paratus* to adapt; and engaging a faceless audience. In the following chapter, I discuss the findings and explore ways in which results contribute to theory and practice. Additionally, I discuss the study's limitations and propose several directions for future research.

Chapter 6: Discussion

This chapter discusses the dissertation's findings, putting them in context with the literature on risk and crisis communication, government communication, and social media and the complexity and relational theoretical lens reviewed previously. The discussion is organized first by findings and implications related to risk communication and then by those focused on social media communication planning and execution. In discussing how the results complement, challenge, or extend past research, the chapter also integrates theoretical contributions and suggestions for best practices and future research. Finally, the dissertation's strengths and limitations are addressed.

Risk Communication Defined and in Practice

  Defining risk communication. Risk communication at the USCG is viewed more as a type of crisis communication surrounding an incident or event. This view aligns with scholars who see risk communication as having a reciprocal relationship with crisis communication (e.g., Coombs, 2010b) and those who combine risk and crisis communication within a larger crisis management framework (e.g., Coombs, 2010b; Seeger et al., 2001; Zaremba, 2010). USCG communicators did not distinguish between risk communication as a risk-centered projection of future harm and crisis communication centered on a specific incident that has taken place and is producing harm (Seeger et al., 2003). USCG communicators within the public affairs and strategic communication functions did not see themselves as risk communicators – reserving that function and term for an operational view of incident response and the public affairs role surrounding it.

Risk communication mindset. Outside of operational risk communication related to an incident or event, USCG risk communication was rooted in the organization's DNA and integrated into its day-to-day public affairs mindset, including social media communication. As the director of public affairs said, "We have a risk communications mindset in all things." When USCG risk communication was made visible through interviews and discussions during observation, participants identified public sector influences on their risk communication and their perceptions of social media's role in risk communication.

As discussed below, public sector influences may also have contributed to the organization's risk communication mindset. For example, scholars have pointed out that risk communication has always been closely linked to government (and industry) communication with stakeholders about environmental, public health, and safety risks (e.g., Nathan et al., 1992; Palenchar & Heath, 2006; Seeger & Reynolds, 2008). In this case USCG's public service missions required the agency to be a risk communicator. As the Coast Guard's 2011 Commandant's Direction states, "We protect those on the sea…We protect the nation from threats delivered by the sea…We protect the sea itself" (2011d, p. 6). Subsequently, this inherent link between public affairs and risk communication influenced what USCG communicators viewed as risk communication. As such, risk communication was integrated into USCG communicators' mindset as a lens for their ongoing communication rather than as the communication itself. Operational security and SAPP issues acted as a risk analysis lens through which all communication was viewed.

The ongoing view may align better with process views of risk communication. For example, Palenchar (2005, para. 1) broadly defined risk communication as "a community infrastructure, transactional communication process among individuals and organizations regarding the character, cause, degree, significance, uncertainty, control and overall perception of risk." This definition was also rooted in the current view that successful risk management depends on building consensus, meaningful stakeholder engagement and interaction, and an acceptance of reasonable government risk regulations (Leiss, 1996). Adopting a view of risk communication as process-based and integrated into the larger public affairs function that depends on consensus-building, engagement and interaction could have applied benefits for organizations that use social media to communicate about risks as part of their public affairs responsibilities. Such organizations may be more willing to and effective at weaving engaging and relational risk communication into their organizational social media program.

Complexity theory can help explain risk communication as a nonlinear, dynamic, holistic process within a complex adaptive system that integrates public affairs, risk communication, and social media functions. A boating safety campaign is not first about risks – but linked to a boating safety mission and the normal cycle of doing their jobs. As weather gets warmer, more boating accidents happen. The natural cycle fuels the need to do a social media post on boating safety before a holiday weekend – rather than to do risk communication about boating safety. This blended function can leverage day-to-day social media communication that weaves risk messages into the larger landscape of social media communication, benefiting from the ongoing collaborations and relationships or interactions taking place daily on the organization's social media sites.

Such a view also fits within a complexity-based view of today's organizational operating environments – and particularly USCG's high-risk operating environment. The USCG has long recognized its need for an expanded public affairs function (e.g., all Coast Guardsmen as spokespersons), a decentralized operational environment, and the need for integrated relationships with the communities in which the agency operates. But these recognitions also foster more complexity, multivocality, and uncertainty for USCG public affairs and social media. Future research could look further at the phenomenon of a risk mindset or risk consciousness identified in this study and how it influences communicators' and publics' perceptions of risk communication in a public affairs context and specifically when carried out via social media. Decentralization emerged as a key theme across research questions in this study. While it is described throughout the chapter in context with each corresponding research question, findings and implications related to decentralization are synthesized for convenience in Table 3.

Table 3

Synthesis of Dissertation Findings Related to Decentralization

Finding	Description	Implication
Recognized need for decentralization	Recognized need for expanded public affairs function, decentralized operational environment, need for integrated relationships with communities	Fosters complexity, multivocality, uncertainty for public affairs, social media
Decentralized incident-related risk communication	Decentralized public affairs function means incident-related risk communication takes place in field	Not considered headquarters public affairs responsibility
Decentralized, open transparent communication environment	Communicators pride selves on maintaining decentralized, open, transparent communication environment	See social media as an extension of this openness and transparency
Concurrent decentralization	Decentralized public affairs history, culture exists within centralized	Decentralized centralization can be challenge when

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and centralization	military command structure, aligns with HRO trait of concurrent decentralization and centralization	communicating via social media about risk as part of risk communication mindset
Decentralization as history of shared control	Given distributed function within military hierarchy, USCG public affairs has always shared some control with field	These organizations may be more willing to take risks inherent to social media when spokesperson function already shared
Decentralized operations, personnel	Diverse missions, decentralized operations mean some internal messages are not "internal" to all USCG members	Internal, external distinctions may be more characteristic of content than audience categories
Decentralized centralization as social media strategy	USCG social media evolved from decentralized experimentation to centralized program that draws from decentralized content, encourages social media use within public affairs function at all levels	"Decentralized-centralized paradox"
Decentralized bottom-up storytelling	USCG social media storytelling viewed as decentralized function where national level passes on field and external stories	Team also story listeners, attending to stories, engaging, incorporating social media co-creators (e.g., commenters)
Distributed, decentralized PR continuum	USCG bound by policies, regulations, laws and resource constraints that influence where it falls on continuum of decentralized/ distributed PR	Resource constraints on time, personnel, and training may help account for push/pull with field/non-headquarters communicators
Decentralized team roles	Each team member assigned different role, centralized strategic responsibilities under chief	May make sense given team's resource constraints and content and compliance-heavy focus but can create strategic vacuum
Management approach to decentralized centralization	USCG strategy is deliberate and planned as well as emerging (e.g., Steyn, 2007), allowing for ongoing learning and embracing complex influences on operational environment (e.g., transient, decentralized, transparent, multi-mission)	May fit with structured flexibility management theory - organizations operate in complex, uncertain environments, need generic principles, encourage local-specific variables (Brinkerhoff & Ingle, 1989)

Practicing social-mediated risk communication. The USCG's decentralized

public affairs function means incident-related risk communication generally takes place

in the field at the appropriate command level (e.g., unit, district, area). Incidents significant enough to result in a JIC might be supplemented with PIAT personnel and would generally require deployments or details to the scene in order for headquarters public affairs personnel to be tasked with risk communication in an incident response context. Given the USCG context and structure, then, it may make sense that headquarters communicators would not consider most incident-related risk communication a headquarters public affairs responsibility. In addition to context and structure, organizational history and culture were also found to influence perceptions and uses of risk communication.

This study found support for complexity theory's focus on organizational history and culture (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a). Using a complexity framework to study crisis managers' perspectives of crises involving issues of culture, ethnicity, and/or race, Liu and Pompper (in press) found the influence of history was clearly evident and expanded beyond the situational crisis communication theory's emphasis on organizational history of crisis. The authors urged communication managers facing such issues or crises to "take a longer, wider view beyond past crises to any past events that may affect audiences' perceptions and attitudes about the organization (Liu & Pompper, in press, p. 14). An expanded view of history as it relates to crisis communication should also take into account complexity theory's focus on permeable boundaries between an organization and its operational context by taking into account an industry or societal context (Liu & Pompper, in press).

Expanding beyond history's role in crisis communication, this dissertation identified the role of USCG and agency public affairs culture and history as an influence

on USCG risk communication and social media communication. Communicators pride themselves on maintaining the USCG's decentralized, open, transparent communication environment and see social media as an extension of this openness and transparency. Open and transparent organizational social media communication can increase stakeholder trust, a key organization-public relationship measurement (e.g., Hallahan, 2008; Kelleher, 2009). Trust and credibility are also critical to stakeholders' meaning-making regarding risk messages (Seeger & Reynolds, 2008; Sellnow et al., 2009). To develop trust, organizations must be viewed as believable, competent, reliable, and consistent (Hallahan, 2008). Having a history of transparency and openness could align with an organization's need to be viewed as reliable and consistent. Trust-building transparent, open communication is also important given the declining trust in government communication (e.g., Fairbanks et al., 2007; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). As a media relations team member noted, "In public affairs our policy of doctrine is really simple. If we can talk about it, we do. Period."

The emphasis on culture throughout the study, including military culture, Coast Guard culture, a decentralized culture, and the public affairs culture and its reciprocal influence on risk communication and crisis communication supports a communicative perspective on organization culture. This view sees organizational communication of all kinds, including everyday conversations and the way an organization is structured, as communicating and constituting culture (Eisenberg & Riley, 2001). Eisenberg and Riley (2001) called on scholars to adapt theoretical frameworks to include complexity ones in order to "investigate the myriad of cultural forces made manifest at an organizational nexus" (p. 317). Based on this study's complexity lens, the USCG social media

program's context, including its culture, provides constraints (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a). In addition to constraints, recognizing a culture of transparency may also provide opportunities for expectations of risk communication and social media communication. The rules, policies, and procedures that develop at the microlevel among individual team members are patterned by macrolevel expectations (e.g., organizational culture) (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a). At the same time, these interactions and adaptations at the microlevel are reciprocally accruing over time to make up the culture (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a). Future research should test the relationship between an organization's culture and history and its predisposition toward open, participatory risk communication. Such research may be most effective when conducted using ethnographic or other methods that can look at risk and crisis communication from the insiders' perspectives on an organization's culture and history rather than from an external assessment of an organization's crisis response communication behavior. A risk communication mindset and culture may accrue from USCG's risk missions and make ongoing risk communication less distinguishable from other communication within this communication mindset. The bounded view of risk communication creates both opportunities and limitations for communicators, including within a relational risk communication context.

  Engaging in relational risk communication. USCG communicators recognized the normative potential for dialogic, real-time, engaging relational risk communication via social media, but did not believe they were able to use social media in a relational risk communication capacity. This view may have sprung from the USCG's understanding of risk communication as incident-based and largely outside of the public affairs (and social media team function). A lack of perceived operational and incident-based risk

communication role for social media was compounded by various public sector factors (e.g., constrained resources, diverse audiences, government regulations and policies) that contributed to highly limited relational risk communication via social media. These factors may have contributed to, for example, the USCG not viewing or using social media's potential to break down the barrier between expert and lay people's risk languages in order to enhance the exchange between institutional and lay public spheres (e.g., Ding, 2009; Ding & Zhang, 2010).

Incident-based, one-way risk communication. Participants mostly acknowledged risk communication's public information role of sharing important risk information with publics. In this way risk communication was described as getting updated information about risks to those affected (social media team member). When social media are used in an incident-related risk communication context, then, they are mostly used in a push perspective where USCG communicators push risk-related messages out to publics.

