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To cite this article: Jim Macnamara (29 Oct 2025): Strategic Communication and Public Policy: A Major Gap and Opportunity for Research, Practice, and Democracy, International Journal of Strategic Communication, DOI: [10.1080/1553118X.2025.2572076](https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2025.2572076)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2025.2572076>



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Published online: 29 Oct 2025.



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# Strategic Communication and Public Policy: A Major Gap and Opportunity for Research, Practice, and Democracy

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## ABSTRACT

Governments and public institutions invest substantially in strategic communication. For example, the UK Government Communication Service employs more than 7,000 communication staff and spending on communication in the UK in 2023–2024 totaled almost £750 million (US\$900 million). However, a study of strategic communication in relation to the development of public policy, commonly referred to as the *policy process* or the *policy cycle*, reveals a predominant focus on one-way communication at the end of the process to announce and promote policies. When two-way communication occurs, it is commonly limited to input from experts. This is an important topic for study, particularly in democracies, because public policy affects every citizen and democracy purportedly gives citizens the right to provide input to policy. This critical analysis based on a review of literature informing public policy development in a democracy and interviews with senior public policy and public sector communication practitioners reveals a need to recalibrate strategic communication in relation to public policy development. It argues that addressing this gap in communication provides an opportunity to redress declining public trust and “democratic backsliding” and can benefit policymakers, stakeholders, and society.

## Introduction

Governments and public institutions invest heavily in communication managed under the functional label of *strategic communication* (Heath & Johansen, 2018; Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015), *public communication* (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2021, 2023), or simply *government communication* (Canel & Sanders, 2013). For example, the UK Government Communication Service (GCS) employs more than 7,000 communication practitioners supporting national government departments and agencies (Government Communication Service [GCS], 2025, para. 4). National public sector spending on communication in the UK was estimated to be £750 million (US\$900 million) in 2023–2024 (Statista, 2025). Local government authorities also invest substantially in what is called strategic, public, or government communication. The European Commission (EC) spent almost €100 million (almost US\$110 million) between 2021 and 2023 on ‘corporate campaigns’ alone – i.e., campaigns reporting and explaining the role and performance of the EC – with

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much more spent by its many directorates promoting specific programs (European Commission, 2020).

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a global policy forum that provides advice and guidelines to almost 100 national and state governments, is careful to distinguish government communication from “political communication, which is linked to partisan debate, elections, or individual political figures and parties.” The OECD says in relation to government: “Public communication is understood as the government function to deliver information, listen, and respond to citizens in the service of the common good” Organization (2021, p. 14). Other OECD guidelines advocate engagement with *stakeholders* as defined by Freeman (1984), saying that they should be able “to influence the activities and decisions of public authorities at different stages of the policy cycle” (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2024a, p. 30). The terms ‘listen,’ ‘respond,’ and “be influenced” in addition to ‘deliver information’ are important, pointing to a two-way conceptualization of communication in government policy guidelines, echoing contemporary strategic and public communication theory.

Public policy is typically developed through research and analysis by policy advisers in government departments and agencies and input from subject matter experts. In addition, in democratic states, engagement and consultation with and participation by stakeholders and citizens are ostensibly key contributions to public policy based on the long-standing democratic principles of *vox populi* (the voice of the people)<sup>1</sup> and the “consent of the governed” (Cassinelli, 1959). These are officially recognized in Article 21 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which states that “the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government” (United Nations, 1948).

The UK’s *Government Functional Standard* for communication states that “strategic communication specialists should work alongside policy, operations, human resources and project delivery colleagues from the outset, so they can inform and advise the government and organizational decision-makers” (Gov.UK [UK], 2023, p. 19). This again proposes two-way communication providing *input* to public policy as well as output to inform and promote compliance.

This analysis reports research that examined strategic communication by democratic governments and public institutions in the development of public policy to explore two research questions that go to the heart of a fully functioning democratic society by examining when and how communication with stakeholders and citizens occurs. Such study is important not only because of the substantial investment in communication by governments and public institutions but because public policy governs and enables or disables every aspect of business, industry, and society as well as people’s personal lives and welfare. In addition to being developed by governments, public policy is developed and implemented by a wide range of public institutions such as UN organizations, health, education, and transport authorities, public utilities such as energy providers, hospitals, social services, state owned companies, regulators, and local councils.

The term public is used in this analysis both in a specific sense related to public policy, the public sector, and public sector organizations and in a broad sense as discussed by Dewey (1927), who said: “The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect

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<sup>1</sup>The phrase, expressed in full as *Vox populi, vox Dei*, Latin for ‘the voice of the people is the voice of God,’ was used in English political history as early as the 1300s and was the title of a published political pamphlet in 1709 (see Boas, 2020).

consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for” (pp. 15–16).

## Strategic public communication theory

A critical analysis of literature and practice in relation to the role and use of communication in public policy development is informed by the body of theory related to the three fields of communication noted in the introduction – strategic communication, public communication, and government communication – as well as what is referred to as public sector communication.

### Strategic communication

The theory and practice of strategic communication has been widely examined and explicated in numerous articles in this journal and elsewhere since the seminal 2007 article by Hallahan et al. (2007) such as Falkheimer and Heide (2015), King (2010), Van Ruler (2018), and Zerfass et al. (2018), as well as in major reference works. These include, in chronological order or publication, *The Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication* (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015), *The International Encyclopedia of Strategic Communication* (Heath & Johansen, 2018), *Future Directions of Strategic Communication* (Nothhaft et al., 2020), and the *Research Handbook on Strategic Communication* (Falkheimer & Heide, 2022).

While it is argued that strategic communication remains in the process of evolving as a discipline (Nothhaft et al., 2020), what is pertinent to note from numerous studies is that strategic communication has transitioned beyond its early organization-centric conceptualization as “purposeful use of communication by an organization to achieve *its* mission” (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 3) [emphasis added]. Contemporary literature advocates a *participatory* approach (Falkheimer & Heide, 2015) including “listening” (Van Ruler, 2018, p. 369), and becoming “emergent” through taking into account stakeholders’ and societal interests (King, 2010) drawing on the work of Mintzberg (1978, 1987). Such approaches are supported by focus on meaningful *engagement* (Johnston & Taylor, 2018), *dialogue* (Taylor & Kent, 2014) and *organizational listening* (Macnamara, 2016, 2019a, 2024; Place, 2023).

