THE ROLE OF PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICERS IN LOCAL AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

A Thesis

presented to

the Faculty of the Graduate School

at the University of Missouri

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of the Arts

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by

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DECEMBER 2020

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DEDICATIONS

To my cats. *Peter James, Daisy,* and *Hefe* (*Graysen* and *Momma* too)

"I work hard so my cats can have a better life."

In memory of *Shania, Sissy* and *Poohy*

Thank you to my *mom* for taking care of my house in Colorado that allowed me to move to Missouri to earn this master's degree.

Melissa Bedford: thank you for hiring me to be your GA and for being an amazing supervisor during my master's program. Your kindness and talks helped me through the challenging semesters and get past the rough spots. Thank you!

A huge thank you to *Kirsten Wyatt* of Engaging Local Government Leaders (ELGL) and *Kristy Dalton* of Government Social Media LLC. You both took the time to help a student you never met. Thank you for responding so quickly when I wrote to ask if you would forward my recruitment request to your membership seeking participants to interview for my research. Within hours, you became my marketers by promoting my request on your social media channels and in your newsletters asking your community to consider volunteering. Without your kindness and support I do not know if my thesis would have been possible. I was inspired by all the

wonderful local government communicators who responded due to your generosity and outreach on my behalf.

Thank you to the *13 volunteers* who took the time to speak with me and made this thesis possible. Your agency and community are blessed to have you as their communicator.

God bless you all. Isaiah 6:8. Psalm 71:14

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank *Dr. Tim Vos* for having the patience to try to get me to understand the qualitative process in the Qualitative Research Methods in Journalism class. Through our meeting you introduced me to the role conflict theory that started this thesis journey and helped me understand how I can apply it to my public information officer's topic.

I was very fortunate to have a great committee that gave their time and suggestions that made me a stronger person, researcher, and writer through this process.

Jon Stemmle deserves a gold medal for putting up with me during this master's program. You have been a great advisor who is always available to answer questions and for agreeing to take over being my thesis supervisor when you had a million other things to do. Thank you for being patient, encouraging and not letting me give up. I appreciate all that you have done to guide me through this thesis and the journalism degree.

Holly Higginbotham: thank you for agreeing to be on my committee and suggesting I add demographics questions which helped paint a better picture of who the PIOs are.

Dr. Brett Johnson: thank you, I first met you when you spoke at orientation and your enthusiasm about the law encouraged me to take your law class. You're a great professor in how you explain the law so I could understand it and a shining light in the journalism school. Thank you for taking the time to help me understand how to code and create themes for this thesis.

Dr. Rebecca Meisenbach: thank you for taking the time to brainstorm with me to narrow down my many ideas that helped me get back to where I started this thesis idea with applying role conflict theory to PIOs and helping with refining my research questions.

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THE ROLE OF PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICERS

IN LOCAL AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

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ABSTRACT

Public information officers (PIOs) see themselves as the liaison between the agency they represent and the public. They come from various backgrounds including broadcast and print journalism, for profits and the advertising world while others seek out local government jobs straight out of college since they loved public relations and wanted to serve their local community. This thesis seeks to understand how PIOs experience and manage competing roles in their local government agency, as well as how they came into these PIO roles. This turned out to be a unique year for the PIOs as they learned how to navigate through an unprecedented pandemic to riots to an election on top of their everyday roles. Through qualitative research that included 13 in-depth interviews from current local government PIOs and applying role conflict theory, this thesis presents the PIOs understanding on how they view their roles in their job, what it means to them and how they manage all that they do.

Keywords: Public Information Officer, role, media, agency, social media, engagement, communications, tasks, public relations, PR, PIO

Chapter 1: Introduction

There has been a lack of academic research conducted on the role of public information officers (PIO) in local American government. This study will contribute to the public relations field regarding local government by examining how PIOs perceive their role and responsibilities to their agency, to the public, and how they manage those role conflicts.

Roles are defined as "the social-psychological bases of social systems comprise the role behaviors of members, the norms prescribing and sanctioning these behaviors and the values in which the norms are embedded" (Katz & Khan, 1978, p. 43). "Roles describe specific forms of behavior associated with given positions; they develop originally from task requirements. In their pure or organization form, roles are standardized patterns of behavior required of all persons playing a part in a given functional relationship, regardless of personal wishes or interpersonal obligations irrelevant to the functional relationship" (p. 43).

The position of a PIO is "to inform the media and the general public about agency operations, events, and activities" (Motschall & Cao, 2002) by practicing public relations, but as a government agency the term "public relations" should never be used. Due to the "legal requirements forbidding governments from spending money on 'publicity,' the existing stigmas of the term public relations, and the lack of understanding of the field, very few communications departments will have titles that reflect the field" (Castelli, 2007, p. 2). Instead the term public affairs department is the preferred term for government.

Citizens are supposed to be represented by the government they elect. On the local level, the government's purpose is to figure out what their public wants and think about by engaging with them (Castelli, 2007). Local government impacts the lives of their citizens more often than

either state or federal governments and citizens can have "far more influence at the local level than they ever will at the state or federal level" (Stephens, "Why Local Government is Important," 2017, para. 1).

When adding social media into the PIO role, it offers great opportunities for local government by creating a two-way dialog and eliminating barriers in communication with the PIO agency (Bertot & Jaeger, 2010). Managing the social media channels is the responsibility of the PIOs, who must have "approval and support of government officials, both elected and appointed" (Graham & Avery, 2013, p. 15).

The majority of the academic literature available is several years old, the studies lack the unique perspectives of PIOs being in diverse locations (Graham & Avery, 2013), and most of the research doesn't include the changes social and digital media has brought to the position of a PIO.

The subjects interviewed were found by sending a screener survey to registered participants of public relations/public affairs networking groups that the researcher is a member. The researcher asked the networking administrators to send the screener survey to the member database. A filter was created by requesting PIO work in local government within the United States and possibly a certain city population range. The data collected provided the researcher a chance to gain the perspective of their role in local government.

The researcher used the Role Conflict Theory (RCT) that focuses on "when someone is subjected to two or more contradictory expectations whose stipulations the person cannot simultaneously meet in behavior" (Biddle, 1979). Grounded Theory approach was used to analyze the data she collects from the interviews with active local government PIOs.

Chapter 2: Rationale

The purpose of this thesis and the following literature review and theoretical framework is to evaluate and analyze the role of PIOs in local government and how they experience and manage competing role expectations. This is a useful area for research because there hasn't been much research conducted on applying role conflict theory (RCT) to PIOs roles.

A review of relevant literature found articles from the 1990s and 2000s that showed the results of surveys conducted using James Grunig public relations theories opposed to RCT. The Motschall and Cao's (2002) research resulted in PIOs ranking the importance of their public relations roles: media relations, liaison, technician and communications manager. However, very little updated research exists on the topic. The PIOs personal opinions don't seem to be a part of the studies conducted that would be found in through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The previous studies concentrated on a centralized location, one type of agency and doesn't include social media's influence on the PIO role.

Due to the content the researcher found it was great to know PIOs see media relations as a primary role and that has carried on through the years. There was some useful information that talked about the need to engage internally and externally along with building relationships and being an advisor to their supervisors.

Based on the literature review, research is lacking regarding the investigating of PIOs at the local government level and how they manage their roles in crisis and a work and home life balance. Still there was useful information found throughout the articles regarding how PIOs

understand their responsibilities. Through the literature review, the researcher developed the following research questions:

RQ1: How do PIOs experience and manage competing role expectations?

1a) What are the roles they perceive to have?

1b) What role is the most fulfilling?

1c) What is their responsibility to their agency in these roles?

1d) What is their responsibility to the public in these roles?

1e) How are perceived role conflicts managed?

Chapter 3: Literature Review

Public Information Officers

According to Better Team (2019), PIOs act as the face of a government agency by "creating and maintaining a favorable public image for the organization they represent." PIOs serve four primary constituencies: the public, the media, their agency and other responding agencies (Politano, 2009) and some of the employment categories include federal, state, local, higher education, Kindergarten-12 education, police, firemen, and non-profit.

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) defines public relations as "a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (About Public Relations section, para. 3). PRSA is the nation's leading public relations professional organization with a membership of over 21,000 professionals throughout the country.

As public relations professionals, PIOs are expected to abide by ethical standards of the profession, such as the code created by PRSA for its 30,000 professional and student members. This code includes fundamental beliefs that should guide the members professional behaviors and decision-making process in "advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty, and fairness." Additionally, PRSA states "the value of member reputation depends upon the ethical conduct of everyone affiliated with the PRSA" (PRSA Code of Ethics section, para. 4).

In their daily work, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019) states PIOs "craft media releases and develop social media programs to shape public perception of their organization and increase awareness of its work and goals" (What they do section, para. 1). It's the PIOs responsibility to follow agency guidelines to make sure the statements they release to the press and public are accurate and follow official policy and laws (Roberts, 2019, para. 1).

The characteristics of PIOs outlined in the Handbook for Public Information Officers U.S. Army (1951) are still relevant today. The handbook states a PIOs should have "all the qualities of a good leader" with the ability to "analyze any situation and move quickly to take effective action and the courage to defend his opinions which are based upon proven facts; his standards of conduct should be unquestionable and he must have the highest standards of honesty, ethics and integrity" (p. 3). To be successful, PIO need to use their interpersonal skills by interacting with the public, media, press and government officials. They use their organizational skills to multitask by working on a variety of projects simultaneously.

Additionally, they use problem-solving skills when dealing with "difficult and sensitive situations with discretion and grace;" and they use communication skills by effectively speaking in public and by writing interesting and clear press releases and speeches (Roberts, 2019, Public information officer skills and competencies section).

PIOs have had to adjust to the changing times by including social media into their communications plan (Graham, 2013). They must be aware of the social media presence of their agency keeping the channels updated with correct information since 40 percent of those who use the internet are going online for information concerning their community for updates on emergencies (Raine, 2011; Smith, 2011). Through digital media, barriers of reaching the public

directly have been eliminated. Today blogs, podcasts, and social media channels are frequent, open and targeted, eliminating the need to work with reporters (Kingsley, 2010). There has always been a two-way flow of information, but with social media channels the response is now instantaneous. Digital communication has proven to be a helpful tool, particularly in times of crisis (Turney, 2009a, para. 6).

Professional Networking Memberships

Professional memberships are valuable to PIOs because they offer opportunities to grow their career through networking. They can also participate in professional development and mentorship activities along with serving the profession through advocacy options (Echevarria, 2018, The Best Fit section, para. 2). Many PIOs and public relations professionals join organizations to network with like-minded people, and many have received their jobs through the connections they make as a member of an organization.

These connections relate to the long-time adage of "It's not what you know, but who you know" as they can be helpful in knowing which agencies are hiring and point to the importance of social networking promoting success in the profession (Rajagopal & Brinke, 2012; de Janasz & Forret, 2007). This cliché has been updated over time to include networks PIOs are connected with: "It's not just who you know, it's what they can help you learn" (Anders, 2018, p. 13-14).

PRSA is helping PIOs and public affairs professionals connect through online networking groups and in-person networking. Members receive the opportunity for professional development through conferences and webinars along with memberships with their local PRSA for networking (Membership section).

Modern History of PIOs in the U.S. Society

In April 1917, President Woodrow Wilson created a new federal agency by issuing an executive order, "put[ting] the government in the business of actively shaping press coverage" (Daly, para. 7). The functions of the Committee on Public Information (CPI) were "to release government news during World War I, sustain morale and handle administered and voluntary press censorship" (Archives). The CPI was chaired by George Creel, a muckraking journalist who had the task of getting Americans to want to support the war. Creel called this "'the white-hot mass of patriotism' and spreading the good news about America and its democratic values throughout the world" (Basen, Committee on Public Information section, para. 2).

At the time, most Americans consumed the majority of their news from their newspapers (Daly, Mobilizing for War section, para. 4). This changed after the CPI was formed and began tapping into practices used by the new industry of public relations, along with advertising, journalism, graphic design, and academia (para. 3). By the end of the war, the CPI's efforts included creating the iconic Uncle Sam recruiting images, millions of bulletins, press releases, posters and photographs along with production of silent films (para. 4). Part of this effort was the work of the 75,000 people dubbed the 'Four Minute Men' who "deliver[ed] carefully crafted four-minute inspirational orations in church halls, movie theatres, and anywhere else that Americans gathered" (para. 5). This CPI effort contributed to Americans shedding their reluctance to war as young men "flock[ed] to recruiting offices" and millions of Americans bought Liberty Loans to finance the war efforts (para. 7). Creel saw the CPI as educational and informative, while others saw it as the "largest propaganda machine the world had ever seen" (Basen, Heart vs. Head section, para. 1-3).

During the 20th century, PIOs welcomed dual roles as "as information brokers to the public and reputation managers of their organizations" (McCollough, 2016). Government agencies were one of the first to apply public relations with federal and local agencies launching publicity, promotional and informational campaigns. PIOs protected the reputation of the agency by being the gatekeepers who monitored interviews to make sure the agency was quoted correctly (Carlson & Cuillier, 2017).

In 1913, political activists and special interest groups expressed concerns regarding the appropriateness of involving government agencies in public relations and attempting to influence legislative decisions (Turney, Government Public Relations section, 2009b, para. 1). As a result, the Gillett Amendment was added to the Deficiency Appropriation Act of 1913 of Code of Laws of the United States of America. It stated, "Appropriated funds may not be used to pay a publicity expert unless specifically appropriated for that purpose" (Taylor & Kent, 2016, p. 2). The Gillett Amendment was intended "to stop government agencies from influencing public policy by creating and distributing information to the public." At the time it passed, one-way communication with citizens was the norm (2016). The CPI overcame the obstacle of the Gillette Amendment by reaching its intended audience through direct messaging. In many ways the Gillett Amendment is a contradiction. The government should be communicating with citizens, but Gillett "was passed to limit communication by the executive branch and curtail the power and ability of government agencies to have impact or influence over public legislation on the national, state and local stage" (p. 3).

Although the amendment passed, taxpayer dollars were still used to inform citizens about government issues by hiding vague titles as statistician, editors, directors of information and

communication “masking how many people are actually involved with public outreach” (Taylor & Kent, 2016, p. 4). The amendment limited the idea of what public relations in government could be by emphasizing “publicity expert” rather than “communication professional” (p. 4).

After World War I and subsequently to now, there have been significant advances in public relations theory that supports thoughtful and ethical practices in public relations (2016). The government has never stopped performing public relations and because of the Gillett Amendment, the appropriate titles to be used for government practitioner tasks have been given a “new and less-offensive and more public-spirited labels” (Turney, Government Public Relations section, 2009b, para. 7, 9) such as public information officer, public affairs officer/director, press secretary, public relations specialist, and press agent (para. 3), the title public relations officer should never be used (Ekachai, Public information vs public relations section, 2002, para. 5). Many state, local laws and regulations that were enacted to prohibit or limit public relations efforts are still strictly enforced today (Turney, 2009b, para. 13).

Fifty-seven years after the Gillett Amendment, Congress passed the Sunshine Law, which requires government meetings to be open to the public promoting transparency. Due to the law and the pressure for openness, the number of government PIOs has increased, and the roles of PIOs have “changed from giving out information to giving out information about information availability” (DeSanto, 2001).

Roles of PIOs

The general role of a PIOs is to “develop productive relationships between themselves, the agency, and the public they interact with for long-term success” since they are liaisons between the public and the agency (McCollugh, 2016). They increase public awareness, (Grunig,

L., Dozier & Grunig, J., 2002) along with assisting the media in getting correct and timely information from the organization to the journalist and the public (Bitter, 2018, para. 6). They also refer the media to the appropriate person in the department who can be referenced as the expert on the topic. Another responsibility is to prepare the spokesperson on how to work with the media and speak to the public and being "well trained in the organization's message" while trying to influence how the organization is portrayed (Fitch, 2012). They are problem solvers, decision makers and planners which includes participating in meetings with leadership regarding adopting new policies and procedures, discussing problems and implementing new programs along with evaluating results of programs. Additionally, PIO are often responsible for preparing PR materials along with creating graphics, producing materials such as designing brochures and writing news releases (Dozier, 1984).