Unrealized dialogic potential. Consistent with past research that has identified the public sector as slow to adopt Internet-based, digital communication tools (e.g., Thomas & Streib, 2003; West, 2004, 2011), USCG communicators could imagine ways social media could be utilized in an operational capacity and in more dialogic ways but did not perceive social media was currently being used that way. While many of the constraints limiting their adoption of these tools fit with past research such as organizational culture and resource and policy constraints, future interview and survey research could test some of the added influences raised in this study such as dual parent organizations and complexity of missions and responsibilities. Legal constraints also did surface in this study (Liu & Horsley, 2007) and were compounded by intersecting, overlapping USCG,

military, DHS, and federal government policies, guidance, and regulations. As West (2011) noted, private sector organizations have been quicker than public sector ones to restructure and make policy changes that ease the use of new technologies. Scholars could use content analyses or ethnographic studies to explore whether public and private sector organizations are likely to use their social media to engage in relational risk communication during a crisis or are also highly limited in their one-way use of the tools during crises.

Ongoing risk communication. At the same time that communicators viewed risk communication as incident-based, their risk mindset and lens through which to view communication became an advantage in that social media provided channels and tools for ongoing, external, strategic organizational public affairs. Social media were viewed as a "public affairs communication tool" (social media team member) and an "ongoing risk tool" (strategic communication team member). In this way, ongoing risk communication rather than incident-based risk communication was tied more to communicating risks or threats related to risk missions such as boating safety risks and environmental risks.

Beyond direct risks to publics, social media also provided a mechanism to communicate about USCG operational or budgetary risks and sensitive issues. The nature of statutory risk missions and responsibilities meant that risk communication was part of the social media team mindset. While not recognized explicitly as "risk communication," organizations with risk-related missions or responsibilities may inherently use social media in their risk communication and even see particular opportunities for it. For example, USCG communicators can address risk-based issues in more creative and conversational ways than non-social media communicators can. A social media team

member believed the team could use events like Talk Like a Pirate Day to raise awareness of piracy today. The team member thought the social media team could do "lots of different things that the Coast Guard as an organization shouldn't be doing at a media relations…or strategic level." For example, the social media team could use humor and informal language that communicators would not use in press releases or in more formal communication settings. This distinction was evident during an October 20, 2011 watch stander meeting when the social media team was familiarizing the media relations team with the social media procedures and tools. The social media team was encouraging the media relations team to use playful language, questions, and a conversational informal tone in their sample tweets and Facebook posts they were practicing. Much of my own participation was helping the team brainstorm Compass blog post titles and Facebook status updates. However, the team distinguished its own voice and tone as still needing to be appropriate for a government, military branch – meaning there were limits to their playfulness, sarcasm, and informal tone. For example, the team spelled out words versus using common slang and shorthand such as "ur" instead of "your."

The USCG's limited engagement is consistent with past research on government social-mediated risk communication (e.g., Ding & Zang, 2010). However, a broader view of social media's role as also including channels for ongoing, strategic communication through which to communicate about risks and threats reveals attempts at relational risk communication that sought to break down barriers between USCG as experts and lay publics surrounding some risk communication topics like boating safety. One practical recommendation from this study would be to increase engaging campaigns that ask lay publics to share their own risk messages such as the Wear It safe boating week campaign

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last spring where USCG asked fans to submit photos on Facebook of them wearing life vests. The campaign also urged fans to change their profile icon to one created by the social media team that depicted a life jacket and featured the words "I wear mine." The icon was used to allow Facebook fans to demonstrate to their own Facebook friends that they boat responsibly. In the kick off to the campaign, the USCG social media team posted a status update asking Facebook followers to share their best piece of boating safety advice.

Ongoing, external, strategic organizational public affairs as pre-crisis communication. As previously stated, incident-based risk communication is mostly viewed by USCG communicators within a comprehensive crisis communication framework in which communicators do not see USCG as prepared or equipped to integrate social media in an operational or response mode. However, given the USCG's risk missions and its high-risk stakes for USCG personnel like rescue swimmers, aviators, and law enforcement personnel, USCG and other similar organizations may have the opportunity to utilize social media's relational risk communication potential in a pre-crisis mode. A pre-crisis mode would be consistent with communicators' view of social media's role as a channel for ongoing, external, strategic organizational public affairs. Such an approach is consistent with crisis researchers who have noted risk communication's pre-crisis role of building positive stakeholder relationships that could help resolve future crises (e.g., Heath, 1997; Seeger et al., 2001). Chaos and complexity theories also view crisis communication holistically beyond a crisis management or response mode (Sellnow et al., 2009). Within a holistic view, social media could help organizations constantly seek to identify issues, rumors, risks, patterns, and relationships

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that could help prevent crises (Sellnow et al., 2009). Research could also explore whether organizations with risk-related or crisis-related missions or responsibilities, like the USCG, that integrate risk communication in an everyday mindset and public affairs content may be better able to use social media in an ongoing risk communication role.

When risk communication was viewed as an ongoing public affairs function, USCG had the advantage of visually-rich content. Just as the 2011 Spring Quarterly Report noted, the most engaging social media content used photos and videos. USCG communicators see a particular advantage in that their photo and video content is visually-rich and dramatic. As a social media team member stated, "The average person knows maybe three things about the Coast Guard and number one is always search and rescue, and that's a great story. It's got drama. It's high visual impact." In addition to having more potential for engaging, dramatic content, these pictures can implicitly share risk messages. Another social media team communicator described a hypothetical picture of rescued distressed mariners that might be included in a USCG blog post and noted: "Even if they were all wearing life jackets, they were saved because they wore life jackets. A lot of what we do no matter what is risk communication."

Using visually-rich, engaging content may also be an opportunity for organizations with resource constraints. Organizations could use social media to post photos or videos with a caption rather than the more resource-intensive blog post writing. Utilizing this advantage, though, depends on having access to visually-rich content. Organizations like the USCG with high-risk missions that produce photos of confiscated cocaine and weapons, rescues, and even animals like drug-sniffing dogs may have an advantage assuming they can curate this content from the source (i.e., field). The USCG's

2011 video of the year campaign that was conducted in December 2011 and January 2012 made use of this visual advantage and resulted in 40,000 views on the USCG YouTube channel during the campaign. During observations, social media team members did not express surprise that the top three videos all featured animals. In fact, the winning video that received 295 votes featured USCG members partnering with Moody Garden's Aquarium and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to release 10 turtles. The second-place video that received 245 votes showed a canine helicopter familiarity training. Finally, the third-place video that garnered 241 votes filmed a USCG rescue of a sailboat passenger and his dog.

From a theoretical and practical perspective, future studies could use experiments, focus groups, and interviews to research how audiences respond to social media messages that include visual risk information versus, and in addition to, text-based information. While the majority of crisis research focuses on organizations' crisis responses using text-based public relations responses such as statements, speeches, tweets, and Facebook posts, this study's findings indicate it may be worth questioning the extent that current crisis response research and best practices apply to visual responses.

Social-mediated risk communication in organizations with risk-related missions or responsibilities. Past research on high reliability organizations (HROs), those that carry out missions with a high degree of reliability while operating in a high-risk and high-uncertainty environment, could be useful in understanding and further testing this dissertation's findings regarding public sector influences on USCG risk communication, USCG communicators' perceptions of social media's role in risk communication, and their use of risk communication. Particular organizational influences

found in this study that could be useful to test in future research in order to better understand the applicability of HRO research to risk communication via social media could include: dual parent organizations; complexity of missions and roles; history and culture; constrained resources; diverse audiences; and government policies/regulations.

HROs have mostly been studied in an organizational communication context, and a 2010 public relations study looked at HROs in a crisis communication context from the perspective of an emergency management agency (Horsley, 2010). As such, a risk communication framework and a social-mediated risk communication context may be a fruitful area for extending the theoretical and practical understanding of the role of risk communication via social media in a high-risk organizational operating environment like the USCG's.

For example the USCG's decentralized public affairs history and culture within a centralized military command structure aligns with the HRO trait of concurrent decentralization and centralization (Horsley, 2010). This study's findings extend this trait to look specifically at the public affairs function of an organization. As a social media team member said, "One of the things the Coast Guard prides itself in is that everyone is a spokesperson." Future research could look at the centralized and decentralized history and culture of the public affairs function in particular to help understand the challenges facing organizations like the USCG when communicating via social media about risk as part of a risk communication mindset and mission. USCG participants described the challenges posed by the military rank structure when a high-ranking leader's view and stance to communication about risk conflicted with a social media communicator's effort to address risks openly and transparently.

In addition to the command structure and leadership, organizations with single or multiple parent organizations may also find themselves in complicated waters when it comes to risk communication. While risk communicators have been encouraged to use honest, open, transparent, candid, compassionate communication (Sellnow et al., 2009), such openness can be particularly challenging for government organizations in high-risk contexts that need to consider significant safety or security issues (Palenchar & Heath, 2006). When there are multiple parent organization(s) that include high sensitivity to security issues, as in the case of USCG communicators who have both the military sensitivity of DOD and the security sensitivity of DHS, these parent organizations may also influence the complexity of missions and responsibilities and the regulations and policies that govern them – two other sets of influences on risk communication found in this study. As such, some of these influences may have reciprocal and compounded influences that could be tested in future research. These potential compounded influences may contribute to the risk or security consciousness of USCG communicators who, for example, used SAPP (i.e., Security, Accuracy, Propriety, and Policy) as a lens through which to evaluate content, particularly when communicating about risk and their ability to communicate transparently and candidly.

USCG communicators emphasized that operational security (i.e., OPSEC) is especially important to consider in communicating about risks. Conversely, OPSEC issues also create risks for personal, unofficial and official social media. Inappropriate personal social media use could result in what a media relations team member described as a "strategic corporal" who inadvertently undermines organizational missions and operations. In other cases, operational security may limit how much detail social media

communicators can include in a post about a drug bust in international waters for fear of retribution on personnel.

The various traits identified in HRO research may also help explain some of the challenges for organizations like the USCG when they use social media to communicate, including about risks. For example, Table 4 compares HRO traits found in Roberts' (1990) study of aircraft carrier crews to challenges found in this study.

Table 4

Comparison of HRO Traits and USCG Social Media Challenges

Construct	Roberts (1990) HRO study of aircraft carriers	USCG social media challenges (including risk communication)
Interdependence of operational functions	Tight coupling (interdependence) between operational functions	Resource constraints may increase tight coupling among operational functions like public affairs and operational missions
Internal stakeholder empowerment	Empowerment at all ranks	Balance strategic initiative with military hierarchy; distributed spokesperson model within decentralization/ centralization; resource, policy constraints may limit empowerment
Risk/security awareness	Implicit understanding of safety concerns on flight deck	Implicit focus on OPSEC, privacy, risk leading to risk communication mindset; view of social media as risky communication
Tasks	Redundancy of tasks	Resource constraints and limited view of social media's role in risk communication may make redundancy of risk communication tasks difficult
Understanding of goals and values	Common understanding of goals	Risk communication mindset may limit view of social media's strategic value and uses; constraints may limit ability to realize relational potential

The concept of high reliability organizations could also help explain why organizations like the USCG may see social media communication as risky and yet may still take the risk of using organizational social media. As scholars have noted, social media communication can fuel rumors that generate crises (e.g., Heath & Millar, 2007), and crises can be initiated or intensified by social media (e.g., Jin & Liu, 2010; Liu, Jin, Briones, & Kuch, forthcoming). Given the distributed function within a military command and control hierarchy, USCG public affairs has always shared some control with field personnel. Future research could explore whether organizations with concurrent decentralization and centralization are more willing to take on the risks inherent to organizational social media in which the spokesperson function is already shared. Similarly, future ethnographic, interview, and survey studies could test whether and how organizations like the USCG that have high-risk missions and complex operating environments with high uncertainty may be more likely to take on risks associated with organizational social media communication while instituting policies and procedures that seek to limit such risks, including a centralized enterprise-wide social media team and strategy. Participants in this study also sought to limit risks through formal policies and procedures, including the public affairs manual handbook and through more informal methods including performing casual risk assessments via conversation or email of social media content like a shipmate of the week blog post.