While noting that the term strategic communication is sometimes used as a ‘rebadging’ of public relations (PR) or simply as an ‘umbrella’ term to denote integration of various public communication practices, Heath and Johansen (2018) emphasize engagement, dialogue, collaboration, and participation (p. 12) to “avoid a modernist, instrumentalist approach” – what some refer to as a *functionalist* approach (Heath & Johansen, 2018, p. 15). Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2015, p. 9) argue that “there is a place for both a functionalist and an emerging strategic process,” which Winkler and Etter refer to as a “dual narrative framework” (Winkler & Etter, 2020, p. 54). However, in sum, contemporary strategic communication theory and best practice advocate discursive processes, and advanced definitions identify a “critical imperative for entities to serve the public interest” (Heath & Johansen, 2018, p. 1). This is particularly so in government and public sector organizations.

A definition of strategic communication by Zerfass et al. (2020) builds on Hallahan et al.’s description saying:

Strategic communication encompasses all communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity. Specifically, strategic communication is the purposeful use of communication by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals (Zerfass et al., 2020, p. 165).

The reference to ‘conversations’ in this definition moves strategic communication away from one-way, top-down processes by organizations to an interactive process. Furthermore, discussion of *alignment* as a core concept in strategic communication recognizes alignment “between an organization and its internal and external stakeholders” as well as alignment with organization strategy (Invernissi & Romenti, 2015, pp. 107–108).

### **Public communication**

The term public communication is used in a substantial body of literature (e.g., Blumler & Gurevitch, 2002; Macnamara, 2016, Macnamara, 2018; Matusitz, 2022; Rice & Atkin, 2013) and by public sector organizations such as the Organization (2021, 2023) to refer to communication in the *public sphere* incorporating all communication between organizations and the public as defined broadly by Dewey (1927). This includes communication with segmented groups referred to as *publics* (plural) in public relations and some social science literature and refers to purposeful communication to achieve objectives. Matusitz says “public communication needs to be viewed as the constant communicative interaction between organizations and their many audiences – and vice versa” (Matusitz, 2022, p. 15). Inclusion of the term ‘vice versa’ meaning the other way round is key to a understanding of the process.

### **Government communication and public sector communication**

In a similar two-way approach, Delli Carpini describes public sector communication as “exchanges between citizens and the state.” He says: “In a democracy, the public sector provides and/or encourages the institutional structures that allow citizens to be information producers in the interactive process by which good, services, and values are authoritatively allocated” (Delli Carpini, 2020b, p. 33). His reference to “exchanges” and citizens being “information producers” make clear that public sector communication aka government communication should be a two-way process.

This analysis treats the terms strategic communication and public communication by public sector organizations as well as government communication as synonymous. The term “public sector communication,” first used by Graber (1992) and recently by Delli Carpini, is also synonymous and further emphasizes “information exchange” (Delli Carpini, 2020a, p. 27).

Because of the centrality of ‘publicness’ in this analysis, the term *strategic public communication* is used in the following to refer to communication by governments and public sector organizations with the public as inclusively defined by Dewey (1927).

Some studies of public sector communication have identified a significant gap between citizens and public sector organizations (Canel & Luoma-Aho, 2019; Macnamara, 2016, 2024, pp. 161–176), indicating a need for further research in this area.

## Research questions

Based on reports that democratic governments often fail to engage with and listen to stakeholders in making decisions (Canel & Luoma-Aho, 2019; Macnamara, 2016, 2024), the objective of this research was to explore how two-way communication is applied in the development of public policy given its importance and the principles of democracy outlined.

Two overarching research questions (RQs) were explored in this study through (a) a critical analysis of relevant literature and (b) interviews with senior public policy and public communication staff as follows:

- (1) To what extent is the public policy development process in democratic governments open to invite, receive, respond to, and consider input from stakeholders and citizens (i.e., two-way communication)?
- (2) When and in what form is strategic public communication involved in the public policy development process (sometimes simply called the policy process) in democratic governments?

## Methodology

This study employed an interpretative qualitative approach as the purpose was to explore in depth when and how strategic public communication is conducted in the development of public policy. Two methods were applied as follows.

### Critical literature analysis

In the first instance, this study conducted a critical analysis of literature related to the theory and practice of public policy development as outlined in the disciplines of *policy sciences* and *policy studies*, as well as in public administration literature broadly. Scholarly literature was sourced using the search term “public policy” in Google Scholar, Web of Science, EBSCO, JSTOR, and ProQuest. More than 30 books and almost 100 academic journal articles on public policy development in a democratic context were retrieved for analysis. These, many of which are cited in the following analysis, identify the theoretical framing of public policy development.

In addition, official government guidelines on the development of public policy were accessed from the websites of national governments in Australia, the UK, and the European Commission. These represent more than traditional ‘gray’ literature as they provide mandated or recommended guidelines and standards for civil and public servants<sup>2</sup> related to the development of public policy in almost 30 countries in total (Australia, the UK, and 27 EU member countries). Examples used in this research and cited in this analysis include:

- *Australian Public Service Framework for Engagement and Participation* (Australian Government, 2020)

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<sup>2</sup>Government employees are members of the Civil Service, referred to as civil servants, in some countries while in other countries they are members of the Public Service referred to as public servants.

- European Commission *Better Regulation Toolbox*, Chapter 7, ‘Stakeholder consultation’ (European Commission, 2025)
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) *Guidelines for Citizen Participation Processes* (OECD, 2022a)
- UK Government *Policy Systems Framework* (Gov.UK [UK], 2021)
- UK Government *Functional Standard – GovS 011: Communication*. Version 2.1 (UK, 2023).
- UK Government *Policy Profession Standards* (Gov.UK [UK], 2024b).