In Motschall and Cao's (2002) research, they used James Grunig's (1989) 'Symmetrical Presuppositions as a Framework for Public Relations Theory.' Grunig's work guided them in creating their survey using his four primary roles of the public relations practitioner. This resulted in determining the four types of public relations roles that were the most important to the survey respondents in their role at their respective agency. Seventy percent of PIOs ranked media relations as their primary role, "placing the use of media-oriented techniques/activities such as writing press releases, making informal/formal contact with the media, and holding press conferences at high importance" (2002). The liaison role ranked second, technician was ranked third and communication manager was forth (2002).

For many public relations practitioners it's about influencing, engaging, and building relationships with the public, along with anticipating crisis (Roberts, 2019, Work Environment

section, para. 1-2). PIO have several responsibilities such as 1) building trust by providing information that the public needs, being transparent and be willing to tell a difficult story; 2) be a source by being present so people will know they can rely on your information along with expediting answers and providing context for issues; 3) be a bridge by getting people where they need to go including knowing your organization and the key stakeholders. This responsibility includes knowing who the content specialists are in the agency and being able to connect them with the journalist to get them the answers they need; and 4) anticipating needs and monitoring feeds by constantly knowing the pulse of the community including managing the various social media channels that are used by the agency. In addition to anticipating needs, they are responsible for recognizing hot topics that arise in the community and knowing when to bring them to the attention of the manager or appropriate department director (Bitter, 2018, para. 4).

Through honest and mutual respect, PIOs have learned to build trust (Garnett 1992; Graber 1992). Along with building relationships with open, two-way communication and ethically engaging citizens on the local level since the PIO is part of the community. PIOs are also the direct source of information and the face of the agency in times of an emergency. They deliver accurate and specific information in a way the affected audiences will understand (Borek, 2018). They are the bridge between the agency and the information seeker as they focus on communicating with the people they serve, whether that's through the media, websites, presentations, videos, or social media (Floore, 2018, para. 16) because people deserve to hear from their government (para. 4). They need to have the ability to anticipate what the community needs. One way to do this is by monitoring news reports and social media conversations

regarding their community. This can help the PIO to steer the department into the direction of developing new content and help understand their constituents' needs (Burnet, 2018).

Local Roles of PIOs

Since most Americans have more contact with their local government than their state or federal government it is important for the PIO to understand "powers not granted to the federal government are reserved for states and the people, which are divided between state and local governments" (Whitehouse, n.d., State & Local Government section, para. 1-2).

PIOs "helped to provide valuable information on schools, neighborhoods, churches, local services, and resources available in the area" (Saylor, n.d., p. 171). This includes developing effective relations with a variety of audiences such as shareholders, employees, local communities, and the public (Saylor, n.d.). Reaching out to the community helps local residents value a company's impact in a community when using it's well-conceived strategic program by being recognized in the community and can build upon those public relations strengths (Saylor, n.d.).

On the local level, "how the government responds to, manages, and communicates about crisis has direct implications for the public's well-being and ultimately shapes public opinion about local governments and government officials" (Avery, Graham & Park, 2016). When a state has a crisis, the impact may not be immediate on citizens, but the public trust can be compromised along with local governments perceived credibility (2016).

PIOs may manage a variety of crises that include corruption of officials, public health, acts of violence, natural disasters such as transportation, flooding, drought and tornados along with social issues including religion-based, race-based and homelessness along with political

scandals (p. 29). In addition to overseeing systems that affect public safety simultaneously such as law enforcement, transportation, medical and legal issues (p. 13). In addition, they may be preparing and updating crisis plans regularly so the PIO will be ready to serve the community at a moment's notice.

Through the physical proximity, understanding, and awareness of living in the community, local PIOs understand their populations needs including the underserved. Due to their critical and direct contact they may have the most freedom to set agendas and promote them. At the local level they may have less clearances to clear when releasing information to the public than the federal agencies (Lee, 2001). For example, when dealing with health issues, the local public health department is concerned about the public health of the community they serve. Their agenda may have some overlap with a national agenda but since it's local their agenda will be unique to the environment, geographically and with ethical issues (Avery & Lariscy, 2011). They are a bridge between the media and the public health administrators (Lee, 2001), as "the special interests of media, publics, and policymakers must align to identify and set the overall health agenda for a community" (Avery & Lariscy, 2011). According to a study by Lee (2001), PIOs spend more time with local reporters than federal PIOs with the public and explaining the health policy agenda (p. 64).

"For most Americans, the local level is where government is most real, and it's a logical place where the principles of democracy can be taught" (Sembor, 1993). This is an opportunity for local officials to be leaders in citizenship development and guiding the public in understanding the rules using open communication, creating town meetings for discussions between public officials and citizens and "building an identity away from the 'us' versus 'them'

attitude prevalent between the government and its citizens" (Castelli, 2007). When local governments provide forums for discussion and public debate, they capitalize on creating a successful government by increasing "voter confidence in the ability of government to solve society's problems" (Castelli, 2007).

Social Media and PIOs

One of the newest additions to the role of the PIO is the use of social media. According to Investopedia, social media is defined as "computer-based technology that facilitates the sharing of ideas, thoughts, and information through the building of virtual networks and communities. By design, social media is internet-based and gives users quick electronic communication of content that includes personal information, documents, videos, and photos" (What is Social Media section, para. 1).

Social media use in government agencies was started to fulfill the goals of the Open Government and Transparency initiative that was created in 2009 by the Obama administration. That initiative required that the U.S. Federal government "harness[es] new technologies" to become more participatory, collaborative, and transparent by using social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs (Mergel, 2013). "The adoption of social media in the federal government was influenced by two main factors: 1) the passive attention network among social media practitioners, and 2) to a much lesser extent and initially lacking, formal guidance from the top management" (2013). The tactics varied in the intensity of interaction that included networking, engagement, or representation (2013).

An estimated 79 percent of the United States population had a social networking profile as of 2019 (Clement, 2019). They include Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, LinkedIn,

Pinterest, and YouTube, with Facebook being the most popular with two billion monthly users as of June 2017 (Jolly, 2020).

According to Mergel (2013), as the use of social media became popular, social media director job positions were created. The positions were "institutionally associated with an internal public affairs team, highlighting the focus of their activities as part of the department's public communication mission." Before social media, when dispensing information to citizens during an emergency, PIOs used traditional media such as television, radio, and newspapers. Since social media has become a popular source for information, PIO have found it is an effective way to communicate and distribute information directly and immediately to the public (Hughes and Palen, 2012).

With social media becoming important to the agency and the community, the field of public relations cannot be underscored. The medium has become necessary for many organizations to function (Valentini and Kruckeberg, 2012).

"Citizens are increasingly offered the chance to communicate with local governments in a variety of online arenas including social media. This revelation opens new communication channels for government officials to communicate with their key stakeholders, the citizens they represent" (2004).

Transparency

According to the Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government, agencies should use the social media channels to inform the public about their operations and decisions online. The transparency will promote accountability by providing information about what is going on in the government to the citizens (2009, Para. 2). The 'Open Government Directive' also

encourages agencies to seek public participation and feedback regarding how the government can be improved (Para. 3-5).

Many agency representatives see the utilization of social media channels to get their message to the public, bring understanding to citizens, and allow them a way to interact with the agency (Mergel, 2013). PIOs can use social media to seek ways of monitoring and gathering "publicly-generated information not only for its potential to aid in response efforts but also so false rumor and misinformation can be identified and corrected" (Latonero and Shklovski, 2011; Hughes and Palen, 2012).

It has affected government communication with the public by creating a direct line to their citizens along with bypassing the media to get their message out to their intended public. The challenge isn't to get their stories in the news, rather, their challenge is getting the agency's news stories reported "clearly, fully, and accurately" so citizens will know how the government is going to affect their lives (Turney, 2009a, Unique Characteristics section, para. 1). Most government PIOs already have an audience with journalists whereas the private sector and non-profits may have to "court media coverage" to push out their message (Gould, 2003, p. 15). A PIO working in a government agency knows they are the news according to Michael V. Reagen, the former Iowa Human Services Commissioner. "We don't have to make the news. We are news!" (Turney, 2009a, Unique Characteristics section, para. 1).

Social Media Engagement

Social media is a way for government agencies to interact and engage with citizens. This is particularly helpful on the local level since the public feels they have the ability for direct access to their government (Graham, 2014). Using social media's ability to create a two-way

dialogue, “PIOs in local government report being able to quickly address citizen concerns and mitigate negative feelings and comments. This encouragement of both positive and negative feedback makes the government’s efforts to provide transparency and accountability more plausible” (Graham, 2014).

There are several challenges for social media professionals working in local government. Since they are operating on a limited budget along with having a variety of jobs to perform and inadequate resources, they may not have the ability conduct public relations using social media effectively. The public affairs department may consist of one person and they cannot commit to keeping up the social media channels every day (Hallahan, 2008). Another challenge is having to get buy-in from their leadership as to why a PIO needs to spend so much time on social media (Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin., 2011) and/or attend professional development workshops so they can learn from their peers in the government field.

Creating Campaigns

When designing social media promotional campaigns, PIOs should take listening, focusing, being patient, sharing, trendsetting, discussion, responding and being available into consideration to be successful (Blakeman, 2014). According to Allagui and Breslow (2015), the campaigns they analyzed in their study emphasize brand positioning, conversion, and continued nourishing the brand as key goals. At the core of many campaigns are digital storytelling and entertainment. PIOs can use those stories to develop and produce entertaining content that is compelling to the agency’s target audience and makes them want to share the information on their social networks.

Creating digital storytelling is a way for the target audience to become interested and aware of the agency's campaign they are pushing out on their social media channels. “The greater that the target audience is immersed in the story, the greater that their engagement with social media will be, which in turn will drive other metrics” (Allagui & Breslow, 2015).

Role Conflict Theory

This thesis will apply Role Conflict Theory (RCT) to the role of PIOs. According to Biddle (1986), RCT “concerns one of the most important characteristics of social behavior - the fact that human beings behave in ways that are different and predictable depending on their respective social identities and the situation” (p. 68). The theory focuses on individuals and their behaviors which are “characteristics within contexts and with various processes that presumably produce, explain, or are affected by those behaviors” (Biddle, 1979).

Role conflict theory is about the role of work in your life. Most versions of role theory argue that “expectations are the major generators of roles, that expectations are learned through experience and that people are aware of the expectations they hold” (Biddle, 1986). Most of role research has addressed practical questions such as role conflict theory (RCT), which focuses on “when someone is subjected to two or more contradictory expectations whose stipulations the person cannot simultaneously meet in behavior” (Biddle, 1979).

RCT began as a theatrical metaphor since actors felt obligated to perform their parts the way the scripts were written. The theory’s earlier work comes from psychology, sociology and anthropology (Biddle, 1986). The theory argues that people will endure stress when they are exposed to conflicting pressures. An adoption of a coping behavior is how to resolve the problem and disproving the disruption in the system and the person. “It is normally defined as the

concurrent appearance of two or more incompatible expectations for the behavior of a person" (Biddle, 1986). Thus, the theory has concerned itself with three concepts: "1) patterned and characteristic social behaviors; 2) parts or identities that are assumed by social participants; and 3) scripts or expectations for behavior that are understood by all and adhered to by performers" (1986).

RCT is associated with stress in formal organizations according to past studies (Stryker & Macke, 1978) including in the workplace with "poor job performance, lower commitment to the organization, and higher rates of accidents and resignations" (Biddle, 1986).

Research Questions

A grounded theory approach is appropriate for answering these research questions because the researcher is starting with what people were saying to build up theoretical understanding of the issues at hand. The research questions that were studied are:

RQ1 How do PIOs experience and manage competing role expectations?

RQ1a: What are the roles they perceive to have?

RQ1b: What role is the most fulfilling?

RQ1c: What is their responsibility to their agency in these roles?

RQ1d: What is their responsibility to the public in these roles?

RQ1e: How are perceived role conflicts managed?

Chapter 4: Methods

The purpose of this study is to understand the role of how local government PIOs experience and manage competing role expectations within their agency. The study used a grounded theory approach which was appropriate, "given that it seeks to generate theoretical

insights grounded in raw data and shed light on a phenomenon which to date has remained largely unexplored" (Dunne, & Üstűndağ, 2020, p. 12).

Role theorists tend to adopt the common prevalent methods of research such as "methods for observing roles and those that require research subjects to report their own or others' expectations" (Biddle, 1986). The grounded theory interviews will be viewed as unfolding, collective stories, "not an individual tale told in a single interview" (Charmaz, 2014, pg. 691). The data was collected through semi-structured qualitative analysis interviews through Zoom chat technology and then Otter software was used to create transcripts from the Zoom audio file of the interviews.

The researcher organized the information chronologically, in the order of the people she interviewed. They each have their own folder on the researcher's computer as subject-1, subject-2, subject-3, […] subject-13. This protects the person's identity and makes them anonymous in the data collection. Their folder includes the Zoom interview transcripts and the audio and video recordings.

The data and transcripts of the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. "A method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set" (Braun. & Clarke, 2006, pg. 6) to find the repeating pattern of meaning (2006).

She used the six phases of thematic analysis as a template but modified them to her needs: 1) be familiar with the data collected by transcribing "verbal data such as interviews" into written form which she modified to typewritten form; 2) generat[ed] initial codes from the data that is interesting to the researcher; 3) searched for themes by "re-focus[ing] the analysis at the broader level of themes, rather than codes, involves sorting the different codes into potential

themes, and collating all the relevant coded data extracts within the identified themes." 4) reviewed themes by refining them since not all themes will be good candidates for the thesis; 5) defined and named themes by "identifying the 'essence' of what each theme is about (as well as the themes overall), and determined what aspect of the data each theme captures;" and 6) produced the report "to tell the complicated story of your data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of your analysis" (pg. 17-23).

The researcher used primary coding resulting in the 'Findings' section of the thesis and created a chart using the information that came from the screener survey. Coding is the "active process of identifying data as belonging to or representing some type of phenomenon. This phenomenon may be a concept, belief, action, theme, cultural practice or relationship" (Tracy, 2019, p. 11). Through the coding process the researcher found words and/or short phrases to build her research. Primary-cycle coding refers to "the initial coding activities" (p. 219). "It begins with an examination of the data and assigning words or phrases that capture their essence" (p. 219). It can also be known as first-level codes that "focus on 'what' is present in the data. They are descriptive, showing the basic activities and processing in the data" (p. 220). Secondary-cycle coding is when the "researcher critically examines the codes already identified in primary cycles and begins to organize, synthesize, and categorize them into interpretive concepts" (p. 225). They "explain, theorize, and synthesize the emerging project" (p. 225). Second-level codes "include interpretation and help the researcher identify patterns, rules, or cause-effect progressions; they may include disciplinary concepts" (p. 234).

Epistemology was used to find the information needed for the project through interviews and audio and video recordings (Silverton, 10) along with note taking. The researcher transcribed

the recordings using the Otter transcribing software a few days after speaking with the subjects so she would remember the details of the interaction.

The analysis will help PIOs understand their role in local government through studying the culture they work in using relativism (McKee, 2003). It will also be important to understand if PIOs are adaptable to various cultures in their population (2003).

Sampling

The researcher planned to complete eight to 12 semi-structured interviews with PIO's who are currently working in local government. She was able to complete 13 interviews with PIO who are currently working in local government. The number of interviews was decided upon as a result of research done by Guest, Bunce and Johnson. According to these researchers, data saturation occurs for the most part after 12 interviews (2006). Guest, Bunce and Johnson cited that after 12 interviews very little new themes will emerge from the research (2006). A screener survey was sent out to members of public affairs organizations that the researcher is a member of focusing on PIOs that are current local government agency employees. She also found potential candidates on LinkedIn and sent an email asking if they would participate. The survey was made using Qualtrics with questions designed to identify interview subjects who fit the required screening criteria. Twenty-six people attempted or completed the survey with six screener entries self-identifying as having less than the required five years of experience needed so the screener stopped at that point so their demographics unknown, leaving the remanding 20 potential participants viable. They were sent the 'you're invited' to interview email that informed the respondent of the interview process and asked which date and time was convenient for them but several didn't reply. The researcher sent a follow up email that was also ignored. The data

collected is only as good as those who cooperate with the researcher and are willing to participate. In the end 13 current PIOs agreed to be interviewed and were successfully interviewed.