Because USCG communicators bring with them a risk communication mindset and see social media's current role as one linked to ongoing, strategic public affairs, many of the findings related to planning and executing strategic social media are also relevant to USCG risk communication. Similarly, the dissertation's USCG risk

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communication findings may also influence and be influenced by the social media team's planning and execution. Therefore, the next section addresses organizational social media including ongoing social media communication about risks.

Organizational Social Media in the Public Sector

      Public sector contexts' social media influences. Researchers have identified distinctions between communication in the U.S. public sector and private sector (e.g., Avery & Lariscy, 2010; Horsley, Liu, & Levenshus, 2010; K. Lee, 2009). This study found support for perceived public sector influences, but participants viewed public sector influences as more complex than residing within a monolithic public sector or even existing within the federal level of government. This study added the complexity of various public sector contexts in which perceived social media influences emerged, overlapped and intersected. These contexts included: USCG (agency); military (DOD); DHS; federal government; and, U.S. public sector. The government communication decision wheel (GCDW) that offers a framework for understanding how communication in the U.S. public sector is distinct from communication in the corporate sector identified many of the influences found in this study, including budget constraints, legal frameworks, and politics. Table 5 demonstrates how the perceived public sector influences on USCG social media communication align with and extend attributes identified in the GCDW and other government communication research (e.g., Avery & Lariscy, 2010; Connolly-Ahern et al., 2010; Horsley et al., 2010; M. Lee, 2008; Sanders, 2011; Tracy, 2007).

Table 5

USCG Social Media Communication Influences Compared With Prior Research Findings

Construct	Attributes found in public sector affecting communication[a]	Perceived public sector influences on USCG social media communication
Audiences	Greater focus on external audiences over internal audiences; diverse government audiences; somewhat static or fixed	Social media, public affairs focus on external audiences; diverse, faceless audiences within four general constructs
Budget	Limited budgets	Resource constraints including budget, personnel, time, training
Complexity	Complexity of audiences, goals, resources	Complexity of dual parent agencies, missions, responsibilities, audiences, goals
Influence of politics	Politics; political environment influences communication – more for those working for elected officials	Federal political election cycle has limited effect; DHS viewed as more political than military culture
Legal frameworks	Strong influence of legal frameworks	Federal legal frameworks; military and DHS policies/regulations/ guidance; operational security focus
Management support for communication	Limited management support for communication	History, leadership play role in support for social media communication
Management team membership	Limited management team membership for communicators	Limited leadership team membership; dictated by military hierarchy; membership viewed as less important than access/support of leadership
Media scrutiny	Heightened news media scrutiny both opportunity and challenge	Media viewed as gatekeeper audience, rather than primary audience; Larger view of social media community scrutiny
Organizational and public affairs culture and structure	Not addressed in general government communication research	Agency and public affairs culture and structure - transparency, transience, decentralization; military command structure, operational focus
Professional development opportunities	Limited professional development opportunities	Limitations and lack of training particular to social media and USCG-focused public affairs
Public nature	Publicness (public service, public good, public sphere)	Federal public service role; social media consistent with transparent public affairs communication
Speed of change	Not addressed in general government communication research	Slow speed of government change challenging to high speed of technology/social media change

Structure of government communication	Federalism; multi-layered nature of government communication	Overlapping, intersecting influences within various public sector contexts
Valuing government communication	Devaluing of government communication as propaganda or spin	Devaluing among field of social media communication; public/taxpayer concerns about government spending, government PR

[a]Attributes drawn from Avery & Lariscy (2010), Connolly-Ahern et al. (2010); Horsley et al. (2010); M. Lee (2008); Sanders (2011); Tracy (2007)

Expanding the conceptualization of public sector influences. This study found support for expanding the conceptualization of many of these attributes.

Management and leadership buy-in for social media communication. Getting buy-in from USCG leaders was viewed as critical to the social media program's existence and success. Such buy-in may fall under the attributes of management support for communication and management team membership. In past research, government communicators reported limited management support for communication (e.g., Horsley, Liu, & Levenshus, 2010; Liu & Levenshus, 2010). Federal communicators perceived a greater lack of management support than did their peers at other levels of government (Horsley et al., 2010). The dissertation expanded the management support concept to include the history and leadership of an organization and public affairs as influences on organizational social media. The USCG's history and various legacy agencies (e.g., Revenue Cutter Service, U.S. Lifesaving Service) played a significant role in USCG social media policy, content and intersected with other factors that influence USCG social media such as complexity of missions and roles, role of public affairs, and limited resources.

In the same way, having the buy-in and support of USCG leaders is credited for the social media program's existence and success. Prior research had identified limited

leadership opportunities for government communicators (Liu & Levenshus, 2010) and particularly at the federal level (Horsley et al., 2010). USCG social media communicators believe having a supportive director of public affairs gave the team an indirect seat at the management table and access to leadership. Additionally, leadership opportunities may have been constrained by the team's split roles where the strategic responsibilities were left to the chief of social media. Such an arrangement can create silos and vacuums when a manager is absent. The chief reported trying to "translate down some of those strategic conversations," and his team acknowledged that these messages did not always get translated down to them. When members of the tactical team were thrust into strategic roles with other program managers during planning meetings, they may not have had the credibility of other management team members.

Multi-layered nature of public sector organizations. Outside of the program's existence, its planning and execution is influenced by the USCG's multi-layered nature. Closely linked with the idea of federalism and its influence (Liu, Horsley, & Levenshus, 2010), the multi-layered nature of government lined up with this dissertation's finding that USCG public sector influences existed within overlapping, intersecting public sector contexts that started at the agency, moved out toward a military organization under DOD, immediately answered to a civilian security agency, all of which existed within the larger federal government and U.S. public sector. The multi-layered nature of government communication at the USCG also results from the complexity of multiple parents, missions and responsibilities, audiences and goals.

Resource constraints. Outside of just budget constraints, resource constraints may encompass limited personnel, time, and access to training. Stephens and Malone (2009)

encouraged organizations to commit resources to support dialogic tools like social media that would allow for frequent and regular updates to organizational social media. While the USCG team has worked to streamline social media efforts to be sustainable and within the team's limits, resource constraints surfaced frequently throughout the study and intersected with other USCG influences. For example, resource constraints may overlap with the attribute of limited professional development opportunities that could include access to public affairs training. Previous research has identified limited professional development opportunities including lack of access to training and education among government communicators (e.g., Horsley et al., 2010; Liu & Levenshus, 2010). In a survey, federal communicators reported fewer professional development opportunities than did respondents at the county and city levels (Horsley et al., 2010). Limited training and education can limit how effectively communicators can fulfill their responsibilities. Lack of accessible, relevant social media training was a challenge for USCG communicators given the wait for some public affairs courses at DINFOS, the small size of the professional public affairs community in the USCG, and the slow speed of updating curriculum to address social media.

Public service role(s). Resource constraints posed a particular challenge when communicating with diverse audiences about USCG's various missions and responsibilities. USCG communicators were aware of their larger public service role as a federal government entity. The social media chief explained that a "public service role" meant that social media feedback should be used to determine how to "be a better public servant" and give members of the public what they need "to be safe." The USCG's multiple missions and responsibilities made it a military and maritime law enforcement

agency. This complex set of missions contributed to a multi-layered complexity and its subsequent audiences, "half a dozen audiences" alone for the port security mission (social media chief). Social media audience diversity influenced social media communication, including risk communication, since messages were interpreted differently based on audience members' perspectives.

Audience of blurred faces. The USCG social media approach of balancing audiences and their needs without segmenting or focusing closely on who made up these audience constructions aligns with a pragmatic complexity communication model that embraces strategic ambiguity (Corman et al., 2008; Goodall, Jr. et al., 2008). The model is based on the premise that audiences and media interpret messages in a dynamic, uncertain environment. It deemphasizes control and discrete channels, audiences, and messages and instead embraces complexity and uses varied rather than repeated messages (Goodall, Jr. et al., 2008). Such a model may help explain how USCG social media communicators work to tell the Coast Guard story in a way that resonates with external audiences like the American taxpayer and congressional staff members and also resonates with internal audiences. Within an atmosphere that devalues government communication, USCG social media communicators worked to integrate strategic messages that would help demonstrate the USCG's value to the American taxpayer and to those who allocated tax dollars including congressional appropriators and their staffs. The need to communicate value may have contributed to the social media team's operational focus of its content discussed later. As a social media team member stated, DHS does not allow the USCG to use third-party external tools like Facebook, Twitter and the blog "to convey internal messaging." The internal/external line was drawn by DHS, and while

USCG communicators did see this line as firm, the social media policy may have needed to reflect DHS's in order to get approval to continue with the program and decentralized strategy. A complexity approach complicates the understanding of internal and external audiences and messages.

As the chief of social media explained, even some internal messages are not "internal" to all USCG members since diverse missions and decentralized operations can make a story about boating safety in Alaska unfamiliar and external for a USCG operator tasked with ensuring boating safety on the Great Lakes. In that case, internal and external distinctions may be more characteristic of content than the actual categories (e.g., personnel as internal). The model may already fit with the USCG's military command structure that oversees internal communication. The strategic communication chief described the chain of command messaging where admirals pass on messages to captains who then pass on messages to their personnel as one of "high message penetration" but "low message control." A pragmatic complexity model that relinquishes some control may fit with the structure that already deemphasizes control for the sake of message penetration. Given the USCG's risk communication mindset, recognizing these blurred boundaries and the importance of including internal audiences may have implications for USCG social media communication about risks or crises.

M. Lee (2008) stressed that governments' diverse audiences, coupled by government public relations' emphasis on external audiences and external affairs, over internal audiences and internal communication systems, can challenge effective external public relations programs. Avery and Lariscy (2010) noted that public sector agencies' crisis publics are more fixed or static than they might be for private sector agencies' and

often include the funders (i.e., taxpayers) and recipients (e.g., at-risk mariners). However, these static audiences can have consequences on relational engagement with social media audiences, including in a risk communication context. By focusing USCG social media messages on external audiences, they may inadvertently devalue the internal audience who are largely the ones participating in the conversation and keeping the conversation going and may make their audience-centered and message-centered risk communication miss the mark with the audience they do have. For example, the approach can limit USCG communicators' ability to address the important role cognitive involvement plays in audience processing of risk communication (Heath et al., 2009). Internal audiences may have the greatest sense of personal involvement and message salience and could act as shared risk communicators in a collaborative social media communication environment (e.g. USCG Facebook page), but current USCG policy and DHS guidance that dictates using social media for external audiences may not take advantage of an internal social media audience as risk-sharers and risk communication partners (Leiss, 1996).

This finding supports research that has emphasized the importance of audience perceptions in co-constructing and accepting or rejecting risk messages (e.g., Palenchar & Heath, 2002, 2006; Williams & Olaniran, 1998). Williams and Olaniran (1998) said that risk communicators could be viewed as untrustworthy or callous if their messages, albeit accurate, violate publics' communication norms or expectations. This was the case when USCG social media communicators addressed risks that their own personnel perceive differently than did external non-USCG audience members (e.g., vessel knock-down, aviation risk).

Social media scrutiny. While increased news media scrutiny has been identified in previous research as an attribute of the public sector (e.g., Liu & Horsley, 2007), news media scrutiny was not raised as a significant influence in this study. In fact, social media were viewed as a way to speak directly with target publics, rather than through the media. As a media relations team member noted, social media's "biggest value" is that the public is "not hearing it on the six o'clock news from a stand up spokesperson" and is instead "directly engaging us." This view is consistent with past research that has identified the Internet's ability to allow organizations to communicate directly with audiences without a media gatekeeper (White & Raman, 1999). Social media have also been identified as providing a direct source of information for information in a risk or crisis (Procopio & Procopio, 2007). As one social media team member described, "[Social media's] where everyone gets their information…What role it plays? It plays *the* role." Social media were not yet viewed as channels the USCG was using to communicate with publics in an incident response or operational mode. However, given the risk communication mindset and integrated content, this study identified organizational social media communication's role as a direct risk communication source. As such, the study builds on past research's focus on organizational use of blogs and social media to communicate directly with stakeholders about crises (e.g., Stephens & Malone, 2009, 2010; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007) to also include social media's uses as an ongoing risk communication channel.