Each book, article, framework, and guideline was searched for references to “communication” or “consultation” or “engagement” or “participation” as well as to retrieve references to and figures illustrating a “policy framework,” or “policy process” or “policy cycle,” or “policy stages,” or “policy steps.” References to the above terms were retrieved using Boolean searches of databases and ‘Find’ or ‘Find in page’ commands in documents as well as manual reading of books when e-books were not available.

### **Deliberative interviews**

Primary research involved semi-structured interviews with a selection of senior public policy and public sector communication practitioners to explore what happens in the practice of public policy development. As the objective of the research was to gain in-depth insights and considered responses, the study used *deliberative interviews* (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2020, 2021; Macnamara, 2019b), an interviewing approach that parallels deliberative surveys and polls (Price & Neijens, 1998) and other uses of deliberation. Deliberative interviews produce more thoroughly considered responses than traditional interviews. Achieving deliberation by interviewees involves “a comprehensive, pre-interview briefing on the subject matter followed by interactive deliberation” (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2020, p. 291). This means that interviewees have time to think about the topic and issues to be discussed in advance and to prepare their thoughts, rather than give ‘off the cuff’ responses. The purpose of deliberative interviews is to access the views, perceptions, and experiences that are considered most relevant and important by participants rather than identify the most frequently mentioned issues, concepts, and messages through quantitative coding and counting key words. To achieve this goal, deliberative interviews were conducted in four steps as follows.

- (1) Public policy officials and public sector communication practitioners were purposively selected and invited to participate in an interview (see ‘Sample’).
- (2) A four-page *questionnaire* was distributed to participants who gave written consent to participate. This was designed to prompt thinking and reflection among participants and to gain initial indications of their areas of interest rather than be a quantitative survey. All participants who completed the questionnaire also participated in interviews.
- (3) Starting 2 weeks after distribution of the questionnaire, in-depth interviews were conducted with 22 senior public policy and public communication practitioners between 3 June and 30 August 2024. These included currently serving and former senior civil/public servants and senior government communication practitioners in

Australia, Europe, the UK, and the USA as well as several academic researchers involved in government and political communication and senior staff of two democracy advocacy groups. Interviews were conducted over a period of 45 minutes to 1 hour, some in person and some on Zoom or Microsoft Teams and were digitally recorded. All interviews were conducted by the author for consistency, and extensive note taking was also used to record comments emphasized by participants and notate documents referred to by participants.

- (4) Participant's verbatim statements and paraphrasing intended for use in reporting the research based on interview recordings and the researcher's notes recorded in a journal were sent to participants for their review. This enabled participants to correct any misunderstandings and further consider their responses and add additional comments or clarify comments if they wished. In several cases, follow-up discussions occurred via e-mail to confirm and clarify responses. This process contributed to *confirmability*, *dependability*, and *trustworthiness* of the research, which is recommended for qualitative studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004).

Following positive responses to an e-mail invitation, interviews were arranged and conducted in accordance with a protocol that included provision of a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and a consent form in advance and use of an interview question guide (see [Appendix 1](#)). The PIS explained the project's objectives, stages, the option for interviewee and organization identification or de-identification, the right to withdraw at any time, the format of the interview (face-to-face or online), and length of time requested. The initial questionnaire and interview question guide received ethics approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Technology Sydney (HREC REF NO. ETH24-9424). All quoted interviewees agreed in writing for themselves and their organization to be identified.

## **Sample**

The sample was *purposively* selected supported by *snowball* sampling with some instances of a *convenience* sample for the following reasons. First, the research had to take account of the difficulty of gaining access to senior public policy staff in governments as well as public sector communication professionals in some cases. Many are reluctant to speak publicly and some are prevented from doing so under civil service or public service guidelines. Second, the research was not designed for and does not purport to present representative findings. Limitations of the methodology are acknowledged (see 'Limitations') but it is argued that the research presents a rarely seen inside view of the important processes of public policy making in major democratic governments. This was optimized by the sampling frame that selected participants in senior roles such as directors or heads of relevant functions with many years of experience in a public policy or public sector communication role. As shown in [Appendix 2 \(Table B1\)](#), interviewees had a total of almost 500 years of experience in public communication and/or public policy roles, with an average of more than 20 years of experience.

Sampling started with senior officials in the OECD Open Government, Civic Space, and Public Communication Unit and the Open Government Partnership (OGP) headquarters

in Paris. These were deemed relevant starting points because of the direct relevance of the OECD's role and because the OECD had a short time before published a landmark *Report on Public Communication: The Global Context and the Way Forward* (Organization, 2021) that focused on the role of public communication in public policy development. The OGP secretariat advises government leaders and civil society advocates in 77 member countries as well as 150 local governments on transparent, participatory, inclusive, and accountable government (Open Government Partnership [OGP], 2025).

This was followed by interviews with senior communication and public policy advisers and researchers in the European Commission (EC) and national governments of Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. In addition, interviews were purposively requested with several senior academic researchers who have worked closely with governments and published on government communication and public policy making.

### Data analysis

Data analysis was undertaken using manual coding of transcripts to categorize the data into topics and themes. Categories were initially identified deductively based on categories aligned to questions such as public policy and public communication 'collaboration' and public communication 'pre-policy' (i.e., as input) versus public communication 'post-policy' (i.e., as 'output'). See [Appendix 1](#) and [Table 1](#).