The subjects chosen for the interviews were purposeful since they had the current skills, information, and knowledge of what it means to be a PIO in 2020. The screening criteria included working as a PIO for at least five years. One subject had four years of experience, but the researcher included him since he was very knowledgeable. This qualification is relevant so they can speak about the changes they have experienced and observed in their PIO roles in government. They were all the main communication contact for their department with their job title varying from agency to agency. The screener survey was a great way to determine the final candidates for participation. Through their answers the researcher was able to determine that the subject's background and career were relevant. After the prospective subjects who filled out the survey and agreed to be interviewed chose their time and date, the researcher sent a calendar invite to secure the interview. The researcher did not interview any PIOs that she personally knows. To collect the data needed 22 questions with sub-questions equaling a total of 29 interview questions were designed to answer the research questions. Criterion sampling was used because it "involves selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance" (Patton, 2001, p. 238). Additional information was collected that included gender, age and the majors studied in college but may not be relevant in this study since it's about the role of the PIO. Nevertheless, those questions were asked and included in the findings section.

Coding

Step 1: Organizing transcript into easy-to-read table

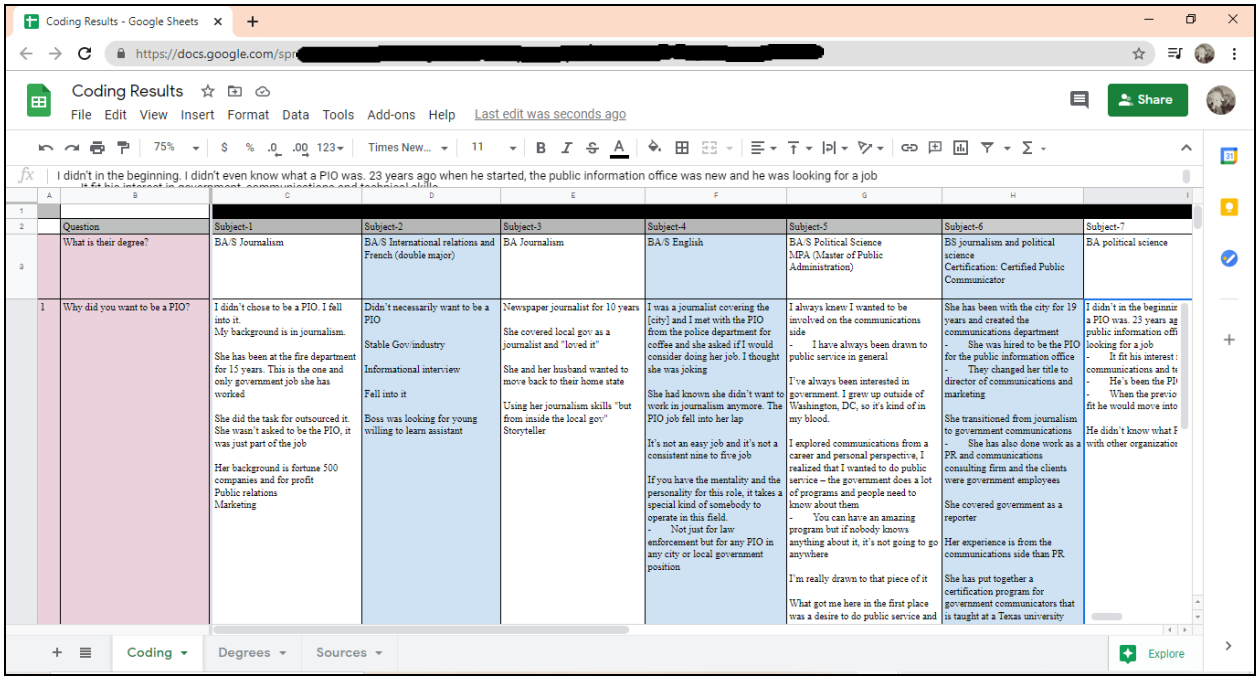
The coding process started by creating a word document that includes a table with two main sections: on the left are the interview questions and on the right were the subject's responses to the questions. The graph (example below) and process was created for each of the 13 interviews. 1) Taking the content that was produced from the Otter software from the 13 Zoom interview audio files. 2) The researcher went through each of the transcripts by coping and pasting the interviewee's answer onto the right of the graph. She then edited the answers down to the highlights.

	Question	**Answer – (edited down to highlights)**
1.	Why did you want to be a PIO?	It started with her love for journalism She enjoyed serving the community by sharing info and embarking info Move into PIO work to inform the public to highlight and focus on storytelling in your org It was an easy transition – the crazy TV days were not viable for a family working environment But wanted to tell people stories She wants to focus on people – staff, students, teachers, families and continue to tell the people stories
2.	What types of public relations/PIO roles do you perform in your agency?	She is a small school district She wears more hats than most who have larger staff Her scope is more narrowed She serves as the PIO – informing all the stake holder's groups - good or bad She is the first person for a snow day alert or wins an award Community public relations Meetings with chambers members, law makers – make sure she is telling their story She serves with gov relations Bills and proposals in city council to have a voice Models what messaging should look like – create and draft messages

		Framing and using the words in an internal way Superintendent is her boss – she leads the principals – then she creates a comms plan for them

Step 2: Coding results

The researcher created a excel with the interview questions on the left and each Subject interviewed at the top of the spread sheet. The highlighted content from step 1 was put in the column corresponding to each Subject.

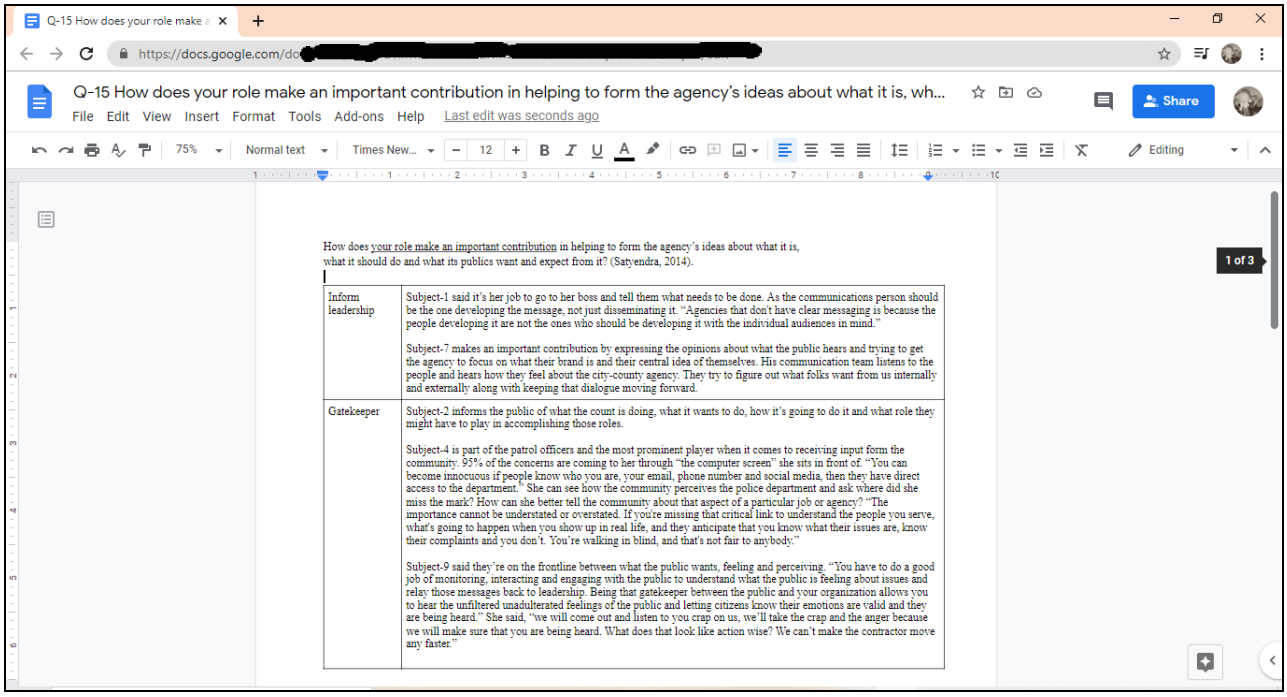


	Question	Subject-1	Subject-2	Subject-3	Subject-4	Subject-5	Subject-6	Subject-7
3	What is their degree?	BA/S Journalism	BA/S International relations and French (double major)	BA Journalism	BA/S English	BA/S Political Science MPA (Master of Public Administration)	BS journalism and political science Certification: Certified Public Communicator	BA political science
1	Why did you want to be a PIO?	I didn't chose to be a PIO. I fell into it. My background is in journalism. She has been at the fire department for 15 years. This is the one and only government job she has worked She did the task for outsourced it. She wasn't asked to be the PIO, it was just part of the job Her background is fortune 500 companies and for profit Public relations Marketing	Didn't necessarily want to be a PIO Stable Gov/industry Informational interview Fell into it Boss was looking for young willing to learn assistant	Newspaper journalist for 10 years She covered local gov as a journalist and "loved it" She and her husband wanted to move back to their home state Using her journalism skills "but from inside the local gov" Storyteller	I was a journalist covering the [city] and I met with the PIO from the police department for coffee and she asked if I would consider doing her job. I thought she was joking She had known she didn't want to work in journalism anymore. The PIO job fell into her lap It's not an easy job and it's not a consistent nine to five job If you have the mentality and the personality for this role, it takes a special kind of somebody to operate in this field. - Not just for law enforcement but for any PIO in any city or local government position	I always knew I wanted to be involved on the communications side - I have always been drawn to public service in general I've always been interested in government. I grew up outside of Washington, DC, so it's kind of in my blood. I explored communications from a career and personal perspective, I realized that I wanted to do public service – the government does a lot of programs and people need to know about them - You can have an amazing program but if nobody knows anything about it, it's not going to go anywhere I'm really drawn to that piece of it What got me here in the first place was a desire to do public service and	She has been with the city for 19 years and created the communications department - She was hired to be the PIO for the public information office - They changed her title to director of communications and marketing She transitioned from journalism to government communications - She has also done work as a PR and communications consulting firm and the clients were government employees She covered government as a reporter Her experience is from the communications side than PR She has put together a certification program for government communicators that is taught at a Texas university	I didn't in the beginnir a PIO was. 23 years ag public information offi looking for a job - It fit his interest communications and t - He's been the PI - When the previo fit he would move into He didn't know what F with other organizatio

Step 3: Combining like quotes

The researcher then created a word document for each question to keep all the questions and interview responses organized. She was looking for patterns in how the Subject's answered the interview questions. She created a table with two sections: the left is the common themes that came from the Subject's responses and the right side are the answers pertaining to that theme from all the 13 Subjects.

The patterns the researcher was looking for were similarities in the PIOs thoughts and how they accomplish tasks. She also looked at the frequency of how the PIOs talked about something that concerned them or excited them like being a storyteller for their agency through writing. The researcher made the determination that it was a theme because the majority of the researchers talked about it. Since the idea was being repeated through out the 13 interviews, the researcher deemed it a theme.



Q-15 How does your role make an important contribution in helping to form the agency's ideas about what it is, wh...

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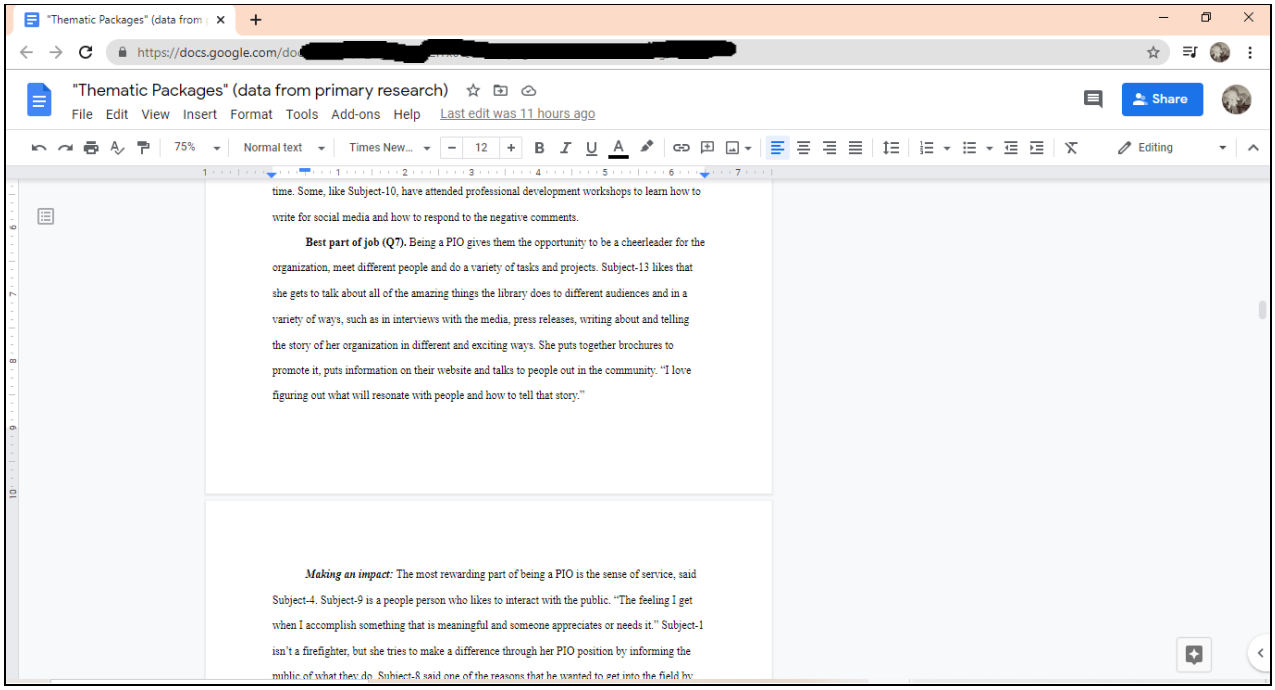
How does your role make an important contribution in helping to form the agency's ideas about what it is, what it should do and what its publics want and expect from it? (Satyendra, 2014).

Inform leadership	Subject-1 said it's her job to go to her boss and tell them what needs to be done. As the communications person should be the one developing the message, not just disseminating it. "Agencies that don't have clear messaging is because the people developing it are not the ones who should be developing it with the individual audiences in mind." Subject-7 makes an important contribution by expressing the opinions about what the public hears and trying to get the agency to focus on what their brand is and their central idea of themselves. His communication team listens to the people and hears how they feel about the city-county agency. They try to figure out what folks want from us internally and externally along with keeping that dialogue moving forward.
Gatekeeper	Subject-2 informs the public of what the count is doing, what it wants to do, how it's going to do it and what role they might have to play in accomplishing those roles. Subject-4 is part of the patrol officers and the most prominent player when it comes to receiving input form the community. 95% of the concerns are coming to her through "the computer screen" she sits in front of. "You can become innocuous if people know who you are, your email, phone number and social media, then they have direct access to the department." She can see how the community perceives the police department and ask where did she miss the mark? How can she better tell the community about that aspect of a particular job or agency? "The importance cannot be understated or overstated. If you're missing that critical link to understand the people you serve, what's going to happen when you show up in real life, and they anticipate that you know what their issues are, know their complaints and you don't. You're walking in blind, and that's not fair to anybody." Subject-9 said they're on the frontline between what the public wants, feeling and perceiving. "You have to do a good job of monitoring, interacting and engaging with the public to understand what the public is feeling about issues and relay those messages back to leadership. Being that gatekeeper between the public and your organization allows you to hear the unfiltered unadulterated feelings of the public and letting citizens know their emotions are valid and they are being heard." She said, "we will come out and listen to you crap on us, we'll take the crap and the anger because we will make sure that you are being heard. What does that look like action wise? We can't make the contractor move any faster."

1 of 3

Step 4: Thematic packages

Creating the thematic packages was the first attempt of creating sentences for each question from the step 4 responses per interview question. This includes a summary sentence and then sub-sections to narrow down the themes.



Step 5: Condensed theme

The condensed them is the second attempt at narrowing down the step 4 sentences since they had become redundant and the themes were scattered in the paragraphs. Step 5 is the way the researcher was able to make the final primary and sub-themes, so the findings are more digestible when reading the thesis. She came up with the primary because the majority of the researchers would talk about how they were important to their job as a PIO. The sub-themes are a result of being important to the main theme that can be viewed as an umbrella. The sub-themes fit under the umbrella and made the theme stronger. The interview questions and the information gleaned from the literature review were the basis of what triggered the researcher to have an idea of what topics could be considered a theme, but in the end, it goes back to what is important to the PIOs who were interviewed. The findings are a result of their collective stories on how they perceive their roles thus creating the topics that were themes.