News media were viewed by communicators as a gatekeeper audience and there were concerns that social media content could attract media attention or be used in media stories, though there was limited evidence provided or observed of this happening beyond military-focused online news sources like Military.com, the same organization that

awarded the team its blogging award the previous year. An exception was the video of the year social media campaign garnering some traditional media attention. However, the media relations team had cross-promoted the campaign in a traditional media release. Media scrutiny itself might be expanded to include more than traditional news media. Governments may experience higher risk and crisis management scrutiny from the public and media (Horsley, 2010). For example, social media scrutiny by social media activists focused on issues like sexual assault in the military influenced the USCG social media team's ability to engage in real-time engagement around that subject given the team's limited subject matter expertise and ability to respond appropriately to the scrutiny of posts about such sensitive topics.

   Adding cultural and structural public sector influences. Other influences identified in this study that have not appeared in previous government communication research but have surfaced in government new media research include slow speed of government change (West, 2011) and organizational culture and structure (West, 2004).

   Slow speed of change. Participants in this study noted the slow nature of government change in the U.S. federal government as a challenge to USCG social media. This delayed change was viewed as resulting in outdated policies and limited adoption of technology. As one participant explained, "It takes two, three years for something to get changed policy-wise. It takes two, three days for something in social media to change." West's (2011) comprehensive report on public sector technology innovation found government still lagged behind the private sector in overall innovation and that private sector organizations had been quicker than public sector ones to commit a greater

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proportion of overall budget to information technology and to more quickly restructure

and make policy changes that would ease the use of new technology.

Government's slow speed of change may make legal frameworks, and related

regulations and policies, particularly challenging in a social media context. Social media

communication in this study were influenced by regulations, policies, and guidance at

various levels, including USCG public affairs policies, DHS guidance on social media,

DOD OPSEC policies and regulations, and federal government privacy and records

management laws. The slow speed of change meant that social media team members had

to adapt and innovate to move forward with social media while retrofitting their program,

procedures and policies to meet outdated federal policies and laws such as those

governing records management and privacy laws.

Public affairs culture and structure. West (2004) also identified organizational

structure and culture among the challenges governments face when working to

incorporate a more interactive communication stance with citizens. This dissertation

found that, in addition to the larger USCG culture, the public affairs function's culture

and structure influenced the organization's social media communication. Specifically,

cultural and structural traits of transparency and transience were identified as were a

decentralized (community-based) operational and public affairs structure, a military

command structure, and an operational focus.

In addition to the influence of decentralization, future research could test how

transparent, transient cultures influence an organization's social media communication.

Participants in this study saw a natural fit for social media at the USCG because it had

always been "extremely unfiltered" and "not afraid to talk about what we do" (social

media chief). Transparency was seen as intersecting with the decentralized public affairs function where junior personnel were empowered to use on-scene initiative and speak about their work. Transparency has been described as risky within a public relations context because it can leave organizations more vulnerable to public judgments (Duhé, 2007). Transparency and openness have also been linked with authenticity and government attempts to use social media to show citizens the inner workings of public institutions without changing their actual nature (Gilpin et al., 2010). However, Fairbanks et al. (2007) found that government communicators highly valued transparency and needed to integrate it into an entire government public relations program, rather than just its social media efforts (Sweetser, 20110). In this study, transparency was viewed as part of the organization's larger nature, as well as the USCG's public affairs program.

Future research could look at how a culture of transparency may influence an organization's social media communication. Fairbanks et al. (2007) found several organizational factors that influence government transparent communication. Of those factors, this study found support for several factors that influenced transparent social media communication: agency communication structure (decentralized), managers' influence on communication (leadership support), politics (somewhat distanced from military public affairs), and agency mission (multiple risk-related missions) as well as resource factors like staff, time and money. Given the USCG's commitment to authentic, transparent communication despite resource constraints, social media communication may be a resource-effective way government agencies can increase their communication transparency if they have in place the structure, leadership support, limited political influences, and missions that lend themselves to open, transparent risk communication.

Additionally, the locally-based nature of USCG personnel who live in the communities they serve also elevated the USCG's need for relationships and collaboration at the community level. As a social media team member emphasized, the USCG is the only military service that "works with citizens on an hourly, minute-by-minute basis" and this daily community interaction gives the social media team a "huge role to play in communicating that importance." The USCG talking point, "locally based, nationally deployed, and globally connected" could also apply to national and multinational nonprofit and for-profit organizations with local branches or community dependence. Future research could test whether decentralized organizations are more likely to engage in social media communication or more likely to recognize the value of using social media to build relationships with members of the communities they serve.

Within a military, yet decentralized, culture, the social media team works to link stories and content to operations and ensure an operational focus. This can be challenging given the emergent nature of this organization's operations. Only so much can be planned in advance. As such, the social media team worked to balance editorial planning with the need to stay open to emergent operational content. A social media team member described the emergent nature of the team's work as part of the military culture. Future research could test the influence of organizations' emergent natures and how they balance planning with the immediate nature of ongoing operations. For example, while K. Lee (2009) identified the GCDW's potential use in a crisis communication context, this study has identified ways it could be expanded and tested in its application with a risk communication and social media communication context. For example, the GCDW could be expanded dimensionally to recognize various other public sector contexts in which

influences may arise and overlap. Additionally, the theory may need to break down communication decision-making to include types of communication such as social media communication and/or risk communication.

Planning and executing social media. The influences discussed above contributed to USCG social media communication planning and execution. Five themes in particular described USCG planning and execution of social media communication strategies and tactics. Themes included decentralized centralization; ground spring of content; coaxing compliance; *Semper Paratus* to adapt; and engaging a faceless audience.

Performing the paradox. USCG communicators have worked to evolve USCG social media communication from its early days of decentralized experimentation to the current program and strategy that centralizes the enterprise-wide program while drawing from decentralized content and encouraging authorized social media use within the decentralized USCG public affairs function at all levels of the organization. As such, the once rudder-less program has evolved into decentralized centralization with an enterprise-wide strategy and approach that the chief of social media called the "decentralized-centralized paradox." The social media team exists at the center of performing this paradox every day in order to successfully and effectively implement the USCG social media program as it was designed. As the results indicated, the program itself emerged from the decentralized-centralized paradox.

The team is proud of USCG's "early adopter" status (Right Tool, Right Level, Right Audience, 2010, p. 1) and is also proud of how the program has moved toward a more organized, strategic approach that balances control and responsibility between headquarters and the field. This approach was considered more effective for telling the

Coast Guard story. As the Social Media Field Guide described, "Social networks represent a 'one-stop shop' enabling an administrator the ability to use text, images and video in one place to tell the Coast Guard story." (n.d., p. 2). In addition to telling stories on official USCG social media sites, the Compass blog also feeds directly to the USCG website homepage. These blog stories then are the first ones told on the USCG official website.

Strategic storytelling. The focus on strategic storytelling supports the limited research in risk and crisis communication on organizational storytelling (Heath, 2004) and the power of crisis narratives (Yang, Kang, & Johnson, 2010). As Heath (2004) described: "Through narratives, people structure their experiences and actions. Narratives give meaning to the world. Through stories, the world and people's actions reflect a logic that explains what happens, why it happens, who makes it happen, when it happens, and how people should respond to these events" (p. 171). USCG public affairs and social media communicators work to tell the truth. Heath urged organizations to "tell a truthful story" (2004, p. 175).

When using a narrative storytelling approach in a risk or crisis context, Heath warned: "Don't assume that you can control these narratives or promote only one narrative" and said organizations "must co-create narratives with other narrators" and urged them to "recognize and adapt to archetypal narratives that are emerging in the interpretation of this crisis and the attribution of its causes and the responsible parties' motives" (Heath, 2004, p. 185). Social media platforms like the organizational blog or Facebook page may provide the opportunity to host various storytellers, both internal and external, in order to co-create narratives. At the USCG, social media storytelling is

viewed as a decentralized function where the national level passes on stories of operators at the local, district and regional levels as well as external stories that involve the agency or its missions. In this way, the national social media team must also be story listeners, seeking first to attend to stories and also to engage and incorporate co-creators who may comment on a post or ask questions about a post on the Facebook page.

The strategic storyteller perspective may complement complexity theory's explanation of the value of multivocality and interdependence of individual actors in a complex adaptive system and rhetorical scholars' urging to include competing voices in both the study and practice of risk and crisis communication (e.g., Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; Heath, 2004; Waymer & Heath, 2007). Within a risk and crisis communication context, embracing multivocality can help an organization collaborate with a variety of credible sources to help build trust with stakeholders (e.g., Covello, 2003; Palenchar & Heath, 2006; Sellnow et al., 2009). Multivocality also fits with recent social and relational risk communication perspectives that emphasize multiple audiences and interpretations (Palenchar, 2010). The USCG's complexity of dual parent organizations, diverse audiences, and missions and goals may have contributed to what former Admiral Allen referred to as USCG's bilingual nature (Kitfield, 2006; Morris et al., 2007), influencing the service's willingness to embrace multivocality.

Future ethnographic studies of other organizational social media teams should further explore the concepts of multivocality, co-narrators, and distributed public relations models to better understand the range between organizations seeking to control a story by using one voice or spokesperson and organizations that allow all voices and spokespersons to communicate on behalf of or in the absence of the organization in an

online setting. USCG communicators moved away from the early days of social media communication where there were hundreds of blogs and Facebook pages and no centralized strategy or program to the decentralized centralization approach it has today. An analogy for the USCG model of multivocality would be appointed soloists backed by a strong, harmonious choir of internal and external members. While the larger music festival may feature competing stages and renditions of the same song, the USCG seeks to include many voices in harmony with the organization's own perspective.

Storytelling can be made more powerful by adding images. As noted early, USCG social media communicators have access to visually-rich content including photos and videos that are dramatic and have high impact. While the organization is focused on providing strategic storytelling on its Compass blog, a resource-intensive storytelling task that puts a heavy content burden on the headquarters social media team, the team may want to consider relying more on images and captions rather than a text-heavy social media journalism approach for the blog until the field begins to provide more content.

The narrative approach with its multiple co-narrators may also improve the team's ability to engage in ongoing relational risk communication by viewing and executing risk communication as a dialogue rather than a monologue (Williams & Olaniran, 1998). The current USCG approach is built on a bottom-up, ground spring of content with the richest, most authentic, operation-focused content and storytelling voice coming from the field. Using Gilpin et al.'s (2010) conceptualization of perceived authenticity as made up of authority, identity, engagement, and transparency, field communicators would have the authority to speak about the missions they are performing, would come with their own identities as part of the larger USCG, would be the most engaged in the external

communities in which the USCG operates, and would carry the larger USCG's transparency culture and public affairs stance. As a social media team member said, the national team wants to "tell stories of enlisted personnel, because they're the ones doing the work."

However, this rich source of content that was designed to cascade up to the national level has not been realized due to a low flow of content coming up from the field. This low volume of content may result from a push/pull with the field and other headquarters programs that have resisted implementing their own approved social media tools and providing ideas and content to the headquarters social media team. The devaluing of social media communication within the operational pressures of performing daily missions may also explain why field communicators have not prioritized social media communication. The low flow of content and compliance that has hindered the full implementation of the enterprise-wide strategy may mean the headquarters team needs to branch out to other headquarters public affairs divisions for help supplying content. Low field participation unhinges the decentralized centralization approach by exposing the limits of centralization. For example, a social media team member had to explain to a field public affairs officer that a story could only be taken at the national level "if it's releasable" and due to the headquarters team member's unfamiliarity with the field communicator's area of responsibility and related sensitivities, the national team could not determine for them if the story should be written. What is a co-narrator to do when an otherwise occupied co-narrator is the one who knows the story? One such opportunity may include working more closely with the community relations divisions in the public affairs directorate and within the field. While the headquarters social media team started

each day with a morning meeting and heard from the various divisions within the public affairs directorate, it may take more internal relationship building with the various divisions in order to cultivate more content generation and sharing.