In addition, because the research often involved lengthy discussions supported by e-mail correspondence, follow-up e-mails and the interviewer's journal notes were used as well as coded transcripts to identify key points and themes. This involved "live coding" as well as traditional coding of interviewees' responses and comments in two forms. First, categories were added inductively to the coding list in real time as they became evident in the discussions. Second, identification of key themes and strongly held views was based on the statements most emphasized by participants through their tone, linguistic cues, and gestures rather than raw counts of coded terms as occurs in quantitative analysis. These were captured in notations in the interviewer's journal that recorded tonal emphasis and

**Table 1.** Samples of coding of interviewees' statements and grouping into themes.

	Text	Key words	Code	Theme
1	"Comms and policy teams don't interact much"	interaction collaboration	Don't collaborate	Structural gap
2	"We get called in after policies are well developed"	after policies	Post-policy	Comms as output
3	"we make it, you sell it"	sell	Promotion Post policy	Comms as output
4	"comms is in a news media bubble"	media	Comms focus	Lack of skills
5	"We have developed new guidelines for collaboration early in the policy process"	collaboration early in process	Collaborate Pre-policy	Comms as input
6	"I think there is fear among policy advisers"	fear	Avoidance	Barriers
7	"policy teams are under pressure to deliver"	pressure	Timing	Barriers
8	"policy is developed by specialists ... comms is rarely at the table"	specialists comms rarely	Don't collaborate	Structural gap
9	"comms focusses on media releases and media relations"	media	Comms focus	Lack of skills
10	"public communication is important to explain policies"	explain	Post policy	Comms as output

occasional gestures indicating strong affirmation, questioning, or responses such as frustration. While traditional coding of text is widely used in qualitative data analysis (QDA), live coding in conjunction with using verbatim quotes “allows the intent, context, and meaning of the words to be present in the results” (Parameswaran et al., 2019, p. 630).

It is proposed that *dependability* and *trustworthiness* were achieved through the four-step interview process described above, particularly step 4 under ‘Deliberative interviews.’ Table 1 provides samples of coding and key themes identified.

## Findings from critical analysis of public policy development literature

Development of public policy in a democratic context is specifically theorized and guided in terms of practice in the disciplines of *policy sciences* and *policy studies* as well as public administration and democratic political theory broadly. Therefore, the first stage of this study involved a critical review of literature in these disciplines to examine what they *say* about communication in the policy development process. The second stage involved interviews with a substantial sample of senior public policy and senior public sector communication practitioners in three countries to explore what they *do* in practice.

A large body of academic and professional literature exists in relation to public policy, which is “made by governments” as well as by public institutions such as statutory authorities and regulatory bodies in areas including health, education, transport, and social services, and which can “affect and influence every member of a nation state or a subnational jurisdiction” (Howlett & Cashore, 2014, p. 17). Relevant literature has been published in journals and numerous books notably by (Araral, 2013; Birkland, 2020; Cairney, 2019; Dye, 2016; Hill & Varone, 2021; Howlett, 2019, Howlett & Tosun, 2023, Kingdon, 2010, and Morgan et al., 2006), who edited the almost 1,000-page reference work, *The Oxford Handbook of Public Policy*.

In addition to discussion of public policy in the broad field of public administration, the development of public policy is most specifically theorized and discussed in two distinct but overlapping disciplines.

### Policy sciences

Policy sciences developed as a specialization beyond discussion of policy in the broad fields of political science and public administration based initially on the writing of Harold Lasswell, who coined the term *policy sciences*. It is salient and somewhat ironic, as will be shown, that policy development theory was initiated by a communication scholar. Lasswell succinctly and cogently described policy sciences as “knowledge of the policy process and of the relevance of knowledge *in* the process” [original emphasis], drawing attention to the importance of research and theory about policy development as well for informing specific policies (Lasswell, 1970, p. 3). In particular, Lasswell proposed and advocated “the policy sciences of democracy” (Lasswell, 1951, p. 15), which brings to the fore the issue of public involvement and participation in public policy development.

Policy sciences is scientific “in the general sense of pursuing verifiable knowledge rather than in the specific . . . sense of searching for general laws” (Ascher, 1986, p. 365) and on the basis that the field draws on social sciences including political science, sociology, and psychology and data informed by both quantitative and qualitative research (Fischer

et al., 2019). This is particularly the case in what Cairney and Weible (2017) call the “new policy sciences” and it highlights a second key feature of policy sciences: a proclaimed *multidisciplinary* approach. Some go further to claim that the policy sciences are interdisciplinary and even transdisciplinary (Vogel et al., 2017, p. 357).

A third claimed distinguishing feature of the policy sciences is a *problem-oriented* and *values-oriented* approach (Morgan et al., 2006, pp. 40–41). In addition to consciously addressing identified policy problems, a values-oriented approach recognizes that no social problem or social science undertaking is value-free. Thus, policy sciences scholars claim to avoid *objectivism* and positivist thinking, instead adopting iterative post-positivist approaches (Fischer et al., 2019).

In operational terms, Lasswell and his followers conceptualized policy development as occurring in stages. Lasswell proposed one of the first multi-stage models of policy development with seven stages, which he proposed as (1) intelligence gathering and processing; (2) promotion of a chosen policy alternative; (3) prescription to define the selected policy; (4) enforcement of the chosen policy; (5) application (i.e., implementation); (6) appraisal/evaluation; and (7) termination if/when appropriate (Lasswell, 1971). (See Table 2.)

These were later refined and simplified to five stages as (1) agenda setting; (2) policy formulation; (3) decision-making; (4) implementation; and (5) evaluation (Anderson, 1975; Howlett & Ramesh, 2003). Similar models identifying the stages of public policy development, which came to be referred to as *policy cycles*, were published and championed over several decades including those of (Howlett & Ramesh, 2003; Janssen & Helbig, 2018, p. S100; Jordon & Adelle, 2012; Linsky, 1986; McNutt & Hofer, 2021, p. 134; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2022a). For example, the OECD identified five stages of public policy development as (1) issue identification; (2) policy formulation; (3) decision-making; (4) implementation; and (5) evaluation (Organization, 2022a, p. 23). Significantly, none of seven policy stages/cycles cited above mention communication in any form (See Table 2.)

## **Policy studies**

As the name suggests, policy studies, which evolved in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, involves the study of policy development as an academic discipline in contrast with the more applied and administrative focus of policy sciences (Cairney, 2013; Fairclough, 2013; Goodin et al., 2006). An examination of public policy in education says that, as well as analysis of the contents and outcomes of policy, “policy studies encompass analysis of the process of policy making, that is, the *policy process* itself” (Pillow, 2023, para. 1) [emphasis added], which includes policy process research. Also, as in the policy sciences, policy studies takes a multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approach. For example, Cairney (2013) examines and advocates the synthesis of multiple theories in public policy studies.

Policy studies scholars have been critical of policy cycles, arguing that they represent the processes of policy development simplistically. Cairney (2021) says “policy theories treat classic descriptions of policy design as divorced from reality, and only useful as ideal types to contrast with what actually happens” (2021, p. 1). Nevertheless, policy cycles continue to be used along with models identifying stages, as discussed in the following.