Planned to Do

The researcher belongs to several professional networking groups: Engaging Local Government Leaders (ELGL), Government Social Media and PRSA national. Along with various PRSA chapters: public affairs and government, PRSA Colorado Springs, PRSA Missouri and PRSA Columbia. The researcher asked the owners or main contact of the networking group if they could send the recruitment flyer to their membership list asking if they would participate. Some of these networking groups also have private Facebook groups that the researcher belongs to could have posted in them requesting for volunteers but the researcher received enough volunteer participants from the ELGL and Government Social Media groups along with reaching out to a few people whose profiles fit the research criteria on LinkedIn. The snowball sampling method would work with one participant since she referred the researcher to another potential PIO participant who agreed to be interviewed. The exclusion criteria were if a PIO was retired or a former local government PIO.

Timeline

The researcher passed the proposal defense in May and expected to start the interviews in June, but the research timeline ended up taking longer than expected due to personal obligations. In July, the researcher completed the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process, created the recruitment materials, and then received approval from the IRB administrator to proceed with the interviews.

The researcher then started researching public relations and local government organizations that she could send the recruitment flyer to along with an email asking them to send it to their membership list. The researcher conducted subject interviews from August 17 to

September 21, 2020. She then coded and created themes using the data collected and will defend the thesis the second week of December.

Method Scheme

Through the semi-structured interviews, the PIOs were asked to describe their perceived roles as a PIO and their duties along with their behavior to understand how they plan and organize their day along with how they react to an emergency or a disruption in their plans. The in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted over Zoom chat technology since they lived in different states throughout America. The Zoom calls also gave the opportunity for a real conversation and being able to see their facial expressions when they answer questions.

The participants, their agencies and findings are confidential. The researcher was professional, has respect for the subjects and appreciates the time they volunteered to speak with her. In addition to using transparency "in the discourse of openness" (Vos & Craft, 2017), the researcher informed the audience of the intentions with the data collected. The data was stored on the computer and a hard drive. Interviewees were de-identified, named and numbered in the order they were interviewed (e.g. Subject-1, Subject-2). The IRB approval applications were approved before the researcher started interviewing PIO in August.

Chapter 5: Findings

Diversity of background

The thirteen subjects represented a wide array of backgrounds, related to education and work. As far as education went, all had at least bachelor's degrees (journalism (4), political science (3), communications (2), English, double degree in international relations and French, meteorology with a minor in broadcast journalism, public relations, and sociology) and some holding master's degrees (MA communications with emphasis in public relations, MA emergency management, and a Master of Business Administration in marketing). Additionally, two subjects earned certifications (Certified Public Communicator and Accreditation in Public Relations (APR) certification).

Related to work backgrounds, there was a mix of responses with some interviewees saying that they began their career knowing they wanted to be in public relations and others transitioning to PR roles from jobs in other fields. Some of them always knew they wanted to be involved on the communications side since they were naturally good at communicating, were drawn to public service and had a love for journalism. They enjoy creating events and meeting new people along with promoting the great programs their agency does for the community.

Additionally, one of the hurdles that had to be overcome in becoming PIOs by many of those interviewed was an understanding of how governments worked. Subject-6 mentioned that people don't seem to be taught civics anymore, so they make assumptions about what their city does. "I get frustrated by that lack of understanding about what their city does, and how the city is working for them," said Subject-6. Subject-10 echoed that idea saying, "I take things a little personally. I was born and raised in [city], I went to [District], I graduated from a [District] high school and my kids attend schools in this district. I live and breathe for this school district and I am very loyal to the school district. So when people come out saying this or that and it takes

shots. It stings. It's really hard for me to not take those things personally," said Subject-10. Subject-9 said, there is a misperception that we are somehow controllers. PIOs can do a good job of helping form, shape and influence perception, but have very little control over how people will react or respond to information, especially if it's sensitive and not something they want to hear. "You can do the job the best you can but there will always be a hill to climb or challenges to face even with your best effort it may not go your way. It's love and a frustration at the same time but you have to do your job despite knowing there may be battles you might not win" (Subject-9).

As for how they came to become PIOs, that varied in three primary ways:

Former journalist: Many of the subjects were former newspaper or broadcast television journalists who transitioned from journalism to government communications. They said they knew they did not want to work in journalism anymore. It was a natural course to go into public relations since the long hours as a journalist were not family friendly (Subject-10). Subject-3 said she had covered local government as a journalist and loved it. She wanted to use her journalism skills to promote the agency. This transition from a journalism career to one in public relations seemed to be quite common among the interview subjects.

As former journalists, some of the PIOs had self-doubt when transitioning to their current position. It's also been referred to as imposter syndrome in academia. The majority of the PIOs that are government communicators come from the media side. Half the battle was they were able to learn how to cover the government, but they didn't know how to be in government (Subject-6). Moving from the mindset of being a journalist and tactician into a strategic-focused professional took Subject-10 time to believe in her skill set and counsel she offered as she had

moments of doubting herself, especially when she realized she was relied upon for her expert opinion, it was hard for her to grasp they were looking at her as the expert and would second guess herself. She realized when she spoke up, she was valued by her peers and colleagues.

Fell into it: The role of PIO found Subject-8, he didn't. I definitely want to be a PIO. Subject-4 said, "I was a journalist covering the [city name] and I met with the PIO from the police department for coffee. She asked if I would consider doing her job. I thought she was joking." The job worked out for her since she knew she did not want to work as a journalist anymore and then the PIO job fell into her lap.

Stable government job: Others said they did not necessarily want to be a PIO; they wanted a stable job in the government within a communications agency. Working in government as a PIO gives many of them the opportunity to use their journalism skills to promote their agency.

Public relations vs. a PIO role

A PIO is a government title, but most of the interview subjects felt their role was really just a public relations role. "It's a very delicate position where you can do an array of different things that are similar to a PIO," said Subject-9. The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) defines public relations (PR) as "a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (About Public Relations section, para. 3) and public information officer (PIO) is defined as "craft[ing] media releases and develop[ing] social media programs to shape public perception of their organization and increase awareness of its work and goals" (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019, What they do section, para.

1). It's the PIOs responsibility to follow agency guidelines to make sure the statements they release to the press and public are accurate and follow official policy and laws (Roberts, 2019, para. 1).

"The main goal of responsibility in government is to be informative. In the role, I'm doing a little bit of everything to make sure the public is informed." Subject-10 said she sees herself as performing PR, since it starts with trust and relationship building. Also, since she is accredited in PR, it's ingrained in her mind to have an ethical responsibility to the stakeholders, compared to PIOs who give information to the community, making sure their citizens and stakeholders are informed. Subject-8 said that PR means you have more control of the message and are trying to craft a message that tells a certain story. PIOs provide the information rather than providing a message and as a PR professional you're trying to develop the message and push out the information that you have. Subject-3 said she uses PR to promote services and programs that promote their city parks. For example, she encourages people to pay their water bill online by prompting the hours they are open through information.

Public information is pretty black and white, the information is either public or not. PR is the totality of what that information does and who impacts it and why it's being released or can cause harm to the community. Not all information is good, and as a person in that role, Subject-4 has to handle all the different aspects and it's trying to sell you something. As the communicator for the police department when it comes to storytelling, it's a calling. It's not going to phase out in a few years. It's in perpetuity and the story will never end, so having an infinite possibility to share information around the brand and why it is and how it impacts the lives of the people that live in the city (Subject-4). Subject-4 went on to say, she asks herself, how does the community

perceive the police department and asks where did she miss the mark? How can she better tell the community about that aspect of a particular job or agency? “The importance cannot be understated or overstated. If you're missing that critical link to understand the people you serve, what's going to happen when you show up in real life, and they anticipate that you know what their issues are, know their complaints and you don’t. You’re walking in blind, and that's not fair to anybody.”

Subject-7 said in her mind PR has a specific gloss to it, providing information and promoting a service, which they are not. She’s not promoting how the public responds to that service; they just want them to respond. Subject-6 said her role provides information several different ways to the residents. She looks for opportunities when she’s doing public relations in her PIO role to advocate for the city. “When my message is clear. I want it to be organic. I don’t want to be convolute or manipulated. I focus on training to make my expectation of my role and strengths. I try to be confident based on the training I’ve had and my experiences to move forward and be able to defend anything that I do.” Subject-9 said at the end of the day, her job as a PIO is to make sure whatever she’s doing is to inform the public about the purpose of what you’re doing. Sometimes the role as a PIO will be that you've got to be at events and do a ton of outreach. When considering a PIO or a PR person for the city, there's a lot that goes into those roles, such as outreach, partnerships, community engagement, internal and external, marketing. “I think it's when you say communications or PR, it just sounds like it encompasses a little bit more than PIOs” (Subject-13).

Subject-11 said the roles of PIO and PR are the same because, “At the end of the day, our measurable goal is to make sure that we are upholding the best public image for our organization.

This includes being informative, transparent, and making sure our stakeholders have the information they need. The school district's goal is to make sure that when people think about the [name] school district – they think of them in high regards as an effective organization."

Writing takes up approximately 65-70% of the time for many of the PIOs, including Subject-10 who said that writing may take the form of digital, print, or general messaging. They create communication plans for upcoming events, in print publication that includes writing columns, editing the newsletter, and designing it. "A lot of people view the role of a K-12 PIO as a cheerleader, but it's not always. You need to understand the balance of being able to write negative messages along with the good messages," said Subject-10. Other common writing tasks included writing speeches, news releases, press releases, copywriter, copy editor, developing talking points, developing key messages in documents, writing statements for leadership and the media, writing memoirs for the CEO to colleagues and writing various messages for the superintendent. For Subject-5, since she has a small team, she is responsible for five external newsletters that she repurposes content for and her team has created a good system to manage them.

Varied task lists: Subject-13 said that a long list of tasks include managing people by meeting with her team about their goals and asking how she can help reach them along with any barriers they may have getting their job done. Along with fact-checking, speaking, listening, collaborating, organizing, checking email, setting up Zoom meetings, creating the annual report, building, maintaining, and updating policy, developing strategies to get more funding from different partners and organizations. They have meetings to talk about the big picture strategies to create brand awareness in the community, said Subject-13.

More ***specialized tasks*** included managing the public image of the agency and gathering media clips to see where your organization might have media coverage in the news. Hiring a sign language interpreter for the deaf and hard of hearing (Subject-3), conducting performance reviews, administrative tasks, financial overviews, signing paychecks, checking hours, and managing staff development. Subject-10 said one of her external tasks was promoting her agency by volunteering to speak in classrooms to talk to students about her job as a K-12 PIO along with attending events and capturing impromptu photos that she takes on her phone and then posting them on social media. "When I'm able to take those happy pictures or videos of kids and post them on social media, it makes some parents' days because they get to see that the school district is bragging on their child and they made the [school district] Facebook page."

Subject-7 coordinates the necessary city staff to be topic experts for the agencies government television program along with managing the lower third CGI creation, starts the videos, runs the audio, and answers emails and phone calls from citizens during the show. He also works with film inquiries to make movies in his city by putting them in touch with the right folk and helping them scout locations.

Translation: Some of the PIOs live in areas where they have to translate all marketing materials and websites into non-English languages. Some of the social media posts also have to be bilingual.

External tasks mentioned were outreach, creating partnerships, communications, and marketing (Subject-13) and building community engagement through events such as coffee with a cop (Subject-4).

***Roles beyond PR*:** The researcher had the idea that a role is a thing a PIO plays, not a task they complete, but the subjects referred to what the researcher thought of as daily tasks as their roles. The PIOs explained their roles as strategic communicators who strategize their messaging the best way to present information via different channels using the tools in their toolbox (Subject-6). Their roles were also described as a supervisor, graphic designer, videographer, photographer, website manager, event planner and providing support to other departments, and writers creating content for newsletters, social media, web content, communication managers, community relations, relationships builders and the liaison between the agency and the public along with helping other departments with marketing and communicating, along with having a presence at meetings and in the community. Additional roles have included creating a government access channel along with managing it and producing videos for the channel (Subject-7). Handling conflict resolution, providing day-to-day communication internally and externally, acting as organizational spokespeople, serving as PIOs for emergencies or community engagement. Along with working as the social media specialist training staff on how to use social media appropriately.

Changes in the PIO role related to social and digital media

Everyone interviewed talked about how dealing with social and digital media (typically in the form of a website) was a large part of their jobs. Most of the PIOs are responsible for their agency's social media channels. This work with social media, said Subject-6, puts "that burden on them because they want to be as responsive as possible" since it means always checking the social media channels and has added to their job and responsibility. Subject-7 had a similar

viewpoint, but also believed social media was an added opportunity. However, Subject-5 said it isn't additional work, it's an extension of the work. It's a new platform and a new channel to continue to do what they're already doing by reaching different audiences. It's a good way to get information out quickly and efficiently when used well.

Some of the PIOs ***leadership impeded progress*** when the agency's leadership tried to prevent Subject-6 from transitioning from traditional communications into digital communications. She felt like she needed to move the department forward and looked at how to best utilize new communication skills and tools but the leadership said the traditional way was just fine. This conflict made her think outside the box and try something different.

Social media and digital platforms were seen as becoming more integral with what they do daily and has become a part of their programming (Subject-9). Subject-1 said she has folded social media into her job. She doesn't mind doing it because she gets to do it the way she wants. "No one from the fire department is qualified to do it or knows much about it so they will not mess with it. I'd rather do it because then I know it gets done the way I think it should be done." She takes personal satisfaction when someone says it is the best post of the day.

Subject-4 explained her role as a digital risk manager since "handling media requests is an archaic mindset because in this day and age, you're first and foremost a digital risk manager because most conversation and conflict exist online."

Social media: Specifically, in the area of social media, the general feeling among interviewees was that it can cause them to focus on what is "stirring up" on the channels. Facebook and Next Door have the highest engagement for Subject-3's agency. She is the middle person between customers and getting the answer to their questions.

Some PIOs said they are on social media every day as much as possible to moderate comments and read private messages, such as Subject-3, while others do not check it after hours or on the weekend. Subject-8 said she checks social media as soon as she gets into the office to see what people are talking about and engages with the program messaging by correcting or addressing comments if needed. Subject-6 said monitoring what is on social media every day is a big chore because of the expectations people have to get an answer immediately. She tries not to look on the weekends, but she does anyway.

For PIOs, the work they're doing on social platforms typically involves either clarifying information or correcting the information, but they never engage in any debate and only answer questions if need be.

Social media has become a part of how Subject-6 strategizes her communications plan to the public and it is integrated into every social media plan. All the PIOs agreed, they are very conscious of how social media impacts people and how they absorb it. Even though Subject-8 does not handle the social media accounts personally for the health department, it has added responsibilities as far as rumor control and fact checking. When misinformation, inaccurate and uniformed information is spread on social media it does impact his role. For many of the PIOs, social media was also the worst part of the job because it's always present, whether they were at work or not as the accounts were all accessible from their phones.

PIOs invest time and talent into each post they create. This isn't just throwing out a post. They present their agencies in a professional manner. Their social media channels have become a large part of their job. The main channels are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Next Door. Subject-7 is like most of the PIOs, he creates messaging and the graphics associated with the

post, uploaded files, cross shares posts and responds to messages, along with moderating the posts and engaging with followers. PIOs also mentioned working on websites and creative videos as part of this subject area.

Additionally, several areas emerged through the interviews, ranging from using social media to deal with and see public reactions to information (good and bad), to education related to using social media to using this digital platform to tell stories.

Angry public: Subject-9 said she gets the good and the bad tweets, the upset person who is angry or frustrated. Subject-4 said, people forget there are humans behind the social media accounts. The abuse that a PIO faces on the computer screen over time causes strife because they often want to respond and say, "Hey, wait a second. That's not cool, how can you say that." However, PIOs have to maintain decorum and professionalism. It can be hard, but it came through in the interviews as one of the most rewarding challenges of the job.

The PIOs have different views on how to handle the social media posts. Subject-1 said she will answer a social media post but leave the commentary alone. She has found the followers will come to the fire department's defense.