Scholars have urged organizations to blend community relations and risk communication in order to build community support and collaboration for shared risk decision-making (e.g., Heath & Palenchar, 2000; Heath, Bradshaw, & Lee, 2002). The USCG field's local deployment and community connectedness provided excellent opportunities for them to take a community relations approach to their own social media communication via unit and district Facebook pages and district blogs, Facebook pages and YouTube and Flickr playlists that could then bubble up to the national Facebook page, blog, and Flickr and YouTube channels. While the public affairs directorate's community relations division was not working as closely with the social media team as the media relations team was, there may be more opportunities for the social media team and community relations team to work together to take a community relations approach to social media that could share resources and also have implications for its ongoing social mediated risk communication.

Coaxing versus coercing compliance. Another decentralized-centralized paradox is the fact that while headquarters could make enterprise-wide policy, enforcement and consequences were left to individual commands. The USCG's military command structure and its history of empowering admirals to control their own commands meant that the headquarters social media team must engage in a campaign to coax compliance and concurrently seek to visually standardize official social media to more clearly distinguish between social media platforms that are and are not in compliance. The

decentralized centralization approach recognizes that employees' voices in organizational

social media share control of the organization's official voice (Kelleher, 2009), but it also

seeks to help tell the larger USCG story in a more effective way that harnesses the

storytelling power of many spokesperson voices active in social media channels.

Information control, and storytelling control, can be challenging given today's

fragmented media landscape with multiple platforms from which internal and external

audiences can communicate about an organization (Gilpin, 2010). The distributed public

relations model recognizes the fragmented communication environment and draws from

both internal and external voices to communicate about and represent the organization

(Kelleher, 2009). The USCG social media approach strikes a balance between a fully

distributed model and a funnel of distribution that encourages a distributed, decentralized

role of spokesperson and storyteller while setting boundaries that funnel up that role

based on level, audience, and tool.

Further qualitative and quantitative research, including future field and survey

studies, could test the various levels of a distributed, decentralized public relations model

as well as the factors that may influence where an organization falls on the continuum. In

the USCG's case, they are bound by policies, regulations and laws and resource

constraints such as DHS's external-only focus. Again referencing the harmonious choir

analogy used earlier, the push/pull with field communicators for content also means that

while the social media "microphones" are being handed to them, they are not always

willing or able to sing into them. Again, resource constraints on their time, personnel, and

training may help account for their silence. The decentralized nature of the headquarters

social media team's responsibilities may result from the team's heavy content and compliance burden.

Balancing strategic and tactical roles. The decentralized USCG social media team roles assigned different functions to each team member and centralized the strategic responsibilities under the chief. While assigning each team member different responsibilities may make sense given the team's resource constraints and its content and compliance-heavy focus right now, it can create a strategic vacuum when the chief is away – as can be the case given the transient nature of the USCG culture. By better balancing and integrating discussion of the team's strategic goals and measuring those goals, the team may be better balanced and more effective. The recently adopted strategic messaging framework could help the chief provide benchmarks for the team and institute a more strategic mindset to guide ongoing tactical efforts. Empowering each member of the team to think more strategically may also benefit team members should they find themselves in management-level meetings.

The strategy-tactic split among headquarters team members is also a challenge given that the team itself is essentially managing or leading the enterprise-wide social media program and tasked with helping integrate the design and strategy at the field level. As a social media team member described, part of the team's role is to serve as consultants or evangelists for the USCG social media program. In this way, the tactical team is also part of the strategic management function of the USCG social media program, even if they themselves are not officially managing or leading the team.

Embracing a culture of adaptability. Channeling the _Semper Paratus_ motto, the team embraced a culture of adaptability. This adaptability helped balance planned content

with emerging operations. It helped the team adjust to meet the increased demands when a team member was away either due to vacation or temporary assignment. They adapted to new rules and policies, outdated regulations and laws, and even lack of policy and guidance all while adjusting for resource constraints and emergent situations. Such flexibility aligns with a postmodern, complexity-based approach that encourages organizations to embrace uncertainty (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a; Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009) and maintain a structured flexibility (Wakefield, 2007). The overall USCG decentralized culture and structure fits well with structured flexibility management theory's premise that organizations operate in complex, uncertain environments and should then have some generic principles such as policy agreements and program structures, but then encourage local-specific variables (Brinkerhoff & Ingle, 1989). Fortunately, factors that can challenge USCG social media are also balanced by the fact that they have long been built into a USCG culture that embraces on-scene strategic initiative. For example structured flexibility theory (Wakefield, 2007) and the pragmatic complexity communication model (Corman et al., 2008) described above advocate approaches that fit well with USCG's organizational strategic initiative operational culture and approach. USCG's strategy is both deliberate and planned as well as emerging (e.g., Steyn, 2007), allowing for ongoing learning and embracing the complex influences on their operational environment (e.g., transient, decentralized, transparent, multi-mission, resource constrained, legal and policy restricted, military hierarchical, security conscious, risk-related missions and responsibilities). The USCG public affairs culture and social media program are both built around an enterprise-wide strategy that simultaneously centralizes and diffuses the USCG storytelling function throughout the

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organization's levels. In terms of managing social media, structured flexibility may also include adapting to local-specific content, diverse missions, audiences, and emergent needs. Future research could test the applicability of using a structured flexibility management approach for social media functions that are concurrently decentralized and centralized.

A culture of adaptability may also lend itself toward organizational learning and renewal. Complexity theory suggests that shifting and uncertain environments can be productive as they push for change (innovation and renewal) (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a). This perspective also aligns with complexity theory's understanding that organizational learning can come from discourses of renewal (e.g., Seeger et al., 2010; Ulmer et al., 2007). This evolved learning has allowed the USCG social media team to adjust and adapt its approach, policies, and content. For example, the team learned that it needs to have content expertise in place to respond dialogically with audience members who are passionate about certain topics (e.g., sexual assault prevention, history). Having engaged and active fans means social media communicators might have an audience member report that a Facebook picture caption or blog post's historical account is incorrect. Additionally, communicators may get questions they cannot answer and need an integrated internal function that sees the value of social media beyond the social media team to help answer the question. Organizational learning can also benefit the social media team's risk communication by engaging communities in everyday risk-integrated messages. As Seeger and Reynolds (2008) said, organizational learning "facilitates the adjustment of risk recognition and refines the collective understanding of risk" (p. 16). Through engaging campaigns like the one asking audience members for boating safety

tips or photos with life preservers, they can adjust the team's own view and understanding of risks.

USCG social media may also foster discourses of renewal by serving as sites of renewal following a crisis. Veil, Sellnow, and Heald (2011) found the Oklahoma City National Memorial could be a site of renewal discourse where participants can offer optimism, loss and suffering that are critical to crisis recovery. As a best practice, the authors urged communicators to establish and provide shared values, ways to find optimism, and an opportunity for learning in order to establish renewal through a memorializing process (Veil et al., 2011). Recently, the USCG social media used its social media platforms as a site of memorial and site of renewal discourse.

Following observation data collection, a USCG helicopter crashed in Mobile Bay on February 28, 2012. The social media team used the Compass blog to post Admiral Papp's email to the USCG community regarding the crash. The post resulted in 113 comments. After the search for survivors was called off, the social media team posted a March 2 blog tribute to the four crew members who perished in the crash. The post included a tribute graphic the social media team created to "memorialize the crew" and invited readers and subsequent Facebook followers to "click on and download the image above and join us in making this image your social media profile photo in solidarity with the service and in tribute to the crew of CG-6535." That same day, the social media team named the community of Mobile, Alabama its Shipmate of the Week. The March 2 post read, "Time and again we have seen tragedy bring communities together as families…In keeping with what makes America the greatest country in the world and Mobile, Ala., a Coast Guard City, the community came together to support the Coast Guard during

search and rescue operations." The blog quoted Sector Mobile's deputy commander: "As Coast Guardsmen we live, train and work in this community and are proud to call it home, even if only for the few years we are assigned here. Today, as every day, we are humbled and honored by the welcoming openness of this community." Future rhetorical or qualitative research could analyze organizational social media's potential for serving as sites of renewal discourse where optimism, loss, and suffering can all be communicated.

   Acting as engaging hosts versus hosts who engage. This study responded to Kent's (2010) critique of the majority of social media research that included flawed assumptions about organizational social media communication motives and uses. Throughout documents, interviews and during observations, the team repeated the USCG social media motive of fostering what one team member called "engagement and authenticity," though the team member also recognized the uses of social media did not yet fully realize that desired engagement.

   This study found various sources for the team's limited engagement in execution. Engagement constraints included legal and policy constraints such as privacy laws that resulted in limited understanding of audiences and ability to measure and evaluate relationships and engagement and limited field engagement that resulted in a content and compliance-focused headquarters team. Those factors were compounded by the headquarters' team's resource constraints that meant the team had limited personnel, budget, and time. Given these constraints and challenges, the team's efforts to engage were present but limited.

Based on J. Grunig & Huang's (2000) OPR model that includes monitoring strategies and stages, the USCG social media team is limited in its (1) environmental scanning to identify strategic publics for *relationship building*; (2) building communication strategies for developing and maintaining *relationships*; and (3) using relationship outcomes such as trust, control mutuality, satisfaction and commitment in order to assess *organization-public relationships'* quality. The team's limited resources put out of reach any high-cost commercial social media monitoring tools and evaluation software programs such as Radian6. Privacy concerns also limited the team's use of more cost-efficient or free social media evaluation tools such as SocialBro. At the October 27, 2011 Department of Defense All Services social media working group meeting, a social media team expressed interest in a presenter's description of using SocialBro, a free Twitter monitoring tool that provides information culled from followers' profiles. By the next day, though, the team member said that after looking at the program more closely, she had "crossed it out" because of privacy rules since the program would essentially track citizens' private information.

With limitations on both expensive and free social media monitoring and evaluation efforts, the team has been creative in its efforts to research and evaluate their social media engagement, using Facebook's back-end social media measurements launched in October called "Insights" that indicate potential reach of content and other signs of engagement per post. The blog's measurement statistics are limited to views and comments. Quarterly reports are used because "it's too hard to notice trends daily, weekly, monthly" (social media team member, personal communication, October 27, 2012). It may take a resource infusion for the team to be able to effectively conduct the

research and evaluation to develop a clearer understanding of the actual social media audiences and their needs and to support and assess real-time relationship-building engagement with those audiences. Without such effective research and evaluation, it may be challenging for the team to communicate social media's return on investment which could contribute to buy-in challenges at headquarters and within the field.

At the same time, the team used the "external" audience as a test of whether content was appropriate and valuable for external-facing social media audiences, but the team did not fixate on the "external" audience beyond that. As noted earlier, the USCG social media approach may better reflect the complexity and strategic ambiguity of communicating with diverse audiences (Corman et al., 2008; Goodall, Jr. et al., 2008). Nonetheless, the emphasis on "external" may limit somewhat the criteria for engagement and relationship building opportunities by creating formal and informal policies and culture that miss out on important feedback or engagement that may be seen as "internal" and outside the scope of the ideal engagement (Duhé, 2007).

Regardless of the reasoning behind the "external-only" audience focus, the lack of emphasis on internal publics and relationships fits with the trend of overlooking employees within the multiple voices needed for developing online organizational identities (Gilpin, 2010), generating openness and a human, conversational voice (Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006) that can also be perceived as more like an ordinary person rather than a formal spokesperson (Gilpin et al., 2010). Such voices can have more authenticity and credibility that can aid relationship management, risk communication, and crisis communication (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). In this way, the organization may be relatable, while not necessarily able to be fully relational.

By lowering the distinctions between internal and external audiences, organizations may also use social media to improve employee-organization relationships by giving all employees a greater sense of connection to headquarters and a perception that what they do and say will make a difference (Waymer & Ni, 2009). This is not to say such a unified view would be easy, especially given the USCG's military culture and its acronyms and individual language that could turn off external audiences. However, it may empower these internal and internal-like voices to help fulfill the USCG social media program's engagement potential.