Critical policy studies also reject positivist notions of knowledge that proponents say has “long informed the theory and practice of policy studies and policy analysis in particular”

**Table 2.** Traditional policy cycles that do not mention consultation, stakeholder or citizen engagement, or public communication.

	Anderson (1975) Ramesh (2003)	Howlett and Linsky (1986)	Jordon and Adelle (2012)	McNutt and Hoefler (2021, p. 134)	Janssen and Helbig (2018, p. S100)	Policy Stages (OECD, 2022a, p. 23)
Intelligence gathering and processing		Setting policy agenda	Problem emergence	Agenda setting	Problem definition	Issue identification
Promotion of chosen policy alternative	Agenda setting	Developing and debating policy alternatives	Agenda setting	Policy formulation	Policy development	Policy formulation
Prescription to define selected policy	Policy formulation	Selecting policy from alternatives	Consideration of policy options	Policy selection		Decision making
Invocation or enforcement of chosen policy	Decision making		Decision making		Policy implementation	
Application (i.e., implementation)	Implementation	Implementing the selected policy	Implementation	Policy implementation	Policy enforcement	Implementation
Appraisal/evaluation	Evaluation	Monitoring and evaluation	Evaluation	Program evaluation	Policy evaluation	Evaluation
Termination if/when appropriate		Making adjustments if needed				

(Fischer et al., 2015, p. 1). Critical policy studies raise questions about evidence-based policy making when this is interpreted primarily or exclusively as scientific evidence and challenges the dominance in policy development of economic criteria such as cost-benefit analyses and reliance on technical experts, referred to *expertocracy* and *technocratization* of policy development. Critical perspectives open the door to greater consideration of lived experience and vernacular knowledge as contributions to policy development.

It can be concluded that policy sciences and policy studies share many attributes including multi/interdisciplinarity, a research-based approach, and a commitment to democracy that should extend the process beyond expert and technical input and analysis to include stakeholder and citizen engagement, consultation, and participation. However, many contemporary policy cycles and models in the scholarly literature continue to either not include public communication or narrowly conceptualize it as functional one-way information to announce and promote policies.

### **Official government guidelines on democratic policy making**

Many governments stipulate how public policy should be developed. For example, in its *Guidelines for Citizen Participation Processes*, the OECD outlines a 10-step path including communication but describes this narrowly as “communication about the process” (Organization, 2022a, p. 22). (See Table 3.)

The so-called *Green Book* published by the UK Government includes “feedback” but at the end of the process after policy has been implemented (HM Treasury [HM], 2024). An input-output model published by Birkland (2020, p. 37) includes “public opinion” as an input but provides no details of how this is identified and accessed (See Table 3).

Only the policy development cycles of the International Organization for Migration (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2023) and the Australian Government (2023) include “consultation.” But in these cycles, consultation occurs as the third stage of seven-stage cycles after policy has been formulated. Only the policy development model of the Centers for Disease Control and Protection (Centers for Disease Control and Protection [CDC], 2022), an academic study by Janssen and Helbig (2018, p. S103), and an updated model of the O (2023, p. 46) refer specifically to inclusion of “stakeholder engagement” and “civic engagement” throughout the policy development process (See Table 3).

Thus, only three out of 13 policy cycles and processes prominently reported in extant literature include two-way strategic public communication. This is a concerning finding in relation to both RQ1 and RQ2.

In addition to stage-based policy cycles and models, contemporary policy research and development have embraced *policy frameworks*, the most discussed example being the *Multiple Streams Framework* (MSF) developed and refined by Kingdon (2010). The MSF proposes that three distinct but interconnected ‘streams’ or work constitute the policy process, namely: (1) the *problem* stream, which focuses on identifying and defining problems requiring a policy solution; (2) the *policy* stream, which develops and refines potential policy solutions; and (3) the *politics* stream that considers the political climate and public opinion. While the politics stream considers public opinion, this is mostly confined to identifying the likely acceptability of policies developed by policy teams as well as political preferences and will.



Other similar frameworks include Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith's *Advocacy Coalition Framework*; Baumgartner and Jones' *Punctuated Equilibrium Theory* (PET) and the *Institutional Analysis and Development Framework* (Van der Heijden et al., 2021). Some policy analysis techniques such as *multi-criteria analysis* (MCA), which is used to identify and compare different policy options, also serve as frameworks. However, while identifying that policy development is not simply a linear process undertaken by expert rational actors, policy frameworks such as the MSF focus largely on *agenda setting* before moving into policy research and policy analysis to identify preferred policy solutions, thus resembling if not replicating policy stages and cycles (Cairney & Zahariadis, 2016). In fact, Hoefler (2021) refers to policy stages as a framework and vice versa.

Analysis of academic and institutional literature reveals a problematic omission of communication *per se* in most public policy development cycles, processes, and frameworks. Of particular note is that strategic public communication as an *input* to public policy, such as public meetings and hearings, public consultation, citizens juries, panels, councils, and assemblies, dialogs, and other methods, is scantily mentioned in academic literature and government guidelines. When forms of strategic public communication are mentioned, analysis reveals a common interpretation of communication as a *one-way* process for informing, persuading, and promoting by governments and public institutions.

### **Findings from practice – What practitioners say and do (and don't do)**

To further explore understanding and use of strategic public communication in policy development and particularly to investigate practice, which might be different to theory and published policy cycles as suggested by Cairney (2021, p. 1), primary research involving interviews was undertaken to explore RQs 1 and 2. Three main themes emerged in the most prominent and emphasized comments of interviewees as follows.

#### ***Open government approaches***

Like many committed to democracy, David Goessmann, Director of the OECD Open Government, Civic Space and Public Communication Unit, is an advocate for open government in the form of increased stakeholder and citizen engagement, consultation, and participation in public policy development, saying “the essential element for reinforcing democracy is meaningful participation.” However, Goessmann said that open government has sometimes been interpreted narrowly as making data available to citizens, which has resulted in “dropping loads of data on the web” rather than being open to receive information and views (D. Goessmann, personal communication, June 4, 2024).