Audience engagement: Even though the public can be mean, social media is a way for audience engagement. It's not just about posting; it's about knowing the social media climate and taking the temperature of the community (Subject-6). People from all over the world who are interested can decide whether they want to follow our accounts. She then gets to pitch to them the messaging she thinks they might like (Subject-1). They can impact thousands of people in a single post within minutes (Subject-12). As a K-12 PIO, Subject-10 uses social media to teach the students since she created a social media ambassador program for their district. She offers

high school kids the opportunity to run [District name] social media pages. “When I see them get to expand their wings and do something or see that they can apply things like that in the real world. That is true fulfillment. I love our kids and love to watch them learn” (Subject-10).

By-passing journalists: Social media has been great for agencies like hers (Subject-1). She can tell those really great stories about the fire department that the media will not tell. Social media has made it “fantastic” she said because she gets to put out good stories on her channels. “With social media, she gets to decide what is news for her agency” (Subject-1). Subject-11 said that she does not have to rely on the media to cover their stories, they can cover their own stories. She can tell the story of a K-12 student who is doing something amazing. It is great if the journalist picks it up but it’s ok if they don’t (Subject-11).

Social media versus journalist: Subject-1 said her role is to build relationships with the media, but the media’s happiness is of no concern to her. It’s her job to provide them with information and to get it to them as quickly as possible so they can have what they need when they need it. “I don't subscribe to the theory that I must drop everything to feed the [media] monster. When PIOs drop everything for the media, it perpetuates the misguided philosophy that the media is all powerful, which they are not. With social media I don’t need them as much anymore. I drive to the philosophy that they need me a lot more than I need them now.” She said the media gets a lot of their content from social media since they follow the fire stations accounts. The media pulls stories from their social media channels, so that’s good for her.

Integrating social media: PIOs have to take into consideration that social media is the easiest way for people to reach us. social media can be used to recruit and reach out to their target audience more effectively (Subject-5). When they are creating an event, they have to

decide which elements they are going to post on which channels to push out their programming (Subject-13). Subject-5 used the housing social media channels to launch the city's first social influencer campaign for the housing agency. Not everyone in the agency posts to social media, Subject-6 said, but when they post, they send an email to the entire team to make sure the words are correct and to fix any typos. Two people on the team have to sign off on it. The PIOs also have to think about their branding when posting. They have to be strategic about their content and collaborate with the rest of her team. For Subject-7 ***other departments going rogue*** regarding their branding. His department is trying to take a centralized approach to branding, but a lot of their departments want to do their own thing by creating their own social media accounts or logos. The tension comes when he can't tell them no, but can't tell them yes either, in communicating that information and in deciding what information to convey and not to convey. Such as any decisions, he can't please everyone. He has to decide if he puts this information out, will it cause their office or government more problems than what they can deal with. Subject-10 also has had this experience dealing with documents, webpages, and digital mediums that are produced with-out her consultation. "I feel frustrated sometimes because we're a free resource for schools to help them market their school and produce social media content, but they don't have the school district's branding and they aren't written correctly so I have to redline it. I found out [a school had] already produced 150 pamphlets or brochures and there were mistakes everywhere and that's where I get a little bit frustrated." To overcome it, her department has slowly put the word out through the principals and assistant principals and other school contacts to tell them "we're here to take that off your plate, we want to help you and we have experts in our department who can design marketing pieces and produce social media content and take

quality pictures, let us do the work for you." They have started to use the services her team offers "but whenever I see one of those documents out there, I cringe and think you don't know what you're doing, I don't say it though."

Social media education: Subject-2 said she was scared of social media because when she started the position the organization didn't have social media channels. She dove in and learned how to use it by attending webinars and government training. She learned Canva for graphics and researched other sites to see what they posted about. She now is on social media 40% of the time. Some, like Subject-10, have attended professional development workshops to learn how to write for social media and how to respond to the negative comments.

Advertising: They are able to use social media to advertise their agency. They fine tune the content planned to determine what channels are going to work with you and what's going to work for your audience. If you don't, you're going to exhaust yourself trying to address all these different social mediums. This has offered the opportunity to target messages effectively. For example, advertising that might cost $5,000 to put in the newspaper would only cost $25 for paid ads on social media and reaches a targeted audience. PIOs also know exactly who paid attention to the ad because of the analytics available.

Writing for social media: The PIOs create the content for the social media posts. Subject-1 is a writer by trade. "I love to write, it's my absolute most favorite thing to do. I can write creatively for social media whereas I can't for other writing tasks." Subject-7 creates content for social media and their message has to be crafted for the mediums that they will post it on. They have to think about how they are going to present the information on each channel

since Facebook and Twitter have different ways of doing things. They have to make sure they are following the rules.

Storyteller role: Subject-3 said she is still doing what she was trained to do as a journalist. She is telling the agency's story to educate people, often through social media. Subject-5 said her job is tangible since it benefits real people. "When a new affordable housing development is built and somebody that has been living in a hotel finally has a place to live. I love being able to share those stories." Subject-11 said the opportunities she has to tell great stories, including on social media and the website, is the best part of being a PIO. "I think being a former journalist, I often wanted to tell those feel good community stories about great people in our city doing wonderful things and the news managers wanted death, disaster, and destruction newscasts. I was conflicted because I wanted to tell the good stories. In this role as a K-12 PIO, I have the ability and the opportunity to tell the great stories about our students. I love telling great stories about our staff and being able to promote and recognize those great things that are happening in an organization."

Serving the public

The majority of PIOs said their goal is to serve the public interest by being a voice for the public, communicating to the public and to give them the information they need to make informed decisions about their life, for example when Subject-8 shares a message that people who have a disease of addiction aren't just junkies on the street, but people who are struggling. Subject-3 also serves the communities by promoting the agency's services to the business community, non-profits, the homeless and the people who live, work and visit her city.

As a K-12 PIO, Subject-10 serves the greater community's interests, but more specifically, their parents, students and staff who are their stakeholders. “We need to do what’s best for our kids and sometimes you lose focus of that, especially when things get political or get one sided. That's what it all boils down to most of the time. When the issue doesn't involve kids, it's what's best for that particular audience that is affected” (Subject-10).

For the PIOs in law enforcement, their role is very involved with stakeholders since their primary purpose is to try to build relationships with them. They are always working on ways to increase their presence (Subject-7) and for Subject-12, the stakeholders for state troopers can be anywhere from the general public to other organizations. The troopers are hugely influential with what the public sees, who they interact with and understanding the many facets of the agency and organization, but they're not faceless automatons. They are real human beings. The work law enforcement does is vitally important in order to make sure they are giving information to be transparent. They are showcasing as much as they can of the good of what their membership does to their stakeholders, the people they serve.

Subject-11 serves lawmakers, businesses in the district, the Chamber of Commerce, and city council representatives. Many times, she will have a different message for each group. When she sends out messaging, she thinks about who's the target audience for this piece and how she frames this message so that it lands the way they want it to land with that audience. In government, it’s twofold, it needs to be the organization, but at the same time Subject-13 said, leadership needs to understand the role that taxpayers play in the work that you do. “We have to take the public's concerns into consideration when we are making decisions because they pay our paycheck. I think one of the reasons why the government works so well for me is because the

government is for the people. I've always reminded people that we are working for the people in the city. I've been in meetings where I've raised my hands and say, I'm sorry, let me just remind you that we work for the people of the city" (Subject-13).

Internal publics: The PIOs have varied roles when it comes to building relationships internally in their agencies. While Subject-1 said this is her role, others have limited access and wanted to be involved, but their supervisors prevented it or they didn't have time or staff to concentrate on internal engagement. None-the-less, PIOs need to remember they have an internal audience who are watching what they are doing. The PIOs need to make sure the internal employees understand the "why" behind what you're doing or why you're doing it and understand the trajectory of the strategy behind your communications. If your internal audience doesn't understand the department and they get questioned by the public, then they don't have the answer. That means you're failing the public you're supposed to be serving (Subject-4).

For many of the PIOs internal expectations have been conflicting. Subject-5 said people understand that communication isn't a last-minute thing. Often program managers will map out the pieces of a plan without including the marketing and communications component. "Plans don't materialize out of thin air. People have to know about it, understand it and it needs to be promoted. Once word is out, you need to continue promoting the projects, since it doesn't just end with a first push." She has to continuously remind people that marketing and communications should be in the fold of the program, not something tacked on at the end. If the departments want their job done right, they need to include communications from the beginning.

Subject-3 has used surveys to engage the agency's internal employees to find out if her community communication methods were working. After a while, the surveys wore off and she

moved on to face-to-face engagement by going to staff meetings and talking with employees in person about communications and getting feedback. Subject-8 has increased the number of press releases to constantly work on making sure the entire agency is aware of what's going on. They forward their press releases to the entire executive staff, strongly urging them to pass them on to their entire team, which would then get it to the entire agency. There have been gaps in employees not receiving information, so it's his goal to ensure the entire agency is aware of what's going on.

Subject-7 serves the interests of different constituencies, including employees who are also residents. "Employees are ambassadors for what we do here, so we serve them too." He also figured out how to balance the residents, public, business, visitors' interests, the local university's interests along with the students along with the homeless since they have a high poverty rate.

Working with HR: Another way to keep the internal audience informed is to work with HR. Subject-11 works with the human resources (HR) department to ensure that they have employee awareness in K-12 and buy-in for certain instances. Working with HR and other district leaders, she makes sure that they have a plan in place to ensure that they're informed, and they have a good understanding of the reasoning behind why they're making a decision. It's important to share the "why" and help them conceptualize the reason for a change. Subject-6 also works closely with the HR department with some of the messaging that goes out. HR takes a lead role, but she provides guidance in the consultation and helps them carry out their message. She is also helping to design the intranet.

Internal confusion: Subject-7 has to communicate to people who are new to unified government about how his office runs. They have an expectation that he is the mouthpiece for them or everything they do has to be approved by him. There are conflicts of expectations that their office is the spokesperson for unified government, and they don't see themselves that way. He works with people who don't realize what they do and or understand what they want. Those people come into the agency thinking his designers are going to do external marketing for the community and tell him it's his job to communicate with employees, and he has to tell them he doesn't have the staff to do that.

Leadership disconnect: Subject-9 said people who aren't PR professionals have an expectation that we can control the public perception. There is a disconnect. Leadership thinks the media's job is to repeat back exactly what was said. She tells them it's her job to give the media the information and it's their job to do what they do with it. She said they can help formulate their messaging to influence the media and can try to anticipate how someone will receive it, but they cannot make people do anything. "Leadership can give an interview with the facts, context and background, but the TV person is going to cut it down to 10 seconds, which, when presented to the viewers, looks as if they are not telling the whole truth and makes the person look like they were hiding something." The staff member will get upset when this happens, and ask Subject-9 what they should do, so she will counsel them that they didn't do anything wrong. They gave the media the facts, they were asked to do the interview and they did, and they have no control over how they make the story. What she could have done differently was to type up responses to the reporter's questions for the topic expert to be more prepared.

Open-door policy: Subject-4 has an open-door policy to her office and a candy jar on her desk. It's easy to manipulate people, in the best possible way, with a candy jar to come into the office to talk and say hello. She has direct access to command staff because she sits in the corridor that people pass through every day to go to briefings before they go out on the streets. "I see the boots on the ground who serve the community every day and hear their concerns and questions that they may not be comfortable passing up the chain through a lieutenant or a captain or a chief." The police officers feel comfortable talking to the PIO because they are seeing positive repercussions of the work that's being done to try to tell the agency's story. They see she is in their corner; they want to share with her more and that builds internal morale and to get them in a place where they feel comfortable pitching ideas for stories or sharing content when they are on patrol. "If there is no trust between the PIO and the boots on the ground, you'll never get anything from anybody. That does a disservice to the entire agency because you're grappling at straws to highlight and tell the story. It's more difficult and people will feel burdened by the difficulty and it becomes too much work. That's where communication fails to exist."

Two-way communication: Subject-4 noted the importance of being responsive and creating channels for two-way communication since you cannot expect your community to be okay with a one-way push of information. "As a PIO you cannot sit behind a computer screen all day, you have to be a boots on the ground representative for your agency by attending meetings, Zoom calls, or coffee." Subject-4 added that they also have to be approachable and explain things to people in a way they will understand. If you come across as governmental, people will tune you out, so you need to be personable.

Tension with the public: Working as the K-12 PIO, Subject-11 has to keep in mind the privacy of the students, staff and faculty when speaking with the media or stakeholders. She has to keep the information vague as per the health department recommendations. It is a balancing act, she said, to inform their audience, but she also has to protect the individual due to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). For Subject-10 who also works as a K-12 PIO in a bigger district, she always feels tension when she has to appease both her boss and the elected volunteers to the school board because some of them come to the board with limited knowledge or no knowledge of how administration works.

The majority of the PIOs stated they would not work for an organization that went against their values; this is why Subject-11 left journalism due to conflicting values (Subject-11). This is why people in the PIO position have to be careful about the organizations they choose to work with (Subject-13). “Even when I've agreed with the organization, there've been situations that I didn’t agree with that go against my beliefs, but I have to find a way to make it work by finding common ground because it's my job to defend my organization and to speak on behalf of it. There may be times you have to defend something publicly that personally you don’t agree with, but you have to do your job that is to speak on behalf of your organization” (Subject-13).

Baptism by fire: Subject-4 said a lot of this job is baptism by fire. There are no amount of books, classwork or experiments that are going to prepare you for what you experience in the real world. For example, she may not have been prepared to handle things when her department was involved in a shooting that gained national attention. Subject-4 also said that the hardest part of the job is anticipating and knowing how the situation will play out. “Nothing truly prepares you for the experience until you are in it in that moment and all your stuff kicks in. It’s either you

or your operating on pure instinct and training or a combination of the two. That's where the magic happens."

Barriers: There are many barriers for the PIOs interviewed. Citizens not understanding how the government works to politicians trying to influence the PIOs messaging to the lack of funding are issues that arose in the interviews. Additional barriers included having to deal with competing interests and information (Subject-7) and playing a role of serving your organization in serving the public and trying to find that fine line of where they align (Subject-9). Not having control of the unexpected has been a barrier for Subject-6 since she is a self-proclaimed control freak and doesn't like the unexpected because it derails what she had planned to work with other agencies that have different approaches. Along with having to learn new techniques with social media being introduced to their jobs or learning how to function in a pandemic.

Subject-7 said that it's hard to get in front of citizens in a meaningful way when there isn't an emergency, or they don't need the government at that moment. It is hard to get them to care about a situation prior to them getting mad about it. Other barriers for Subject-11 include the lack of manpower and the hours needed to get everything done. They have so much to do and so many people to talk to and get information from, it's never an easy task getting something accomplished. She is also a school district cabinet member so if she is at a meeting, she is not doing all the tasks she needs to be doing. She said she is very envious of large school districts that have 15 to 20 people in their communications and public relations team. If she had staff members, she could deploy them to meetings. Subject-1 said working with ***government regulations*** has different pressures than for-profit jobs. When she purchases something in the government, she has to bid it out from a minority-owned business, women-owned businesses,

and then she has to select the lowest bidder, even if it's not the bid that you want, or the vendor that you want. She found all of these parameters for something incredibly simple frustrating compared to how, in a for-profit situation, the purchasing person buys it and turns in a receipt.

Relationship building: Subject-12 said that as state troopers, going out and doing events and participating in the community "gives them the opportunity to see us, approach us, ask questions and understand that we are real human beings behind the badge and not just an image on a computer screen or social media." Subject-10 said she builds relationships through seeing her work matter to people along with the communication and the process. "This is when you see that it makes people's lives a little bit easier, and better that they are more informed. That's the best part of the job," said Subject-10.

For Subject-9, the transportation PIO, the best part of the job is when a long range or long-term plans that when they finally come to fruition it's "awesome." Subject-6's agency started a volunteer program to build relationships, which has been recognized in the state and nationally as one of the best for its community service with 11,000 people in the volunteer program. Getting to know the volunteers has been one of the best parts of the job. "I am amazed every day at the quality of the expertise that we have in our city employees. I continue to be proud of what they do and how much they care about the community," said Subject-6.