As it is now, the USCG headquarters team must do its best to be engaging in strategic intention, tone and hospitality and allow the audience to foster its own engagement with the posted content. The team only steps in to engage again if directly asked a question or if the community does not first answer a question. So, while the team may "host" engagement and may write in a conversational, engaging voice, team members are not often able to actual carry on an engaging conversation with audiences. As one social media team member stated, "Every time we engage, we show commitment." Under the current circumstances, the team may rely on the internal and internal-leaning audiences such as USCG retirees, volunteers and families to step in and answer questions posed by social media audience members. In that way, by hosting the social media Facebook page or blog, the team is demonstrating its commitment to providing the space for engagement. Ironically, the "internal" audience may be seen as outside the scope of ideal engagement (Duhé, 2007) but may also be sharing the engagement responsibilities similar to co-hosts for an event. A social media team member expressed the ideal form of engagement as when the team could put out content

about life jackets and "somebody was so moved by that that they went out to their community and taught life jacket safety and told us. That's making change. That's making our jobs easier as an organization, and it's saving lives which is – so creating those ambassadors." Another form of ambassador may be the social media audience member who engages with organizational social media platforms and their audiences.

Future ethnographic, interview or survey studies could test this more complex understanding of engagement as a continuum in which organizations that may not have the resources or support to fully engage themselves may be able to host engagement and share engagement responsibilities. Such an approach may be more realistic for organizations beginning their social media programs or ones like the USCG that have influences limiting their ability to fulfill dialogic best practices of online and social media communication that include responsiveness and interactivity (e.g., Kent, 2010; Kent & Taylor, 2002). Similarly, the team may be limited from using social media to fulfill risk communication best practices of listening, understanding, and responding to publics as well as empathizing and partnering with them (e.g., Covello, 2003; Palenchar, 2005, 2010; Sellnow et al., 2009). While the team may not be able to fully initiate those best practices, the team's approach and content does embrace and advance authenticity, transparency, and openness – perhaps aided by the larger USCG culture of transparency and openness.

Thus far the discussion has focused on the dissertation's contributions to extending the theoretical and practical application of complexity and relational approaches to studying the intersection of government communication, social media, and

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risk communication. The next sections offer brief summaries of theoretical and practical contributions.

Summary of Contributions to Theory

This dissertation responded to calls for social media research on strategies and social media research placed within the context of the larger media mix (Kent, 2010). By studying the USCG headquarters social media team and its enterprise-wide strategies and tactics, the dissertation has also pushed forward theory building surrounding social media's place in the "overall practice of public relations" (Kent, 2010, p. 654). The USCG sees social media and ongoing social mediated-risk communication within its larger public affairs function. The study has also demonstrated the usefulness of applying relational and complexity theoretical approaches to studying the nexus of social media, risk communication, and government public relations.

The approach supported scholars' claims that complexity-based approaches fit well with the relational view in risk and crisis management (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a). While chaos and complexity theories have mostly been used in public relations to study crisis management, this dissertation shows the value of using a complexity-based approach to studying risk communication and risk communication via social media. The dissertation extended the complexity-based conceptualization of a holistic view of risk, risk communication and risk management to include organizations with risk-related or crisis-related missions or responsibilities that may take on a risk mindset. USCG communicators embraced uncertainty by becoming adaptable and innovative, spurring organizational learning and renewal. The concept of fostering multivocality was seen as closely aligned with the distributed public relations model and concepts of co-narrators in

strategic storytelling. Within the USCG, multivocality was encouraged and strategized but limited by resource constraints and lack of buy-in from field communicators.

Multivocality was also found to exist on a continuum rather than as an all or nothing concept. USCG social media multivocality was both decentralized and centralized. The concept of building relationships with key internal and external stakeholders was particularly challenging for USCG communicators who were limited by resources and policies that hindered their ability to build relationships, particularly with internal stakeholders. The dissertation, however, offered a continuum here as well between participating in engagement and hosting engagement – another concept ripe for future exploration and testing. Such a continuum may move away from dialogic theory's two-way relational communication model (e.g., Hallahan, 2008; Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007) toward the multivocal conversational relational communication model that encompasses the distributed public relations model (Kelleher, 2009). Serving as an engaging host aligns with Kelleher and Miller's (2006) index for conversational human voice included "[the organization] invites people to conversation" (p. 413). Human conversational voice was found to be a particularly important quality when using blogs as a communication channel (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). Voice correlated positively and significantly with all four key relational outcome measures, including trust, satisfaction, control mutuality, and commitment (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). The study and subsequent ones supporting its findings suggest that using a conversational human voice may be an effective relational maintenance strategy in a social media context (Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). Similarly, government relationship management research has also identified the

strategy of putting a human face on the government by giving citizens increased

interaction with employees (Bruning, et al., 2004). Social media may help put both a

human voice and a human face on the USCG. By looking at an organization's social

media function and full landscape of tools, this dissertation added depth to the human

conversational voice construct and online relational maintenance strategies by offering a

real-time, behind-the-scenes understanding of why and how organizations can be

engaging and conversational by inviting audiences to dialogue and engage without

having to maintain all the conversations themselves across all their social media

platforms. Given the dissertation's finding about a risk communication mindset,

organizations with this mindset that integrate risk communication into everyday social

media communication may be able to use an engaging conversational human voice that

invites others to multivocal conversations as an effective relational maintenance strategy.

While all organizations are unique and there may be no one right way to do social

media (Kent, 2010), this study responded to a gap in researchers' understanding of how

organizations use social media to interact with publics (Stephens & Malone, 2009). While

limited to one organization, the unique behind-the-scenes view of how the USCG

planned and executed its social media interactions may have implications for other public

sector and private sector organizations with decentralized-centralized structures, risk

missions, the need for collaboration and relationships at the community level, and high

amounts of regulation or resource constraints. The complexity and relational perspectives

helped extend the understanding of relational risk communication, including that it may

be normative and the constraints that may limit its execution. Given the USCG social

media team's audience "constructions" and challenges getting to know and build

relationships with actual audiences, the dissertation also extends the limited government

organization-public relationship research.

Specifically, future qualitative research may want to explore areas of theoretical

overlap that emerged in this study at the nexus of complexity and relational approaches as

well as risk communication and social media communication including control,

authenticity, voice, and engagement. In particular, studies using in-depth interviews and

ethnographic methods could get at the complex intersection of these concepts in other

types of organizations. High-reliability organization research may offer useful theoretical

constructs to use when looking at these intersections. For example, control and voice

intersected and overlapped in this study. A perceived loss of organizational control

emerges in research on social media (e.g., Karpinski, 2003; Kent, 2008; Marken, 2005).

Within the organization-public relationship context, new and social media are seen as

slowly shifting the locus of control within public relations from the organization to the

public (e.g., Cozier & Witmer, 2001; Gilpin, 2010; Kelleher, 2009). Employees' voices

are also seen as sharing control of the organization's official voice (Kelleher, 2009).

Control is also a key factor in most risk communication and risk management research

(Gurabardhi et al., 2005). Overlapping with the key relationship management dimension

and outcome measure of control mutuality, Gurabardhi et al. (2005) considered control

mutuality the dominant theoretical perspective in risk communication research. Within an

online communication environment, Hallahan (2008) considered control mutuality to

refer to the amount of interaction between organization and publics. The postmodern

perspective on control urges organizations to take a looser approach to control and

prediction and to embrace an organization's highly contextual, holistic, turbulent environment (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010b).

In this dissertation, control emerged in the structure of the decentralized centralized program. A social media team member described the need for a balance of control with the field: "It's about balance and also about control, because can we trust every 22-year-old who is out in a small boat to make the official voice of the Coast Guard? Because…that is a federal authority that you're enacting..." Control also emerged in the balance of coaxing rather than coercing compliance, both internal and external. Regarding the field, the social media chief said: "We're not trying to control information or stifle creativity. We're trying to bring the Coast Guard into 2011 and adopt social media best practices." Control also emerged in the struggle of how much control to expect of social media communication messages. As the chief of social media said, with social media, "you have to give up a certain sense of control." A media relations team member pointed out: "There has always been this perception that we have to control the information…It becomes less viable to control it…and it's not a bad thing." Given the theoretical and practical implications for how to approach "control" within a social media and relational risk communication, future ethnographic research could further interrogate these overlaps as a multi-dimensional concept sitting at the theoretical intersection of relational risk communication, social media, and government public relations.

Summary of Practical Implications

In addition to the theoretical implications, the study's findings also offer practical implications for the U.S. Coast Guard. These implications and recommendations may transfer to similar organizations or those facing similar opportunities and challenges.

Expand conceptualization of social-mediated risk communication. Adopting a view of risk communication as process-based and integrated into the larger public affairs function that depends on consensus-building, engagement and interaction could have applied benefits for organizations like the Coast Guard that use social media to communicate about risks as part of their public affairs responsibilities. Such organizations may be more willing to and effective at integrating engaging and relational risk communication into their organizational social media program. The Coast Guard could improve its social-mediated relational risk communication by further embracing this risk communication mindset that sees social media as both a channel for ongoing public affairs and as a channel for operational risk or emergency communication with publics. Taking a complexity view of the organization and risk communication may break down the barriers between these social media roles in risk communication. For example, the Coast Guard may benefit from integrating social media team members into current conversations about internal social media use taking place within the strategic communication and the operational risk communication functions. For example, one social media team member could be added to the task groups considering these internal uses and participating in ongoing meetings. The social media team could also put together its own best practices document for managing social media to circulate among other USCG program offices as well as share its current field guides and frequently asked questions documents with non-public affairs personnel. Both internal and operational social media use, while outside the public affairs scope and authority, could benefit from the social media team's lessons learned, best practices developed, and policies written.

Improve social media planning and execution. In addition to conceptualization implications, the dissertation also identified five specific recommendations for social media planning and execution, including within a risk communication context: reduce blog content pressure; increase use of visually-rich content; increase engaging content; cultivate internal relationships; and, improve strategic integration and evaluation. These recommendations build on and support one another in an effort to improve social media communication, including relational risk communication.

Reduce blog content pressure on headquarters social media team. This dissertation offered a conceptualization of engagement as existing on a continuum in which organizations could act as engaging hosts versus hosts who engage. Where an organization falls on that continuum depends on several factors including resource constraints, laws and policies, leadership support and missions and responsibilities. In this study, those influences intersected and overlapped in various public sector contexts. Organizations could use that understanding to assess their own influences at various levels and how they collectively impact the organization's social media function. Those organizations with constraints such as legal, personnel or budget restrictions may fall on the continuum of hosting versus sharing engagement. Additionally, organizations with high-risk missions and responsibilities may use a risk communication mindset that integrates risk communication messages and generates visually dramatic and engaging social media content that triggers audience engagement.

Within the Coast Guard context, certain strategic choices may increase the organization's ability to engage in relational social media communication, including relational risk communication. While the official Coast Guard blog may require less

content if the ground spring design were fully implemented, in its current low-flow state that offers minimal field content, the team is left with a heavy content burden to fill text-heavy daily blog news stories. By reducing blog content pressure on the headquarters social media team, the current content manager could spend less time writing and editing blog posts and more time actually engaging with the audience on one of the social media platforms – particularly Facebook that the team has identified as its most successful engagement tool (personal communication, April 20, 2012). A recent study of Fortune 500 companies found that blogging had decreased among these companies for the first time since 2007 (Barnes & Lescault, 2012). The study found support for other research that has indicated organizations are shifting social media efforts to platforms like Facebook or Twitter and newer tools (Barnes & Lescault, 2012). As a way to gauge the right balance of effort spent on the organizational blog, the social media team could conduct a time study in which team members log, track and evaluate their time use and its results, including amount of engagement. Using the study's results, the social media chief and public affairs director can make strategic decisions about the most effective use of the team's time. They could then experiment with maintaining the current frequency of blog posts but decreasing posts' average length. They could also try decreasing frequency of posts during the week and increasing time spent engaging on Twitter and Facebook.