#### ***Public communication as promotion***

The predominant theme emphasized by almost all interviewees was that many governments have stated commitments to public consultation, engagement, and participation in policy development but commonly fail to implement them in terms of engaging with stakeholders and citizens in the practice of public policy development. This could be summarized as democratic governments ‘talking the talk’ but not ‘walking the walk’ of two-way communication.

Bob Jensen, a veteran of 32 years working in US Government departments and agencies including the White House, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, pointed out that “consultation and stakeholder engagement are mandated by Federal law on many issues in the USA.” However, he said “how much is done varies quite a lot.” He explained: “Specialists usually take the lead on consultation and stakeholder engagement and sometimes citizen engagement on the big issues. Once policies are developed, they tend to bring in communicators to publicize them” (B. Jensen, personal communication, August 15, 2024).

Global Director of Capability with the WPP Government and Public Sector Practice, Sean Larkins, who previously held senior positions in the UK Civil Service, said the relationship between public policy teams and public communication teams in government is mostly a case of “we make it; you sell it” (S. Larkins, personal communication, August 8, 2024).

Communications Advisor for Europe and Central Asia at the World Bank, José-Manuel Bassat, who has more than 20 years of experience advising governments on how to use communication said that Ministers and other senior officials in government commonly do not have the bandwidth or the mind-set to focus on public communication as part of policy development. “They tend to see communication as something to be done after policies have been developed – it is often an afterthought” he said (J. Bassat, personal communication, September 10, 2024).

Alessandro Bellantoni, Director of Policy and Partnerships for the Open Government Partnership (OGP), agreed saying “this is something the OGP is working on” but he acknowledged:

Public communication and public policy are mostly not connected other than use of public communication to announce policies after they have been developed and to promote support and compliance. Public communication is mostly focused on getting information out . . . it’s one-way at the end of the cycle. (A. Bellantoni, personal communication, June 3, 2024)

While qualitative research findings are not generalizable, *information saturation* (Morrison et al., 2002), also referred to as *thematic saturation* or *redundancy* (Guest et al., 2020), emerged quickly during interviews indicating a near consensus that public policy development proceeds with little strategic public communication as input, such as through public consultation, engagement, or participation methods. Communication practitioners are most often called in after public policies have been developed.

Larkins offers a global perspective in explaining this marginalization of strategic public communication in public policy development. Before joining WPP in 2015, he was Deputy Director of UK Government Communication in the Office of the Prime Minister and Cabinet from 2012 to 2015 and, prior to that, from 2008 to 2012 he was Director of Strategy and Planning in the UK Central Office of Information (CIO), a forerunner organization to the current GCS. Since joining WPP, he authored *The Leaders’ Report: The Future of Government Communication* (WPP, 2017) and he leads WPP’s executive education faculty at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore and the Blavatnik School of Government at Oxford University. Larkins observed that very few schools of public policy include communication as a discipline of study. Public communication for most public policy staff is “very much an unexperienced practice.” He added: “Communication is not seen as a profession in the same way that economics and

policy analysis are. ‘Comms’ is shunted into a corner in the process; it’s not sufficiently respected” (S. Larkins, personal communication, August 8, 2024).

Emeritus Professor of Corporate Communication at the University of Huddersfield in the UK, Anne Gregory, who has worked closely with UK Government communication for 20 years and who is lead tutor of the GCS’s master’s degree course on strategic communication leadership, considers public consultation and stakeholder and citizen engagement part of strategic public communication. She includes public meetings; public consultation methods; citizens’ juries, councils, panels, and assemblies; dialogs; deliberative polls; and engagement with deliberative mini publics as strategic public communication methods. She said: “I don’t know what else you would call it. There is a level of hyper-specialization that has occurred in consultation and engagement, with people re-labeling functions and roles. But in the end, it is public communication” (A. Gregory, personal communication, August 6, 2024). This view is supported in academic literature such as the work of Delli Carpini (2020b).

Gregory said that in her experience collaboration between public policy staff and public communication staff at national level in government in the UK is “occasional” rather than the norm. She noted that “sometimes consultation is mandatory” but described central government openness to input from stakeholders and citizens as only “slightly open” overall. She said:

I would say that central government does the minimum to do the job. This is partly to do with cost restrictions. They also restrict consultation to a number of prescribed questions, and these are not always the questions the public has or the topics that they want to be consulted on. (A. Gregory, personal communication, August 6, 2024)

Referring to 2023 OECD *Public Communication Scan of the United Kingdom*, which reported many positive aspects of GCS strategic public communication but noted a lack of large-scale organizational listening to stakeholders and citizens (OECD, 2023, pp. 8–9), Sarah Clark, Head of Strategic Communication in the GCS, described involvement of GCS communication staff in policy development as “varied and patchy.” Clark claims that collaboration between policy teams and communication staff is improving in the UK Government, and this is supported to some extent by recent initiatives such as publication of a revised *Policy Systems Framework* including an annex that specifies stakeholder and citizen engagement (UK, 2024b) following revised *Policy Profession Standards* (UK, 2021).

### ***A ‘demand side’ and ‘supply side’ problem***

A number of discussions turned to possible reasons for lack of two-way communication in public policy development, and a two-fold answer emerged in interviewee responses.

Sarah Clark offered the view that governments are now constantly operating in a *permacrisis*, a term that Collins Dictionaries selected as its ‘word of the year’ in 2022 (Collins, 2022). She explained: “People in government feel they need to make decisions very quickly. It’s a case of psychology meets strategy. Staff find themselves using System 1 thinking, not System 2.” As a result, “they feel they don’t have time to be deliberative and consult” (S. Clark, personal communication, July 16, 2024).

After a 25-year career in the Australian Public Service (APS) at the national government level and being a key architect of the *Australian Public Service Framework for Engagement*

*and Participation*, Damian Carmichael sees several practical limitations that curtail public servants from consultation, engagement, and enabling participation in public policy development. He said:

In some if not many instances, governments in power believe that they know the problem and also believe that they know the best way of addressing it. They ask the Public Service to simply come up with a way of implementing the solution, leaving little opportunity for consultation, engagement, or participation. (D. Carmichael, personal communication, July 26, 2014)

In other cases, Carmichael noted that governments want something done quickly. So, there is no time to consult, engage, or seek participation in decision-making or policy making.