Subject-1 said getting to meet people in the community and form relationships has been beneficial since she had made a relationship with a PR person at a company. When a firefighter died, that PR person helped the firefighter's family and made their day a little easier in a difficult time. Working in a housing agency, Subject-5 said the best part is meeting people and hearing their stories. "I enjoy the department I work in because it's cool to get community engagement

and neighborhood matching grants. People are excited when they get a $20,000 grant from the city to have a playground and it is the first playground that's ever been in their neighborhood for 40 years. It's really powerful."

Subject-13 has been able to increase the library's engagement with their external partners. Relationship building is the key to the work she does because she doesn't have the funds to do traditional communications and marketing work, so she uses relationships as a way to push and promote their work. She keeps them informed through newsletters, having constant communication meetings with city council aides, discussing their needs and how she can support them, along with sharing how they can support her. This also ensures they are a part of meetings. The external partners are other city agencies, but also other partners in community organizations, and associations that they support.

Making an impact: Being a PIO gives them the opportunity to be a cheerleader for the organization, meet different people and do a variety of tasks and projects. Subject-13 likes to talk about all of the amazing things the library does to different audiences and in a variety of ways, such as in interviews with the media, press releases, writing about and telling the story of her organization in different and exciting ways. "I love figuring out what will resonate with people and how to tell that story," said Subject-13.

Subject-9 is a people person who likes to interact with the public. She has always been a PIO for a government agency and feels she has been called to work in government. "I am representing the average person who is me, who may distrust the government. I love being a PIO. I feel like I am a good person and have both sides of the coin type of view. That helps me be a good PIO for people who are like me" (Subject-9). "The feeling I get when I accomplish

something that is meaningful, and someone appreciates or needs it." The most rewarding part of being a PIO is the sense of service, said Subject-4.

Subject-1 isn't a firefighter, but she tries to make a difference through her PIO position by informing the public of what they do. Subject-8 said one of the reasons that he wanted to get into the field by working in a health agency is that he could help people through difficult times by providing information to people in disaster areas and communicating prevention of health issues.

Tensions between PIOs and News Media

For those who do ***media relations***, they are the gatekeepers to their agencies responding to daily questions and emails. The PIOs all believe building relationships with reporters are part of their role and important to their agency. The majority of the PIOs were journalists or have been in communications long enough to know the reporters are on deadlines, however the PIO offices are often short staffed and need help with telling the agency's story. That's where the news media comes into play. The PIOs understand if they can feed reporters information, the news media may use the content that is given to them. This is a benefit of building relationships and knowing the journalist can trust the PIO to give them factual information.

When the media calls, they have to set aside what they had planned for the day. Due to the news cycles, the PIOs have to drop everything and get the media what they need by fulfilling media inquiries and requests and conducting interviews. PIOs also train the topic experts and key people throughout their government to speak with the media and the public about their projects.

Subject-7 mentioned that it's important to answer the media's questions and don't hide the truth. There will always be things that Subject-11 won't be able to share if something bad happens in her school district, she will probably be the person who is on television answering those questions. But if something good is happening, her strategy is to recognize the people that are behind the good work. She will ask directors, district leaders or principals to go on camera and speak to the media so they can earn that recognition.

Before Subject-13 meets with the press or community she makes a list of questions that she thinks the community is going to have and has an answer for them, even if it's not information she wants to share. "I always push my team to think of the questions the media will ask and to answer the questions that I know the community is going to ask. You have to be prepared to answer them." Everybody needs to operate under the same philosophy of "you want to make me look good. I want to make you look good. I'm going to get you as much information as I can get you. I'm going to be honest with you, so that you can share honest confirmed information with your viewers, then we're all going to be okay," Subject-1 said.

Accessible to media: It's a challenge to learn different media outlets, the media professionals, stations and how to communicate with them and give them information. However, Subject-9 has built relations with the media and chooses the journalist she knows will get the facts straight. It's a delicate dance of knowing how certain people receive certain things. When Subject-6 deals with breaking news elements or the media calls her about a particular event or issue she works with the media to bring in the right people to provide the correct information. She never forces her staff to speak with the media, but she prefers them to since they are the

subject matter experts. She works with the topic expert to teach them how to be interviewed and deal with the media, along with making sure all their questions are getting answered.

Subject-7 said the news media is a little different because there's not a whole lot of outlets anymore. He sends them information and responds to their queries, corrects them when they are wrong, and provides corrections on factual matters. The media knows they can call him, and they will get an honest answer and they are very appreciative of that. He also speaks with journalism classes about the process of how to interact with PIOs and the public affairs office. He tells them ways to find information, what they should do and shouldn't. For Subject-12 living in a small town, she knows the editors and writers of the only paper since they are all a one-man show. She is a major provider of the content the media needs for their paper to put forth the county's position and initiative programs to the media. The paper will run her news releases verbatim, which is helpful in telling the story of her agency to let the community know what's going on.

Educate reporters: Subject-10 is starting to see many younger journalists in the field. As a former journalist, she takes a different perspective since she's been around the block in public communications for a number of years and takes the opportunity to train the journalist. She's not persuading them to think one way or another, but to tell them helpful hints with what they might find helpful for their jobs. ***Going the extra mile:*** Subject-3's helps the reporters and community by holding press conferences and using Facebook Live so everybody can access it since there are fewer reporters, newspapers are smaller and more regional. Subject-4 echoed his observation by saying, dealing with the media can be tricky because there is such an exceptionally high turnover rate. As a former reporter, she said there was no greater value than having a PIO who gets it and

understands the needs of a journalist. Giving the media what they need because reporter resources are so strapped right now builds trust and rapport. If a reporter doesn't have time to gather photos or videos or a statement, then she provides them with quotes and sounds bites from police officers at the scene. "It's my job to facilitate that for them so they can have a more complete picture of what occurred when they are covering the situation. This includes always adding your contact information such as your phone number and email." This type of effort builds trust with the reporters because they're more likely to give you a little more time to get your voice into a story. However, all of that can disappear if a PIO ignores media emails or calls because that'll give a poor impression of their professionalism.

Subject-13 her relationship with the media is less than what she would like in terms of relationship building. Dealing with the media is a full-time job and her agency doesn't have a person dedicated to it. There are times when she has pitched ideas to reporters that have nothing to do with the work she does, and it's been a good strategy because then they understand that she loves stories. "I love storytelling, I can see a really good story and say, 'Hey, this would be really cool'." She will send reporters notes and tell them she liked a story they did and thank them for sharing that story. Reaching out in this way has made it easier to call on people that she knows, than to blindly pitch on something.

Being their own newsroom: Subject-6 said every job she's had has led her to this PIO job. Being a former journalist has helped her deal with the media and given her the tools to craft messages for the agency and tell their story. Subject-6 added, since she is from a smaller city, the reporters don't cover her community often. "If we won't cover the story, we have to be prepared to tell the story." Subject-7 creates videos, puts public meetings online and makes them

accessible to the public. Subject-11 will send out communication to the district, parents and students that include her own updates. They will hear the information from her first before the news since it's important in terms of being transparent with the local community.

Subject-7 also had to learn to be an advertising buyer for buses, billboards, and radio. As the police PIO, Subject-12 responds to open records act requests and makes sure they are filled out properly.

Crisis communications role: From the Covid pandemic to the protesting and riots, many PIOs received a crash course in crisis management in 2020 dealing with both the media and the public. PIOs need to be able to shift their techniques and tools, being ready to pivot from one long crisis to another that was heightened, emotional, and compacted by other external factors, said Subject-4. Time expectations have been difficult to deal with during the pandemic since other departments expect her to help them which takes away from the Covid response focus (Subject-3). Additionally, Subject-8 noted that when crises hit, they also have to handle citizens disagreeing with the information coming out of the agency.

"It's psychological in how your strategy plays out and how it's honed, since the amount of schooling or book reading can't prepare you for a pandemic and then protesting. This is a career where you need real world experience to hone your craft," said Subject-4. During a crisis, the PIOs had to take on added responsibilities such as being a part of a response team and fulfilling their PIO responsibilities and making sure communications did not suffer (Subject-3).

Role conflict: Stress and the PIO role

A majority of the subjects interviewed made their way to their current PIO job because they were unhappy with their previous job. Most of them said they love their PIO job, even though it is very stressful due to pressures from stakeholders, their supervisors and the Covid pandemic. After the insanity of this year's challenges of the pandemic, riots and learning how to communicate their message over the chaos, they are more dedicated to their job and are learning how to find new ways to push out their agency's message.

People make the assumption that PIOs can manage it all. When Subject-3 said, "I am only one person, I am doing my best," it seemed to echo many of the PIOs. While Subject-11 said, experiencing and managing competing role expectations are always a work in progress. Subject-4 said the expectation level that PIOs set for themselves are high and don't talk about them. "We don't want to vocalize how much pressure we put on ourselves to perform at the level that we think people need of us. Our roles are defined when you take the job, but you don't know of the psychological impacts that come with the position. All the pressure that comes with the anticipation of meeting the community. You are only given 50% to 60% of the job description and the rest you find out on the job such as the needs and wants of the community and then you are building a new program from that."

The PIOs have different ways to cope when experiencing and managing their competing roles. Many PIOs said they do work as many hours as needed to get the projects done and they stay connected to social media and respond to messages after standard work hours. Whereas other PIOs, like Subject-7, said he doesn't expect his team to check email on the weekend or after work hours. They do what they can during the work week, but he will not force them to work 80 hours. "I am a firm believer that we work hard and long when we are at work, we don't

need to be nickel and diming our staff in the evenings and on weekends, it's not a sustainable practice" (Subject-7).

Feeling overwhelmed: A majority of the subjects said they did get overwhelmed, but Subject-1 said she doesn't get overwhelmed and would rather have too much to do. While Subject-3 said being in crisis mode this year doesn't give her enough hours in the day to finish all her tasks and it's difficult to step away. "I adore my job and I want to do it well, but I have to take a break."

Subject-9 said she went into public relations because of the flexibility of communications, no two days are the same and it gives her the ability to do different things. She thrives in chaos so she doesn't get overwhelmed because she enjoys meetings, community events, interviews, setting up an interview or putting together a presentation.

In the library sector, Subject-13 is in a ***high stress*** job as the strategy person who looks ahead in development of the strategy. She is forced to be a strategic thinker, but also be the detailed person that checks a box on all things you have got to get done to make it happen.

The other overwhelming issues range from writing everything to creating the marketing plans (Subject-6) to feeling exhausted and running ragged and needing to prioritize what they thought would get done and did not (Subject-8). At the same time, they all love their jobs. "This is a good job for me since I'm the type of person that likes to have their foot in everything. It is never boring, and I could not do a boring job, I'm not doing the same thing over and over. I'm not a desk type person," said Subject-8.

Emotional: Subject-12 said, like any job, there are going to be good and bad days. As state troopers, their line of work is literally life and death. "It's different for different first

responders, we all have different ways of coping. This is a job where we hear about just about every single fatal and injury crash that happens in the state that we cover. It's an emotional toll that goes along with it. It can be difficult at times to deal with that disconnect, only to turn around and realize you still have to go home and spend time with family and friends and try and be a fully functioning member of society that doesn't have to deal with this all the time. That goes with any first responder. At the PIO level, being a part of so much of it can be difficult and continuing to make those relationships and understand that people are still people. While we try to disconnect from it, there are still people affected by all of these incidents."

Can't unplug: Most PIOs mentioned that people don't understand that you can't just unplug or step away for all the responsibilities. PIOs are driven by the needs of the community and those exist at all hours. Finding the time to take care of the personal aspect of life, while ensuring that you don't miss something on the professional side, is a delicate balance. Stepping back and truly taking a break is vitally important, because PIOs will run until they're empty and then they'll keep running, according to Subject-4. "Being able to refill your cup is essential and find the time to step back and have your community understand that yes, you will be there, but also that a human is behind the account and they need time away. That's a learning process for everybody. Being able to separate for a time, my personal life from my professional life, is very difficult and having that honest conversations with my family about why I cannot just unplug or turn off my phone for the day. Unless you are in the job, you will not understand. It's hard to stop" (Subject-4). Subject-7 added, his friends always want to ask about stuff going on and he is not even thinking about "PIO stuff," so in some ways he is always on.

Subject-12 said leadership had an expectation of the PIOs being available 24 hours, seven days a week, even days off and vacations. It comes down to the PIOs having a work phone and they're expected to answer it at any time, even when they're not the one that's on call or in charge at the moment. "It can be extremely difficult to maintain work life balance and be normal. Fortunately, those leaders are few and far between, with a majority of them having an understanding that PIOs are not going to do very well or last very long. It does not behoove the agency to burn out your people that quickly, and they have an understanding that there needs to be rotation and disconnect."

Work is never done: Subject-7 summed up the general feelings of PIOs saying that the PIOs task list is long, is never done and never will be done. Subject-9 added that the public will never know how much time and effort goes into presenting anything to the public. "When people see a bus mural or a 30-second TV spot, they don't know it took months or years' worth of planning to get that done." She wants to tell the citizens, "Hey, I'm presenting something to you that literally has my blood, sweat, and tears in it. Even if it is a 2-minute video or a short statement that says this is what happens, and this is what you do with it," said Subject-9.

Prioritizing roles: PIOs for the government are doing the jobs of many people, even though they are often a solo act. The deadlines of projects set the priority but then when the boss prioritizes a job, all the PIOs said they go along with it, said Subject-13. They also think about managing their time and resources by taking in consideration the needs of the day along with the organizational goals, mission, and responsibilities and crisis communications, in order to do the job. Subject-9 said they can start the day with a goal to meet a deadline by then a crisis happens and then the goal turns to communicating their crisis management plan.

Educating leadership: Subject-9 said sometimes people go against your council. In one case, Subject-9 recalled that leadership didn't understand why a four-page press release didn't seem to inform the public. She had to let her leadership know that in this case, the public wasn't informed in a way that best suited them. "You do your job informing leadership of how best to educate the public and they think they know best; this leads to many cooks in the kitchen." At the end of the day she gave the public the information in the way the leadership wanted even though she knew it would contradict the needs of the community.

Using time wisely: Subject-7 often has to decide if speaking with a couple people in depth or sending out a survey to 20,000 people on Next Door is the best use of his time. "It's a scattershot approach vs the focused approach." Along with not having enough time in the day to get all their tasks done, they are also ***short staffed*** which is challenging. Being ***short staffed*** was a problem echoed by many PIOs. Subject-6 said her department is the smallest in the city, but the population has tripled in size. This has been a "bone of contention" for her in that she has not been able to expand her department the way she thinks it should be and to keep up with the population influx.

The PIOs are trying to make sure everybody's needs are met and serving a variety of groups as well as possible while still getting everything done. "There will be times when one building is getting more attention than another. We're in a small district, so we don't have the capacity to serve them all like we would like to do" (Subject-11).

It's hard to make the case as to why Subject-7 needs an adequate number of people in his office because government positions are hard to add. "I have to validate why communication is important and all the different things I want to do. Leadership doesn't understand the amount of

time things take to do. They think I just put up a Facebook post, but it takes time to create and design it and then pay attention to the comments. They don't understand producing a video involves writing the script, shooting, editing, captioning, creating graphics and uploading it can take an afternoon," said Subject-7.

Lack of funding: It can be hard with so many responsibilities but still wanting to expand and do more along with the burden of not having the funding needed for all the agency's programming (Subject-3). Subject-13 also mentioned the lack of funding is challenging because the library promotes over 20,000 programs a year that target 25-year-olds versus 70-year-olds along with not having enough money to hire staff. With the small budget, she has to figure out how to tell their story in bigger chunks so that it makes sense and is doable. Social media is free, but often she has to boost advertisements to get the message in front of the right people. Subject-5 is reminded of how much help and resources the government does provide and how many people really need help, but the hardest part is when they can't do enough to help the public. Her housing agency is "really tiny. If they could hire more staff, they could do a much better job of marketing all their programs. It could be more proactive and not just always putting out fires. The people asking for housing help aren't just a number, they are not just a story you're reading about. I am meeting with these people every day, it's a real face, a real person, it's really difficult when we've exhausted our resources and it's not enough" (Subject-5).