Increase use of visually-rich content. With less blog pressure, the organization could also leverage its access to dramatic and visually-rich content, including in a social-mediated risk communication context. Using visually-rich, engaging content may also be an opportunity for organizations with resource constraints. As suggested previously, the Coast Guard could use social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter to post photos

or videos with a caption rather than the more resource-intensive blog post writing. Since exiting the field, the team has begun to experiment with caption contests where a photo is posted on Facebook and the audience is asked to suggest captions for the photo in the comments. The Coast Guard then announces the "winning" caption. Such efforts reduce initial content pressure while offering low-resource opportunities for the audience to engage and respond to the audience's engagement while also highlighting visually-rich content.

Increase engaging content. By reducing the blog content pressure and taking advantage of visually-rich content, Coast Guard social media communicators can increase campaigns and content that specifically engage the audience. In addition to efforts like the caption contest just described, the dissertation's findings support increasing engaging content and campaigns that ask lay publics to share their own risk messages such as the Wear It safe boating week campaign. Coast Guard social media communicators recognized their unique ability to address risk-based issues in more creative and conversational ways than non-social media communicators can. However, the team distinguished its own voice and tone as still needing to be appropriate for a government, military branch – meaning there were limits to their playfulness, sarcasm, and informal tone.

Cultivate internal relationships. This dissertation identified limited field participation and subsequent low flow of content as well as limited resources such as access to subject matter experts as reasons for limited engagement. These circumstances could be improved by strategic efforts to cultivate internal relationships among headquarters public affairs divisions, other headquarters programs, and the decentralized

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field public affairs community. The headquarters team may need to branch out to other public affairs divisions beyond media relations for help supplying content. Specifically, the community relations division may be an effective partner in soliciting content from Coast Guard communities and about Coast Guard communities. Internal relationship-building with the field may require greater efforts to understand current field perceptions of the social media program and its role in a strategic public affairs function. It may be helpful to use some of the team's limited funds to send social media team ambassadors to the field to work alongside and offer support to field communicators now being tasked with social media responsibilities. While an investment of resources, the effort may improve headquarters personnel's understanding of the field social media needs and improve field communicators' understanding and trust of the headquarters social media team. To justify the expense, the team could use an online survey or interviews with field communicators to gauge their perceptions, knowledge and motivation to participate in the USCG social media program. The results of the study would serve as a benchmark and also may identify gaps in perceptions, knowledge and motivation that may justify resource expenditures to conduct relationship-building and training activities.

   Improve strategic integration and evaluation. Lightened content needs could free the social media team to improve its currently limited strategic planning and evaluation. While quarterly reports can offer aggregate benchmark reviews of the team's efforts, more in depth evaluation against specific and measurable goals and objectives and related strategies and tactics would help the team measure its progress. The current split between strategic and tactical roles may play a role in limiting the ongoing integration of strategic messaging and evaluation. The recently adopted strategic messaging framework offers an

opportunity to provide benchmarks and institute a more strategic mindset among the team, empowering them to think more strategically and evaluate their work against these strategic goals. Weekly strategy meetings with the team where individual and team objectives, strategies and tactics are determined and discussed could help evaluate and course correct based on what tactics and content achieved the highest quality and quantity of engagement.

While current privacy policies make it difficult to track and measure specific audience needs and engagement, general categories of participation could be tracked and measured in order to gain a better sense of who is participating and how the social media team can better engage with these audiences. For example, a Facebook comment itself can often reveal if a USCG-related audience member such as a USCG retiree, auxiliarist, or family member posted the comment or if it came from an external audience member. Therefore, without violating privacy rules by tracking individuals, the team may be able to track these audience categories based on the comments themselves. By improving the team's evaluation of the social media program's return on investment, the team may be better equipped to earn continued buy-in from field and headquarters personnel. Improved buy-in may increase compliance and participation among field and headquarters program personnel. As such, each of these recommendations complements the others – building toward a more efficient and effective enterprise social media program.

Strengths and Limitations

Whereas the dissertation's strengths included offering an in-depth ethnographic view of how government communicators in high-risk environments view and use social

media within a risk communication context, the study had limitations. Specifically, my lack of military experience meant I did not immediately understand the jargon and command structure around me and may have limited my early understanding of certain conversations or contexts. However, I earned credibility with the social media team by demonstrating my earnest enthusiasm to learn military culture. I maintained a spreadsheet of key terms and would often ask for help understanding jargon and phenomena like rank and promotion requirements. The team members were enthusiastic teachers and remarked on my inclusion of military terminology in my daily conversations with them.

A second limitation was time in the field. Because data collection took place during the course of the semester and related teaching responsibilities, I was only able to conduct observations two to three days a week, meaning I was not present for all interactions over the course of data collection. I balanced this limitation by extending my time in the field into January and observing during two full workweeks.

As a third limitation, while focusing on one field location and organization allowed me to go in depth, future studies should look at other organizations to see how this study's results apply beyond the USCG, military, or even government agencies. For example, organizations that have chapters or locally based branches, offices, or manufacturing facilities may be able to apply the findings regarding decentralized centralization and multivocality. Other organizations with risk-related or crisis-related missions or responsibilities or highly regulated organizations and industries such as energy companies, airlines, cruise lines, and pharmaceutical companies or associations may also be able to apply the dissertation's findings regarding legal and policy constraints and public expectations. Given that this study focused on the organization's

perspective, other audience-based research should look at publics' perspectives of organizational social media engagement and socially-mediated OPRs.

Finally, my background as a former government communicator may have influenced my observations and interviews as well as my analysis by connecting what I was seeing or hearing to my own past experiences. To counteract any potential bias, I grounded my research questions, interview protocol, and data analysis in the research and theory on government communication, social media, risk communication and relational and complexity theoretical approaches. To account for the possible biases that come with ethnographic, embedded approaches, I utilized various strategies, including memos and observer comments, using various data sources in addition to my observations, maintaining a detailed audit trail, utilizing a peer debriefer, and conducting extensive in-person member checks of the dissertation's findings following data analysis.

This dissertation simultaneously pushed my growth as a public relations scholar focused on social media and risk communication while also being influenced by my own growth. From the beginning, the director of public affairs and social media chief urged me to tell them what they could improve and noted their "thick skin." My own skin grew thicker through this process as I gained a voice and confidence in my own observations and understandings – even those that differed from the team's understandings. Through this study, I found my feet as a (part)icipant observer who was *part* researcher, *part* peer, *part* third-party validator, *part* consultant, *part* confidant, and *part* witness. My hope is that through this study and the subsequent practical white paper and presentation I will provide USCG leadership, I can do my *part* to validate and improve the USCG social media program and the work of its dedicated, distinguished team.

Conclusion

This dissertation sought to examine and understand how government communicators in high-risk environments view and use social media communication within a risk communication context. It focused on one federal government organization with risk-related missions and responsibilities in order to provide depth and context in a real-time behind-the-scenes perspective. Results contribute to our understandings of the intersection of risk communication, government communication, and social media as well as the usefulness of relational and complexity theoretical perspectives in exploring that intersection. As the first known behind-the-scenes ethnographic study of a government agency's social media function, the findings related to social media and risk communication can benefit both future research and practice as we expand our understanding and use of social media in high-risk contexts, including those in the public sector. Findings suggest that a risk communication mindset may spur and constrain social media communication within organizations with risk-related or crisis-related missions or responsibilities. Various influences within an organization and its context may result in limited relational risk communication, even when communicators recognize social media's potential for fostering dialogic, real-time engaging relational risk communication.

Similarly, findings suggest an organization's strategies and tactics related to social media communication are also influenced by a complex set of intersecting and overlapping influences that can exist within various contexts and levels. These same influences can determine how well or poorly the social media strategy can be executed and may account for the organization's ability to adapt and learn from such challenges. In

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the USCG's case, the not-fully-realized strategic design acted as both compass and container – guiding and limiting the effective use of relational social media, including in a risk communication context. However, as a highly adaptive organization, the USCG was itself a learning organization with the social media team acting as a learning organization that also contributed to that learning.

Ultimately, I hope that this dissertation gave voice and insight into the everyday experiences and efforts of the USCG social media team. By chronicling their challenges, successes, and public service, scholars and practitioners can better understand the landscape of influences communicators face and how they navigate the tumultuous, complex waters of social media, particularly in a high-risk environment. Additional research can validate the extent to which the USCG social media team's approach may serve as a compass for other organizations seeking to build or improve their own social media strategies and programs.

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Introduction and Basic Points

Good [morning/afternoon/evening], as you may know, my name is _____, and I am a graduate student at the University of Maryland, College Park. I have been working with the Coast Guard's social media team at headquarters to try to learn more about how the Coast Guard is using social media to communication. Thank you for agreeing to talk with me today about your thoughts on how the Coast Guard is using social media to communicate. Your insights will help me to understand more about social media communication.

(*Repeat these points as necessary if individuals have questions about the consent forms they have signed*)
- There are no right or wrong answers. I only want to know your thoughts and opinions, and every opinion is valuable.
- Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. You may choose to skip a question or stop the interview at any time and for any reason with no penalty, especially if you feel uncomfortable with the question or subject. Your information will stay secure. I will not share your personal information, including your name, with anyone else. Unless you prefer otherwise, your name will not be linked to the information that you provide during the interview.
- This interview is being audio-recorded in case I need to listen to it later to clarify something from the notes. This recording will not be shared with others and will be destroyed at the end of this research.
- The interview should take around about an hour.
- Do you have any questions before we begin?

Opening

1. Before we begin, could you tell me about your background with the Coast Guard?
2. Could you tell me a bit about what a typical workday is like for you?

Now I'd like to get your thoughts about communication at the Coast Guard.

Thinking About Communication

3. How, if at all, do you interact with social media as part of your official responsibilities?
   a. What do you consider social media?
   b. How has this changed over time in your work at the Coast Guard?
4. How, if at all, do you interact with social media about the Coast Guard in an unofficial capacity?
5. What role do you see communication playing at the Coast Guard?
   a. Who do you see as internal audiences for the Coast Guard?

b. Who do you see as key external audiences for the Coast Guard?
6. What factors do you think influence the Coast Guard's communication?
    a. Internal factors?
    b. Other external factors?
    c. How, if at all, is this different from other places you've worked?

Thinking About Social Media
7. How do you see social media's role in Coast Guard communication?
    a. Official
    b. Unofficial
    c. Personal use
8. Who do you see as the key audiences for the Coast Guard's official or unofficial social media?
    a. Internal
    b. External
9. How, if at all, does planning play a role in the Coast Guard's use of social media?
10. What would you say the goals are for the Coast Guard's social media efforts?
11. What do you see as the overall management approach to social media communication?
    a. Is that different than other types of communication at the Coast Guard?
12. How, if at all, do you think the Coast Guard measures the success or effectiveness of its social media program?
13. What factors do you think influence the Coast Guard's use of social media in its communications?

In thinking more about risk communication…

Thinking About Social Media and Risk Communication

14. How, if at all, do you view the strategic role of social media in risk communication?
    a. Official Coast Guard social media
    b. Unofficial Coast Guard social media
    c. Personal use of social media
15. How closely do you think your view matches the Coast Guard's overall view of social media's role in risk communication?
    a. Official Coast Guard social media
    b. Unofficial Coast Guard social media
    c. Personal use of social media
16. Can you give me an example of how the Coast Guard has used social media to do risk communication in the past?
17. Has this view changed over time or has this always been the approach?
18. What factors do you think influence how the Coast Guard uses social media in a risk communication context?