In addition, he said there is also “some fear and potential reputational risk” involved in public servants opening themselves up to open government processes. Carmichael admitted that some public servants do not want to invite others into the policy process. “They see themselves as being responsible for finding solutions. They think ‘I’m the one who is supposed to have the answers.’ Others coming into the process can represent a potential attack on their identity and role” (D. Carmichael, personal communication, July 26, 2014).

Executive Director of the newDemocracy Foundation, Iain Walker, agrees that fear is one of the reasons for lack of public consultation and stakeholder and citizen engagement. He reported: “When we ask politicians, do you want to consult the community, who do they picture? They picture people sending irate all-caps e-mails to them” (I. Walker (personal communication, July 3, 2024).

Carlotta Alfonsi, a policy analyst in the OECD Open Government, Civic Space and Public Communication Unit in Paris, who was one of the authors and coordinators of the *OECD Report on Public Communication* (OECD, 2021) and the *OECD review of UK public communication* (OECD, 2023), said that in her experience:

Many public communication staff working in government tend to come from media backgrounds and tend to be more attuned to what drives the news media cycle more than social science or the public administration side of government. (C. Alfonsi, personal communication, July 23, 2024)

Alfonsi added: “Government communication staff can sometimes suffer from biases from being in a political media bubble.” US veteran policy adviser and public communicator Bob Jensen agreed with this observation and offered the advice that public communication practitioners need to be *strategic* in the true sense of the term. He explained:

We often hear communication staff say they are doing strategic communication. It’s often a case of no, you’re not. You’re doing media relations and publicity or producing content for online platforms. There’s a disconnect in how many people and organizations use that term. (B. Jensen, personal communication, August 15, 2024)

Interviewees also suggested that most public communication practitioners working in government and public institutions lack the skills for specialized two-way strategic public communication practices. For example, Professor of Journalism, Media and Communication at the University of Gothenburg, Magnus Fredriksson, who teaches public sector communication, said:

Public communication is seen as a very important part of government agency activities. However, there are two types of communication – the brochures, the social media, and producing content on one hand. When it comes to public consultation and citizen

engagement ... it's usually other specialists taking the lead. (M. Fredriksson, personal communication, August 7, 2024)

This suggests that the lack of strategic public communication that solicits and uses input from stakeholders and citizens in public policy development is both a *supply side* and a *demand side* problem. Public policy teams are commonly not involving government communication staff other than for PR and promotion after policies have been developed, while, on the other hand, government communication staff are often not focused on two-way communication such as public consultation and stakeholder and citizen engagement methods as part of public policy development. These findings offer empirical evidence in relation to RQ1 and RQ2.

## Conclusions and recommendations

This research indicates that strategic public communication in relation to the development of public policy that affects every organization and individual is predominantly a one-way process. Public policy researchers, analysts, and advisers typically seek strategic public communication advice and implement strategic public communication *after* public policies have been developed to announce and promote them. In fact, in many published policy frameworks, cycles, and processes, public communication – strategic or otherwise – is not systematically addressed at any stage. This is problematic on several counts.

First, the lack of strategic public communication as *input* to the development of public policy undermines democratic principles.

Second, as has been reported by a number of authors and official inquiries, lack of public consultation, engagement, and participation in the development of public policy is shown to lead to not infrequent “public policy failures” (e.g., Road Safety Knowledge Centre, 2020, para. 6) and even to “public policy scandals” (Gov.UK, 2024c) and “debacles” (Rinta-Kahila et al., 2024). Some of those have led to deaths as well as physical and mental suffering of substantial numbers of citizens.

Third, even when public policies are accepted and effective, OECD studies have found that public trust is impacted by the extent to which stakeholders and citizens generally feel that they have a say and that their voices are listened to by government (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2022b, p. 31, 2024b, p. 106). This finding is supported by academic research in relation to employees at work (Kluger & Itzhakov, 2022) and communities (Schultz & McGinn, 2012), which show that trust is highly correlated to listening by leaders and managers.

Critical analysis identifies a conundrum in relation to strategic public communication as a two-way process in public policy development in that:

- (1) Strategic public communication as well as government and public sector communication theory advocate two-way communication between organizations and their stakeholders. However, public sector communication practitioners are mostly employed for one-way communication to promote public policy.
- (2) Many democratic government guidelines and frameworks for public policy development also advocate two-way communication with stakeholders to gain input to public policy development. However, policy sciences and policy studies literature,

particularly popularized policy cycles, mostly fail to identify public communication as a two-way process engaging with stakeholders and citizens.

Identification of the gap in strategic public communication in public policy development as a *demand side* problem suggests that many public policy frameworks, cycles, and processes need revision. This is an area for further research in the policy sciences and policy studies disciplines. However, more inclusive approaches involving strategic public communication as an input to public policy can be facilitated by greater cooperation and collaboration between strategic public communication practitioners working in or for the public sector and public policy professionals. Introduction of the *Policy Systems Framework* in the UK public sector including an annex that specifies stakeholder and citizen engagement (UK, 2024b) and the revised *Policy Profession Standards* (GovUK, 2024a) are developments worth tracking in future research.

Potential barriers to increased use of two-way strategic public communication in public policy development beyond those identified in this study such as fear and lack of skills are also a subject for further research. For example, resistance might exist because of demarcation between functions and the risk of ‘turf wars.’ Can the collaboration between policy teams and public sector communication staff improve, as Clark claims in relation to the UK Government?

Identification of the gap in strategic public communication in public policy development as a *supply side* problem suggests that, despite what could be called ‘grand theories’ of two-way communication, communication practitioners working in or for the public sector need to be informed by further development of middle range theories applicable to specific topics such as those listed in Table 4, supported by enhanced practical skills. Specifically, at the intersection of strategic, government, and public communication, open government, and democratic political theory there are a number of specialized forms of two-way public communication including informal methods, specialized methods, and qualitative research methods that can be used in public policy development (See Table 4.). Interviews conducted in this study indicated that a minority of public sector communication practitioners are experienced in or even familiar with specialized methods of two-way strategic public communication (See Table 4.). Such methods should be incorporated into strategic public communication theory, education, and professional development.