Apolitical: Subject-12 said as a trooper they are apolitical and no matter what their personal feelings are, they're going to put them aside and be as apolitical as possible. They still have to deal with politics on both sides and be able to maneuver and navigate that while being as effective as possible within our duties. For Subject-8 his goal is to stay out of politics by

providing information to the public as the public health PIO but leadership wants him to provide messaging for the state regarding the 2020 election. He feels like he is being "dragged" into politicizing Covid information instead of being a PIO for his agency. As a former reporter, this is when his journalism training kicks in since this is a conflict for him, because it's not what he would have wanted from the media as a viewer. He would want the media to report the facts so he could draw his own conclusions rather than draw the conclusion for him. For Subject-2, she has to be careful not to show her political views and keep them separate from the job and on her social media accounts. If she can't manage or reconcile political or personal views it would be time for her to move on.

Don't take it personally: Subject-9 said take your personal feelings out of it. "I still have to do my job and relay information that is best for my organization." The PIO is not the reason the citizens are angry but are still the face of the inconvenience, they can't solve the problem the citizen has but they do need to have a thick skin along with having an understanding of the way people want to be talked to.

Pandemic fatigue: The Covid-19 pandemic has proven to be a difficult time for many of the PIOs interviewed for this thesis research. They had to deal with employees who were emotionally and physically burnt out due to working 80-90 hours a week for several months. Subject-7 he would wake up in the morning and dread going into the office. Subject-8 said it was challenging to work during this time because his health department work was clouded with politics. "It's been challenging and frustrating to deal with things that are out of my control and unprecedented which makes it emotionally and mentally draining," said Subject-8.

In the beginning of the pandemic, Subject-12 said it was a difficult time since as a state trooper and PIO he had to prioritize their messaging to be in line with the government officials and make sure he wasn't conflicting those messages and safety aspects. Subject-4 said, "The psychological toll that a crisis in real time takes is an emotional charge on individuals whose PIO role is to be the conduit between questions and answers. Not being able to respond to the onslaught of people from all over the country posting on their social media accounts. They were posting comments about the police department as if they knew who we were and how we operated."

The pandemic has also contributed to draining financial resources for many PIOs, including Subject-3, who wasn't able to do snail mailing, although that was her community's preferred method of getting information.

Transparency through truth and the role of persuasion

The image of a PIO has often been that of a talking head. PIOs are seen as only telling people what they want you to hear and manipulating words. However, PIOs who are good in this role tell the truth, said Subject-13.

Subject-10 summed up what most of the PIOs said in the interviews that the PIOs role is to help the organization understand that transparency means trust. If you don't have trust with your community, you don't have trust with the media, it will burn you at some point. It's a hard piece to swallow for any organization. You don't ever want to be on the front page of the newspaper or the top of the newscast for something negative happening.

The way the PIO handles the situation is the way that people will remember the agency. The PIO is a good gatekeeper. One of the rules of public relations is to tell the truth even if the public gets mad, said Subject-9. This also goes for the agency, as conflict can arise since leadership doesn't want to have some of their less than desirable pieces of information aired to the general public (Subject-10). Subject-9 added that since with a government agency everything is on record, laws are in place and she does everything by the books. Subject-1 echoed with saying if a PIO lies, they will get found out and that never goes well. Transparency comes in many forms such as being present and available. It breaks down barriers faster than anything else.

A PIO is a first stop on what could inevitably be an incredible opportunity for the government at all levels to negate the assumption that local government is unresponsive, broken, and bureaucratic. They are more than paper pushers. The PIO has to be exceptionally intelligent emotionally, psychologically, when it comes to interactions with the public, they have to be well versed in policy and practices, according to Subject-4. Subject-8 said that it's a matter of being as forthcoming as possible, even if that means saying you don't have an answer or the data available right now. He added the importance of providing the information you do have in a timely manner making sure everybody, no matter the size of the outlet, gets an answer. Subject-10 is always trying to put herself into a parents' perspective since they are the primary stakeholders. It's key for a PIO to become more of a consultant and a strategy-focused professional by thinking like the community would think and that's kind of hard. "Sometimes it's hard to put yourself in other people's shoes, but you start to get a knack for it and start to anticipate it. As an executive leader, I have value in foreshadowing something which takes a lot

of skill. I'm still trying to work through how to have my crystal ball ready and foreshadow certain things." Subject-9 is also on the frontline as a gatekeeper between what the public wants, feels and perceives. "We will come out and listen to you crap on us, we'll take the crap and the anger because we will make sure that you are being heard. What does that look like action wise? We can't make the contractor move any faster."

***Accountability*:** Subject-9 said there is accountability for the PIOs. She presents the information to the public by making sure she's not stepping on toes and saying untruths or violating anyone's personal or private information or the law. In local government, she works with the law department to make sure she's communicating the messaging appropriately. Lawyers are a very integral part of making sure the PIOs message is correct, so they don't get in trouble down the road. Subject-12 said as the state trooper PIO, "Our membership is human and they make mistakes, we are upfront and forthcoming with the information."

Having a seat at the table

Although the PIOs serve as the mouthpiece for their agencies, they had mixed responses about their roles in their organizational decision-making process. They were united in their responses about the fact that if they don't have a seat at the table, it makes their jobs harder.

Leadership trust: As a PIO, Subject-4 said, she knows more than anything a major factor is being able to foundationally build lasting, trusting relationships with people who run the organization because they rely on you to have that information and per Subject-9, leadership

needs to trust the PIO with their counsel because they have been trained and skilled. For Subject-7 the best part of the job for him is he is not micromanaged by his bosses. They have their priorities that they want him to do, but they do not micromanage every aspect. They may override him from time to time, but they let him do his job. There is always something new and different to do in the office. He said that since he isn't micromanaged, he can explore tasks on his own and can try "wacky things" that interests him and keeps him going. Subject-9 said, any organization that has a PIO understands they are trying to counsel and advise. Her agency has always understood that daily communication with the public is important in order to do what the PIO needs to do to be involved and know what is going on. If the media calls, she won't be caught off guard because she's familiar with what led up to the "something" that happened. Subject-2 said her managers have given her a lot of freedom to communicate on behalf of the county without having to get everything approved on social media, the website and with the media since she writes the content and schedules the posts. They trust her to keep on message and to make reasonable posts without being inflammatory or divisive.

Informed and involved: Subject-3 sits and meets with the leadership team and says it's important for them to see her at the table in those conversations. She receives updates from city commissioners and city managers, so she knows the status of projects throughout the organization. This is really helpful for her to have a feel for what's going on.

Subject-9 said a good organization will have their communications person on hand to be informed and involved in any type of messaging so that they can better do their job of explaining things in a way that the public will understand. Her leadership understands the PIO has been trained and skilled into communicating with the public. "I don't need to be at every meeting but

bring me in when you are ready to present something and I can do my job from there." Subject-4 said if a government agency wants to do a community right, they have to include their PIO. They can't be getting third-or fourth-hand information that is passed down the line. As part of the team, the PIOs inputs should be heavily considered and their position should be clearly demarcated. The optics are everything and if there is a lack of communication or miscommunication the first person that will fall is the PIO. Subject-11 said it's critical to have a PIO that works closely with key leadership, because you want to make sure that you're having the same message. In order to frame that same message, the PIO and key leadership have to be connected. It's difficult to have an organization say one thing and a leader say something else. She thinks it's really important for those two pieces, and the public image, to represent the organization collectively.

Un-engaged: When ***leadership*** doesn't include Subject-2 in discussions or meetings it gives her the feeling of being un-engaged with her agency. They purposely leave her out of big decisions because leadership said she needs plausible deniability to do the job. She is purposely not invited to meetings so she does not "spill the beans" to the media and can honestly say she doesn't know. She wants to be included in meetings and show she can "keep her mouth shut." Which makes her feel like she's being underutilized and excluded.

For Subject-3, it's frustrating when she doesn't isn't brought into a project sooner or when the projects are moved forward without her input. Subject-7 figured out a way to get his team to re-engage with their jobs by doing fun tasks outside of their specialties. He said this tends to invigorate them for a while to combat boredom. Subject-4 said leadership needs to understand how essential the PIO position is and how it can be a barrier for a civilian working in a

military-type setting, such as a police department. “The police PIO position is absolutely necessary.” Subject-10 understands how important it is for a communicator to have a seat at the table and be relied upon for that function. As the K-12 PIO, her superintendent boss is wonderful right now but in the past, it had been challenging to get used to different supervisors' styles. “I think it really is hard sometimes when you have a boss who is not willing to hand over that freedom, because you really do have to convince them to let go of the reins sometimes” (Subject-10). Subject-5 says more often than not, they were viewed as the last step in the process instead of an integral part of it. Every program is different because some program managers value getting her communications team involved from the beginning and others dismiss them as a “media thing.”

If the PIO is not reporting to the head of the agency, there is automatically going to be a situation where things get lost in translation, causing a communications problem. Subject-4 also noted that, “Having to report up the ladder is archaic, almost militaristic and it should not be applicable because, at the end of the day, there’s going to be one person who is held liable for everything and that’s the head of the agency. If they are not getting accurate and timely information from the person distributing it externally, that is going to create problems and ultimately going to be a failure.”

Conflicting interests: Most of the PIOs said they will advise their leadership on what they think is best, but in the end it’s up to their supervisor, they are going to do what they’re going to do (Subject-12). Subject-1 said ultimately, it’s not her decision, so she will have a conversation with her boss and explain the pitfalls that can happen if they do it a certain way. She believes it’s important to give leadership all the information before they decide how to

approach the situation. It's also her job to play ***devil's advocate*** or point out the potential problems. "I don't have an agenda other than I want the department and the people in it to be presented as best as possible," said Subject-1. If she feels it could be problematic for the agency, under protest to the situation, she will put her disagreement in writing and in an email to have a paper trail because in city government everything is discoverable for public records. Subject-1 added that if anybody would ever submit a public information request, they'd find the email. Subject-12 said it's not just giving leadership information they like or dislike, it's being able to see all sides of it. If we demonstrate this these are the ramifications that may happen. Sometimes leadership listens and takes the PIOs information and ends up changing their thoughts and sometimes they still go forward, they do their best with what we know is maybe a bad situation.

Subject-7 said when interests conflict, it has to come down to the needs of the position and stepping up to do what needs to be done. For Subject-9, they're representing the agency through communicating to the public the best way she can and with the public's best interests in mind while making sure that the organization is accountable, reliable, and reputable. By merging them together, it shows she is speaking on behalf of your organization and not you the individual. At the end of the day, most PIOs are successful in managing the conflicts.

Peer help: Most of their former bosses were instrumental mentors in their careers who many still speak with. They also have found mentors in their current boss and through professional organizations. Subject-6 was able to receive help from her peers when she was learning about social media. In her groups, "none of us believe in reinventing the wheel, they shared graphics and information that helped us communicate during Covid time." Subject-10 finds it difficult when people want to hide things or sweep them under the rug or not put them

into the public. “Ethically, through PRSA, we have a code of conduct and a code of ethics that we swore to take an oath to. I rely on those since there is a lot of gray area when you’re talking about ethics. If there is any kind of gray area in question, you need to speak with a colleague whose part of PRSA and has their credentials so you can talk through those gray areas. I’ve been amazed when I reach out to some folks through PRSA or other colleagues in other school districts how helpful they have been. They talk me through the ‘here’s where I’m at’ or ‘how do I ride this out’.”

Mentors throughout career: Subject-2 hadn’t worked in the communications field previously, so her first boss taught her how to write in APA style, how to handle a crisis, people and situations. She is grateful for him since he took her under his wing. Subject-3 took a writing class in college with a professor that was very detailed and that stuck with her. “I keep it in mind with everything I do, the details are important.” In her current role, when she is engaging with her community and listening to their stories, she asks them a lot of questions to help her to understand where they're coming from. Subject-4 said her boss lets her do projects at her own pace and never makes her question herself. “He's my first cheerleader, which I've never had before. I know that it is a gift. I know that not all PIOs have that. You just got to find your tribe.” Since she has been in this role and network, she’s found people outside of her boss who she will go to just to hear their voice because she knows that there's going to be somebody that is there first and foremost to make sure that she’s okay and that she can do the job that she needs to do. “What's so fantastic about being a PIO is you have so many people in your support network.”

Pay forward: Subject-1 always tries to pay that forward since she thinks that’s important. Students have reached out to her through the years and ask her to speak at events. “I always tell

them yes because a lot of people took the time to talk to me and help me and I always appreciated it, so I am happy to do that because I feel it is important that those who want to get into this profession continue to support each other, especially women." She tries to do her part and be available to anybody who likes to talk about PR, needs guidance or advice or wants to ask questions about what it's really like to do her job. They ask what advice she would give them by being honest. She says, no matter where you work, there's always going to be things about your job that you like and things you don't.

Chapter 6: Discussion

After the researcher completed her interviews, she learned how PIOs view their roles, why they sought out a communications position and discovered answers to the research questions:

RQ1 How do PIOs experience and manage competing role expectations?

RQ1a: What are the roles they perceive to have?

RQ1b: What role is the most fulfilling?

RQ1c: What is their responsibility to their agency in these roles?

RQ1d: What is their responsibility to the public in these roles?

RQ1e: How are perceived role conflicts managed?

In answer to RQ1: Interviews uncovered that the PIOs are individuals and each have their own way of coping with the expectations of work vs. personal life and all of the various tasks that fall under their purview. The PIOs were very honest when they said, people make assumptions that they do manage it all (Subject-1). The job can be overwhelming, and the projects will never end (Subject-7) and don't expect staff to work after hours since it's not sustainable and they will eventually burn out. Others on this topic said that they feel the need to work long hours to make deadlines and they are connected to the agency's social media 24 hours a day, seven days a week. They have conversations with their families to tell them why they cannot disconnect (Subject-4). The boss is always the final say of what project is the priority. The PIOs give their advice and play devil's advocate to make sure their supervisor understands all aspects of the decision but in the end, they do what the boss says (Subject-1 & Subject-12). All the PIOs have a variety of stakeholders, but the K-12 PIOs have that added layer of leadership, staff, students, parents, school board members, the media and then trying to get

students back into the classroom at the parent's requests and the teachers wanting to teach through Zoom chat. This year added additional responsibilities since they had to learn how to navigate a Covid pandemic and social unrest. A crisis usually lasts a week or two, but this has been a crisis within a never-ending crisis (Subject-10 & Subject-11).

When it comes to discovering answers to RQ1a: The roles the PIOs perceive to have are digital risk managers (Subject-4) who handle conversations and conflict that exists online, they are the gatekeepers for the media, working with them to get the correct topic expert, they are writers, content creators for websites and marketing, community managers, relationship builders and liaison between the agency and the public along with internal and external responsibilities. They have become their own newsroom, if the media won't cover their stories, they need to be prepared to tell their agency's stories (Subject-6). They are graphic designers, photographers, videographers, supervisors, event planners and strategic communicators. They have also had to fold the role of social media specialist into their job (Subject-9) and it's become an extension of their work to reach different audiences (Subject-5). Several PIOs have created a government access channel producing videos and content to inform the community. They are trainers who teach leadership to work with the media and prepare them for interviews and teach other employees how to post on social media appropriately. Throughout 2020 they have refined their crisis communications and emergency management skills.

When it comes to discovering answers to RQ1b: The roles that are the most fulfilling appeared to be those of storyteller, writer, and a general creative force. For example, as the PIO for a housing agency, Subject-3 loves when she is able to tell the story of a community receiving a grant and building a playground. Those moments balance out the hard days when she has to tell

a family that she doesn't have any money to help them with securing a place to live, especially during Covid and so many people have lost their jobs and shelter.

Subject-1 expressed the joy of writing and being creative through working on social media posts and thinking about how she wants to tell the stories of the firefighters in her agency and the community they serve. She is able to bypass the media and speak directly to her Facebook and Twitter audience. As the PIO for a library, Subject-13 gets to be a cheerleader for the agency, promoting the more than 20,000 programs a year that serves the community of all ages.

When it comes to discovering answers to RQ1c: Their responsibilities to their agency in these roles are to make a positive impact by being transparent and truthful along with telling all the parts of their agency's story, including the events they wish they didn't have to tell but that is part of the job. It's learning how to use their communication skills to be truthful, honest and developing a road map of how they will move forward. Subject-9 loves her job but at the same time it can be frustrating with battles she might not win. PIOs also need to remember their internal audience who is watching them (Subject-4) and those employees who are ambassadors for the agency (Subject-7) also need to be informed as to why the agency is doing what they are doing and not hear about a situation for first from the media. This can be accomplished by adding them to the news releases that are going out to the media along with creating internal newsletters.