19. What, if any, opportunities do you think social media offers for risk communication at the Coast Guard?
20. What, if any, challenges do you think social media offers for risk communication at the Coast Guard?
21. What factors do you see as influencing how the Coast Guard communicates about risks more generally?
    a. How is risk communication conducted externally at the Coast Guard?
    b. How is risk communication conducted internally at the Coast Guard?
    c. Who do you think the key audiences are that Coast Guard needs to conduct risk communication with?
    d. Can you give me an example of how the Coast Guard communicated about a recent risk?
        i. Internally?
        ii. Externally?
22. Going back to social media, to what extent would you say the Coast Guard supports social media engagement between Coast Guard personnel and external stakeholders/publics?
23. What about the extent to which it supports social media engagement between Coast Guard personnel and the larger Coast Guard organization like headquarters or leadership?
24. How, if at all, does planning play a role in the Coast Guard's risk communication via social media?
25. What would you say the goals are for the Coast Guard's risk communication via social media?
26. What do you see as the overall management approach to social media risk communication?
27. How, if at all, do you think the Coast Guard measures the success or effectiveness of its social media program?
28. Finally, looking forward, what do you think are the next challenges Coast Guard needs to address in its social media risk communication?

Closing

That's all the questions I have. Is there anything about social media and risk communication that you feel I left out or did not ask about that you feel would be important for me to know?

Is there anyone else you recommend that I talk to about these topics?

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. Would you be willing to be contacted again in the future should I need to conduct a follow-up interview at a later date?

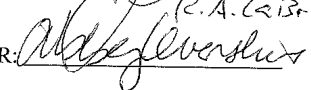## Appendix B: Gratuitous Services Agreement

GRATUITOUS SERVICES AGREEMENT

1. This gratuitous services agreement is between the United States Coast Guard (RECIPIENT) and Dr. Brooke Liu/Abbey Levenshus (PROVIDER).

2. The duration of this gratuitous services agreement is from Oct. 18, 2011, to Feb. 1, 2012. This duration of this agreement cannot be extended except by the express, written, mutual consent of both parties. However, both parties can mutually consent to early termination of this agreement. Additionally, this agreement can be unilaterally terminated by either party, with or without cause, with or without prior notification to the other party, in writing or verbally. Both parties are prohibited from claiming or seeking damages from the other party or from the United States because of any mutual or unilateral early termination of this agreement.

3. The terms of this agreement cannot be modified except by the express, written, mutual consent of both parties.

4. PROVIDER offers to provide the following gratuitous services to RECIPIENT:

   Share the results of the research from the doctoral degree project titled "Enhancing Government Communication via Social Media" to include research on Coast Guard Social Media conducted during visits to Coast Guard Headquarters as described in the University of Maryland, College Park "Application for Research involving Human Subjects." Sharing of results can include providing a copy of the dissertation, an executive summary, briefing(s), and a copy of any academic journal articles published on the project.

5. RECIPIENT agrees to accept PROVIDER's gratuitous services identified in Paragraph 4 above to the extent permitted by law.

6. PROVIDER agrees to provide the gratuitous services described in Paragraph 4 above with the full understanding that RECIPIENT and the United States will not compensate, provide any financial benefit to, or reimburse PROVIDER in any manner for providing those services.

7. PROVIDER agrees and declares that he/she has no expectation of receiving any compensation, financial benefit, or reimbursement of any kind from RECIPIENT or the United States for providing gratuitous services under this agreement.

8. PROVIDER agrees to make no claim for compensation, financial benefit, or reimbursement of any kind against RECIPIENT or the United States for gratuitous services provided under this agreement.

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Init: _____ 10/18/11

9. PROVIDER understands and agrees that it would be unlawful for RECIPIENT to accept PROVIDER services if PROVIDER had any expectation of any compensation, financial benefit, or reimbursement from RECIPIENT or the United States.

10. Both parties understand and agree that PROVIDER does not become a RECIPIENT employee or United States employee for any purpose under this agreement.

11. RECIPIENT declares that it will not replace or displace any federal employee because of this agreement.

12. RECIPIENT declares that it is not using this agreement in lieu of hiring a federal employee or contractor to perform the services described in Paragraph 4 above.

13. Both parties declare that this document constitutes the sole and complete gratuitous services agreement between them.

For RECIPIENT: _____ Date: __10/18/11__
    R.A.LaBree

PROVIDER: _____ Date: __10/18/11__

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Appendix C: Project Description Flier

Coast Guard Social Media Research Project

What's the project? This project seeks an *in-depth understanding of how the Coast Guard uses social media communication, particularly in a risk communication context.* Currently, there is little research on *how* to effectively conduct social media activities, particularly in the U.S. public sector, so this research could benefit communicators, academics, and students. The on-site research is being conducted by Abbey Levenshus, a former congressional communicator and current doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication at the University of Maryland.

What does the project entail? The main portion of the project involves the researcher observing and participating in the day-to-day activities and experiences of the social media team at Coast Guard headquarters. The researcher will be on site 2-3 days a week from October-December 2011. This could include working with the social media team and participating in meetings, informal conversations, and daily tasks. When possible, the researcher may take notes or audiorecord meetings or conversations to ensure accuracy. The researcher will always ask permission before recording any conversation or proceeding. Interviews may be requested with personnel and non-classified documents like emails, memos, or manuals may be reviewed.

Does everyone have to participate? Participation is completely voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time. The researcher has obtained approval to pursue this project through the university's Institutional Review Board. Consent will be sought from individuals before interviews. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.

Where will this research end up? Coast Guard leaders will have the opportunity to review written work before findings are reported in the dissertation. When requested, individual identities will be kept confidential in the dissertation or future journal publications or books. Any information determined off-limits would be respected as such.

How will you protect confidentiality? In any report or publication about this project, identities of participants who have requested confidentiality will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Given the participant observation nature of the project, only information relevant to the study's topics will be reported. Data will be securely stored on the researcher's password-protected computer as digital audio files. Hard copies of data will remain in the researcher's locked office in a locked file cabinet.

How will this research benefit the Coast Guard? The researcher will provide an executive summary report and recommendations for the Coast Guard's future social media communication. Others may also benefit from this study through improved understanding of how government agencies use social media communication, including in a risk communication context.

Questions? If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, please contact the student investigator, Abbey Levenshus, 2108 Skinner Bldg., University of Maryland, College Park, MD, 20742, ABL@umd.edu, 202-580-5030. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact: University of Maryland College Park, Institutional Review Board Office, 1204 Marie Mount, College Park, MD, 20742, irb@umd.edu, 301-405-0678.

Appendix D: Summary of Data Collected

Participant Observation	
Hours	205.25
Timeframe	Oct. 7, 2011 - Jan. 19, 2012
Number of visits	28
Daily hours	2 - 9.25 hours, averaged 7.31 hours per day
Days of week	Tuesdays (10), Thursdays (9), Fridays (4), Wednesdays (3), Mondays (2)
Fieldnotes	156 single-spaced pages
Interviews	
Number of interviews	12 interviews with 10 individuals; totaled 10.25 hours
Participants	Public affairs director; Social media (4); Media relations (2); Strategic communication (2); Motion picture (1)
Length	29 - 127 minutes - average 67.8 minutes
Transcript	240 single-spaced pages
Documents	
Number	49
Formats	Emails (30); Word documents (14); PDFs (3); Excel spreadsheet (1); PowerPoint document (1)
Senders/Recipients	Social media team members; director of public affairs; field communicators; media relations team members
Topics/Categories	Planning/Strategy (15); Content (10); Policy/Procedures (10); Informal Evaluation/Feedback (7); Compliance (4); Formal Evaluation (3)

Appendix E: USCG Terms Spreadsheet

Term/Acronym	Meaning
AOR	Area of responsibility
BLUF	Bottom line up front
CGVI	Coast Guard Visual Imagery Gallery - team scans for images for Facebook, YouTube, Flickr
Climatize	Acclimate to weather
COA	Course of Action
Coastie	Term used within Coast Guard to refer to Coast Guard personnel (active duty/reservists) - does not usually refer to auxiliarists, spouses, etc.
CommRel	Community Relations
Concurrent clearance	When it has to go through more than one channel (e.g., DOD and DHS) to get approved - takes time
Deconflict	Reduce conflict in stories/overall conflict
DINFOS	Defense Information School
DMA	Defense Media Activity - Host dodlive.mil blogs. Team has to go through them for things.
EPIRB	Emergency Personal Individual Response Beacon
Expeditionary public affairs	DINFOS class was joint expeditionary public affairs class. Public affairs is different here - temporary/bounded - social media are different/difficult during expeditions like Japanese tsunami, Haiti earthquake, Deepwater Horizon oil spill
External affairs	It's clearer in the field. At a district, will have an EA and PA officer. PA will do public affairs function - press, SME prep, speaking, good community service event to do. External - mayor, congress, etc. Seems like external refers to public policy community.
FAM	Familiarization (e.g., blog fam, area fam) - how they learn
FORAC	For action
FYSA	For your situational awareness
Gaggle	Morning meeting - a name which is despised by some - started within past six months to make sure teams were communicating about what was on task for the day, improve internal communication

Groundtruth	Truth on the ground - get there and figure out the truth on the ground (groundtruth it)
IAW	In accordance with (e.g., IAW the public affairs manual)
Iconic	Reflective of Coast Guard core operations; used to describe images directly related to Coast Guard - "shoot some iconic images", "I'm looking for some iconic images." - used for twitpics, blog photos, etc.
ISPR	Incident Specific Preparedness Report
Lash up	Get people together - align people - connect people to complete a task
MedRel	Media Relations
Miscomms	Miscommunication
MoPic	Motion Pictures office
MWR	morale, welfare, recreation - MWR - not appropriate for public-facing social media (aka Facebook around here)
NCC	National Command Center - takes after hours media calls, doesn't do social media monitoring
OCONUS	Outside Continental U.S.
Operational	Related to mission, value to taxpayer - key consideration of social media
OPSEC	Operational security - key consideration of social media
PADET	Public affairs detachment - At whim of PADET for things like photos from Statue of Liberty 125th anniversary
PAG	Public affairs guidance - Used as backgrounder/brief/talking points/policy/message/posture/update, etc. - when major events/issues happen, MedRel puts these out to help team talk with one voice.
PIER	Contracted service for news releases - online news room - for-profit vendor hosts/maintains this "media port"
PPE	Personal protective equipment - Video couldn't be posted on social media (from CGVI) unless it included them wearing PPE - Team member noted that's more of a situation for PA team who created video but doesn't become an issue until social media wants to do it - on homepage

Pre-decisional	A no-no - talking about information in a pre-decisional way should not be done publicly, etc.
Rerack	(Think billiards) Idea of going back to drawing board - starting over when something's not working the way it should
Rescue litter	Basket used in search and rescue
RTQ	Response to query - RTQs from media that media relations team replies to
SAPP	Security, Accuracy, Propriety, and Policy - must be determined before posting photos, videos, stills, etc.
SAR	Search and rescue
Shipmate	Common term used to describe Coast Guard personnel by Admiral but not universally accepted because not everyone is on ships – though use Shipmate of the Week as standing weekly social media post
Situational awareness	Being aware and informed about what's happening around you - Used as part of SOP/SQP for social media watch - developing situational awareness - comes out of MedRel too
SOP	Standard operating procedure - used to explain social media watch duties and procedures for social media at headquarters in Public Affairs office
SQP	Standard qualifying procedures - Used for social media cross-training for the watch with MedRel
Stand-alone	"Stand-alone" computer terminals and Internet connections outside of the Coast Guard network to obtain greater access to the blocked site (field advised to consult servicing procurement office for assistance).
Surge	Surge trust - if it's in place, won't have to surge trust during crisis/incident
Tack	Radio telephonic for hyphen - Social media team member uses this to describe hyphens - example of military culture
Trackline	Direction you're going
Trio	Leaders think of "Trio" as any smartphone - Sign they're not up to current technology vocabulary. Trio was originally only way to do anything while mobile. Even though there are now other devices, many personnel still use that term to refer to even iPhones.

TTP	Tactics techniques and procedures - help train/supplement policy/guidance to get task accomplished
Virons	Flickr photos should always include "virons" - Very specific number, pulls from a personal ID number (used to be digits from social - not anymore) and your sector or whatnot - essentially a calling card, trail for image they're required to provide
WRT	With regard to

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