**Table 4.** Methods of stakeholder and citizen consultation, engagement, and participation.

Informal methods	Specialized methods	Research methods
Stakeholder engagement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meetings and forums</li> <li>• Visits and tours</li> </ul>	Public consultation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Circulation for comment</li> <li>• Call for comment or submissions</li> <li>• Public hearings</li> </ul>	Deliberative polls
Advisory boards and groups	Deliberative mini publics	Focus groups
Roundtables	Citizens’ juries	Stakeholder interviews
Crowdsourcing	Citizens’ panels	Participatory action research
Citizen science	Citizens’ councils	Community based participatory research (CBPR)
	Citizens’ summits	Appreciative inquiry
	Citizens’ assemblies	
	Dialogs	
	Participatory budgeting	

Source: Based on (Australian Government, 2020; Macnamara, 2024, pp. 316–318; OECD, 2022a).

It is argued that a lack of two-way strategic public communication in public policy development is a key example of “democratic backsliding” (Bermeo, 2016; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021) and a key contributor to a widely reported “democratic deficit” (Curran, 2011, p. 86; Norris, 2011), a “democratic malaise,” (Gregorio, L. (2021), and even a “crisis of democracy” (Davis, 2019, p. 7; Przeworski, 2019; Van der Meer, 2017). Addressing these alarming trends is a critical challenge for democratic societies in which strategic public communication can play a key role.

## Limitations

Interviews conducted as part of this study did not include representatives from Africa, Asia, or Middle East countries because its focus was major democratic states. Also, as qualitative research, this study does not provide representative or generalizable findings. Nevertheless, it provided a ‘deep dive’ into policy development frameworks, cycles, and processes and the practices of senior public policy and public sector communication practitioners in contemporary democracies.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## APPENDIX 1: Interview Question Guide

- (1) Overall, based on your experience, how would you describe policy development in terms of openness to input from stakeholders, citizens, and communities?  
*(Prompts: Would you say very open, sometimes open, not very open, not open at all? Explain why)*
- (2) To what extent do public policy staff and public communication staff collaborate in public policy development in your experience?  
*(Prompts: Would you say regularly, sometimes, rarely, never?)*
- (3) At what stage of public policy development is public communication employed?  
*(Prompts:*
  - *At the very beginning to seek information about stakeholder and/or opinion, attitudes, or concerns*
  - *Throughout the process*
  - *When releasing draft or proposed policies and seeking feedback*
  - *After policies have been formulated to inform the public and promote the policy*
  - *When things go wrong with policies – e.g., to counter negative media reporting*
  - *Not at any stage*
  - *Other (Please explain)*
- (4) How would you describe the main role of public communication in policy development?
- (5) What are the main communication channels, platforms, and/or methods that you see used for gaining input to policy development, if any.
- (6) Is there a particular policy development cycle or model that you/your organization use or with which you are familiar?
- (7) What types of public communication should be used in the development of public policy in your view?  
*(Prompts: Media advertising; media publicity/PR for policies; official government websites; social media; direct stakeholder engagement; public meetings; other)*
- (8) Can you give an example or case study of when you feel stakeholder or community engagement was actively and inclusively implemented as part of developing public policy?
- (9) Can you give an example or case study of when you feel public consultation was actively and inclusively implemented as part of developing public policy?
- (10) Can you give an example or case study of when you feel stakeholder/community engagement and/or public consultation was NOT present in developing an important public policy?
- (11) To what extent do you believe public sector communication staff are sufficiently knowledgeable and skilled to provide useful input to public policy development?
- (12) To what extent do you believe policy advisers and other policy development staff are open to input from public sector public communication practitioners?
- (13) Is there anything else you would like to say about public communication in relation to public policy development and implementation?

## APPENDIX 2

**Table B1.** Interviewees by organization, position, years of experience, and location (in alphabetical order by location).

	ORGANIZATION	TITLE	YEARS OF EXPERIENCE	LOCATION
1	Open Government Partnership (OGP)	Director	15	Brussels, Belgium
2	Joint Research Center, European Commission	Senior Policy Adviser	10	Brussels, Belgium
3	The Good Lobby	Head of Global Partnerships	12	Brussels, Belgium
4	Federal Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water	Principal Behavioural Scientist	11	Canberra, Australia
5	University of Gothenburg	Professor of Media and Political Communication	14	Gothenburg, Sweden
6	University of Huddersfield, UK	Professor of Communication (Adviser to UK Government)	32	Huddersfield and London, UK
7	UK Government Communication Service (GCS)	Head of Strategic Communication	20	London, UK
8	WPP Government and Public Sector Practice Group	Global Director of Capability	29	London, UK
9	Federal and Commonwealth Development Office, UK Government	Director, Communications	22	London, UK
10	Goldsmiths University	Academic (government communication and policy)	18	London, UK
11	The World Bank	Head of Communication	35	New York, USA
12	OECD Open, Government, Civic Space & Public Communication Unit	Director	15	Paris, France
13	OECD Open Government, Civic Space, and Public Communication Unit	Senior Policy Analyst	12	Paris, France
14	Government Information Service (GIS), France	Chargé de Mission International	14	Paris, France
15	International Listening Association	Immediate Past President	20	Solingen, Germany
16	Center for Media Transition	Research Officer	9	Sydney, Australia
17	Public Purpose (formerly Federal Australian Public Service)	Director	39	Sydney, Australia
18	newDemocracy Foundation	Executive Director	24	Sydney, Australia
19	Institute for Public Policy and Governance	Director	31	Sydney, Australia
20	Converlens consultancy (former Australian Public Service)	Head of Strategy and Relations	34	Sydney, Australia
21	WPP Government and Public Sector Practice group	Executive Director	30	Sydney, Australia
22	US Department of Homeland Security and The White House	Former Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs	42	Washington, DC, USA