When it comes to discovering answers to RQ1d: Their responsibility to the public in these roles are to tell the truth (Subject-13) and to help the organization understand that transparency means trust (Subject-10) and being honest with the media so they will pass on the

confirmed information to their viewers (Subject-1). It is important for the PIOs to be responsive and create two-way communication (Subject-4) by being "boots on the ground" representing the agency at events such as coffee with a cop, community engagement and Zoom calls. It's imperative to be approachable and explain situations so the general public will understand (Subject-4).

When it comes to discovering answers to RQ1e: Perceived role conflicts are managed in the PIO world by having strategic plans and a framework of what the year will look like, but situations and news items pop up and they have to respond to them (Subject-12).

They also have to go along with what the boss says since they prioritize the tasks. Leadership is going to do what they're going to do (Subject-12). When Subject-13 has a conflict with her agency she finds common ground when she doesn't believe her organization is doing the right or moral thing but it's still her job to promote the needs of the agency to the best of her ability. Subject-9 also manages conflict by understanding her job is to represent the agency through communicating to the public the best way she can with the public's best interests in mind while making sure that the organization is accountable, reliable, and reputable. Many of the PIOs will send out surveys to their stakeholders to get their opinions so they are not assuming what the public's needs are while Subject-7 uses surveys when his conflict is lack of time. He can reach 20,000 people on the agency's social media site Next Door vs. spending hours packing the car to drive to an event and speak to people one on one. For other PIOs, they found themselves being "dragged" into politics this year. Subject-8 said his journalism training kicked in when he felt politicians were trying to politicize the Covid information his health department was giving to

their concerned citizens. As a former journalist he knows the public wants the media to report the facts and so they can draw their own conclusions rather than draw the conclusion for him.

Contribution to Academia

This research contributes to the academic literature by capturing the voices of current PIOs speaking about their jobs in this unique moment in history. Their comments created a portrait about the profession from their love of writing and being creative to dreading going into the office during the pandemic knowing it would be an 80- or 90-hour work week to their honesty of why they left the journalism profession and how they found a home serving their local government.

The previous studies on the topic of PIOs were structured through surveys that tend to use the same theory along with focusing on one demographic and one type of agency. When I started this thesis journey, my goal was to produce research to be diverse in scope that included men and women who are on the front lines and in the trenches day after day. The interview subjects represented nine states - California, Colorado, Georgia, Michigan, Missouri, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Texas - along with different segments of local government, including a fire department, rural-county, city, law enforcement, housing, municipal, city-county, public health, transportation, K-12, and library.

Contributions to the PIO Profession

For professionals in the field working as PIOs, the primary point that they could take away from this research is the commonality of freedoms, barriers, joys, and problems that occur across geographic and topic area boundaries. Subjects spoke about the importance of being

included in the planning process with communications, respect and recognition of their skills by their superiors and colleagues where they work, the relevance of journalism to the job of a PIO and the love of creativity and storytelling. Overall, the consensus for the most rewarding part of being a PIOs is the sense of service and making an impact on their community.

Conclusion

After completing the interviews, I learned a great deal about how and why the subjects became PIOs. Some of them it was intentional for others the job fell into their lap.
The research discovered the PIOs experience and manage competing role expectations in a variety of ways that are influenced from their educational training, on the job experiences and suggestions from their mentors and peers. The subjects interviewed are outgoing, love their jobs and represent the agency to their best ability. They have a passion for helping others and informing their community of the programs they offer.

Ever since I was a kid, I would walk around bothering people with my camera and wanting to be a photojournalist. I have always loved journalism and communications, this study encouraged me to keep pursuing a position in communications and be purposeful in where I apply. Each PIO is a great representation of the local government community by volunteering to be interviewed and sharing their thoughts regarding their life experiences and the jobs they ended up in.

As in most professions the PIOs are hardest on themselves but as Subject-4 said, “the performance evaluation that you give yourself is always subpar, but when you sit back and look at what you’ve done in a year, it’s astounding how government communicators have risen up this year. PIOs have really stepped up and done remarkable things with communications.”

Future Study

Future studies could include a quantitative survey of PIOs examining issues similar to this study but adding elements about their allotment of time spent on certain tasks or ranking of the importance of various aspects of their jobs. Focus groups would be interesting to conduct because they PIOs could bounce ideas off each other and speak about their successes and failures. Other studies could also include a more in-depth focus on why journalists leave that profession for public relations compared to public relations majors who go directly into the PR field or examining how the PIOs have coped emotionally with the 2020 crisis-filled year.

Limitations

There were several limitations of this study, primarily dealing with acquiring the sample. Given the pandemic and civil unrest that was taking place during the summer, it was difficult to find PIOs who had the time to do the interviews. This caused a lower response rate than anticipated. Additionally, the sample wasn't as diverse in gender or race or geography as the I had hoped for due to these aforementioned issues. However, related to gender, the PIO and PR fields tend to be more heavily female, so the distribution of seven women to three men is indicative of the field as a whole. Additionally, given that the interviews took place during the Covid pandemic and civil unrest, these factors could have influenced how the PIOs answered the questions compared to if this took place without these events being in play.

I brought reflexivity to the study since I have taken public relations and communications classes. I listened to the opinions of the participants with the understanding that I may have a bias going into the interview because I may think the situation the local government PIO is explaining during the semi-structured interview should have been handled differently.

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Appendix

Appendix A-1: Introductory email and (A-2) IRB Recruitment Flyer sent to professional networking group owners

Dear ...,

My name is Christina Mascarenas. I'm a student member of [professional networking group name]. I'm currently a graduate student at the University of Missouri in the School of Journalism and I am in the process of starting the research portion of my thesis – "*The Role of Public Information Officers in Local American Government."*

I was writing to ask if you would send my recruitment flyer (attached to this email) to the membership database requesting participants for my research. My flyer includes my contact

information along with a link to my website for more information regarding my research for the potential participant.

Thank you for your consideration and time.

Christina Mascarenas

Appendix A-2: IRB Recruitment Flyer sent to professional networking group owners/contact

University of Missouri

You're Invited

graduate student requests your expertise

Yes! I want to participate

Please visit Christina's website for more information on how to take the screener survey.

WWW.CHRISTINAMASCARENAS.COM

Who

Christina Mascarenas is a graduate student at the University of Missouri's School of Journalism in Columbia. She is pursuing a master's degree in journalism with an emphasis in strategic communications and public relations.

What

Requesting public information officers (PIOs) with a minimum of five (5) years' experience working as a PIO or government-related communication to participate in her research study.

When

The participant interviews will be conducted in August (September if needed) 2020.

Where

Christina and the subject will meet on Zoom for the approximately (1) one-hour semi-structured interview.

Why

The purpose of this research is to examine - *How do PIOs experience and manage competing role expectations in local American government.*

Study Title

The Role of Public Information Officers (PIOs) in Local American Government

IRB #2026662

Principal Investigator

Christina Rae Mascarenas, M.A.

Committee Chair/Advisor

Jon Stemmle, M.A.

Christina's contact information

email: CRMCNR@MAIL.MISSOURI.EDU

cell: (719) 696-1733

Appendix B-1: Email sent with (B-2) Recruitment and Information Consent Script

Dear ...,

Thank you for taking the screener survey and agreeing to participate in my research study that will be used in my thesis. I apologize for taking longer than expected to get back with you, I am currently doing two internships. I have attached the participant consent form for you to keep regarding your participant.

I am writing to set up a time and date that will work for the both of us. I will send a Zoom link and a calendar invite. Please reply with three times/dates that work best for you within the next two weeks. The interview will be approximately an hour.

During the Zoom interview - I will ask semi-structured questions regarding your role as a PIO or in government communications.

My research question is "How public information officers (PIOs) see their role in American local government." Your experience and responses generated from serving as PIO may add valuable information to my study. The information that you provide may help understand the role of PIOs in local American government by examining how PIOs perceive their role and responsibilities to their agency, to the public, and how they manage those role conflicts. The data for this project will be collected anonymously. Identifying information will be omitted from the data set, all identities will remain confidential, and individual responses will only be analyzed as a whole.

Your participation is voluntary. You may decline to answer any question, or you may withdraw your participation at any time by ceasing to respond to questions. Participation in

either activity – surveys or interviews – is voluntary. If you have any additional questions concerning this research or your participation in it, please feel free to contact me, my thesis committee chair Jon Stemmle at (573) 882-6225 or email: stemmlej@missouri.edu at any time. Thank you for contributing to helping me earn this master's degree and for your consideration and time.

Christina Mascarenas

Appendix B-2: Recruitment and Information Consent Script

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Christina Mascarenas for her thesis as a graduate student in the School of Journalism at the University of Missouri-Columbia. She hopes to better understand the role of a public information officer (PIO) in local American government by examining how PIOs perceive their role and responsibilities to their agency, to the public, and how they manage those role conflicts., along with helping a graduate student earn her master's degree.

Voluntary & your rights as a study participant. Taking part in this study is voluntary. You are free to say yes or no. If you do decide to take part, you have the right to change your mind and drop out of the study at any time. If the study investigator (Christina) decides to take you off the study, she must explain the reasons.

Purpose and Background. You are being asked to participate because you have been a PIO serving in local government for a minimum of five years. There hasn't been a lot of research conducted on the PIOs role in American local government, so the purpose of this research is to examine how PIOs experience and manage competing role expectations in their local government agency.

Procedures. Thank you for agreeing to be a research study participant, this includes an approximately one-hour Zoom interview answering semi-structured questions. We will agree to a time and date that is convenient for both of us. I will email you a Zoom interview link and a

calendar invite for you to accept and have on your calendar for a reminder of our interview. Zoom will record the interview resulting in a video and audio recording and a transcript.

Risks of being in the Study: The risk in participating in this study is no greater than what would be expected in a daily conversation about similar topics and there should be no potential risk in participating. Your participation will help us understand more about your experience as a PIO.

Questions, Concerns, or Complaints? If you have more questions about this study at any time, you can call Christina Mascarenas at (719) 696-1733 or email: crmcnr@mail.missouri.edu OR her committee chair Jon Stemmle at (573) 882-6225 or email: stemmlej@missouri.edu

You may contact the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board (IRB) if you have questions about your rights as a research participant. Their phone number is 573- 882-3181 or email irb@missouri.edu. If you want to talk privately about your rights or any issues related to your participation in this study, you can contact University of Missouri Research Participant Advocacy by calling 888-280-5002 (a free call), or emailing MUResearchRPA@missouri.edu.

Christina Mascarenas

Candidate for a master's degree in journalism

University of Missouri

Appendix C: IRB Approval

Institutional Review Board University of Missouri Columbia

FWA Number: 00002876 IRB Registration Numbers: 00000731, 00009014

482 McReynolds Hall, Columbia, MO 65211 573-882-3181 irb@missouri.edu

July 29, 2020

Principal Investigator: Christina Rae Mascarenas, Department: SHP Public Health

Your IRB Application to project entitled The Role of Public Information Officers in Local American Government was reviewed and approved by the MU Institutional Review Board according to the terms and conditions described below:

IRB Project Number 2026662

IRB Review Number 269545

Initial Application Approval Date July 29, 2020

IRB Expiration Date July 29, 2021

Level of Review Exempt

Project Status Active Exempt

45 CFR 46.104d(2)(ii)

Exempt Categories (Revised Common Rule)

Risk Level Minimal Risk

The email and the screener questions sent after consent is given to participants.
Consent information.
Approved Documents

Recruitment Flyer.
This is the recruitment email I will send.
Interview Questions to ask the chosen subjects to gather research

The principal investigator (PI) is responsible for all aspects and conduct of this study. The PI must comply with the following conditions of the approval:

COVID-19 Specific Information

Enrollment and study related procedures must remain in compliance with the University of Missouri regulations related to interaction with human participants following guidance at research.missouri.edu/about/covid-19-info.php

In addition, any restarting of in-person research activities must comply with the policies and guiding principles provided at research.missouri.edu/about/research-restart.php, including appropriate approvals for return to work authorization for individuals as well as human subject research projects.

No subjects may be involved in any study procedure prior to the IRB approval date or after the expiration date.

All changes must be IRB approved prior to implementation utilizing the Exempt Amendment Form.

The Annual Exempt Form must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval at least 30 days prior to the project expiration date to keep the study active or to close it.

Maintain all research records for a period of seven years from the project completion date.

If you are offering subject payments and would like more information about research participant payments, please click here to view the MU Business Policy and Procedure: http://bppm.missouri.edu/chapter2/2_250.html

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the MU IRB Office at 573-882-3181 or email to muresearchirb@missouri.edu.

Thank you,

MU Institutional Review Board

Appendix D: Anonymized Interview, Table D

Subject	Current Job Title	Years in Communications Field	Size of Agency	Type of Agency	Gender
S-1	Public Information & Marketing Manager	15+ years	1,000 fire fighters & 100 staff	Fire	Female
S-2	Public Information Officer	10-14 years	245	Rural - County	Female
S-3	Communications Manager	5-9 years	550	City	Female
S-4	Social Media & Public Relations Coordinator	5-9 years	95 sworn officers & 40 non-sworn personnel	Police	Female
S-5	Senior Public Information Officer	5-9 years	8,000+	Housing	Female
S-6	Director of Communications and Marketing & Public Information Officer	15+ years	2	Municipal	Female
S-7	Public Information Officer	15+ years	1,700	City - County	Male
S-8	Public Communicator	4 years	1,200	Health	Male

S-9	Public and Community Relations Specialist	10-14 years	350-400	Transportation	Female
S-10	Public Information Officer & Communications Director	15+ years	3,500	K-12	Female
S-11	Director of Public Relations	10-14 years	550	K-12	Female
S-12	State Trooper & Public Information Officer	5-9 years	1,100	Law enforcement	Male
S-13	Director of Communications & Community Engagement	5-9 years	700	Library	Female

Appendix E: Qualtrics Screener survey questions

1) Do you currently work in government communications as a PIO or other title?
2) How long have you worked as a PIO or in a government-related communications position? (Choose one below):
    a) 1-4 years
    b) 5-9 years
    c) 10-14 years
    d) 15+ years
3) What is your current age?
4) What gender do you identify with?
5) What is your highest level of education completed? (Choose one below):
    a) 12th grade
    b) GED or equivalent
    c) Some college
    d) Graduated 2-year college
    e) Associate degree
    f) Bachelor's degree

g) Master's degree

h) Doctoral degree

6) Which of the following degrees do you have? (Choose one below):

a) None

b) BA

c) MA

d) Ph.D.

7) How long have you worked as a PIO or government-related communication? (If less than five years, end of survey)

8) What is your current job title?

9) Size of your agency?

a) Do you consider the size of your agency (small, medium, or large)?

b) Approximately how many employees?

10) How do you describe the type of government your agency is? (Education, sheriff, etc.)

11) Which best describes your government agency geographies?

a) i.e. urban cities, small communities, etc.

b) Region of the country

12) Based on your responses, you're a good fit for my thesis research. Would you be willing to participate in a 30-60-minute interview? If you select yes, you'll be asked to provide some contact information on the next screen so I can contact you and set up a time for that.

Appendix F: Interview Questions

1) Why did you want to be a PIO?
2) (RCT is your professional role - everything that is the person's job in the work role) What types of public relations/PIO roles do you perform in your agency?
3) How do you prioritize those roles during the workday?
4) How do PIOs experience and manage competing role expectations through the demands of tasks and deadlines:
    a) What tensions do you face daily?
    b) When was a time you experienced a decrease in professional performance or employee 'un-engagement'?
    c) Give an example of competing and incompatible demands placed on you as an employee?
    d) Have you been overwhelmed with a variety of roles?
5) What are the tasks you perform in your agency?
6) Has social media added responsibilities, if yes, what are they?

7) What is the (a) best and (b) worst part of being a PIO?

8) What are the barriers you have in your role as a PIO?

9) A PIO is the mouthpiece of the agency. As a PIOs how are you transparent to the public?

10) Whose interests are you serving?

11) Do you see your role as a public relations role (vs. PIO)? How is it the same or different?

12) (Another basic form of role conflict is between role expectations and self-concept (Stryker & Macke, 1978). What do you do when those interests' conflict?

13) Are you involved in the decision-making process when it comes to communicating the agency's messaging?

14) How does your role make an important contribution in helping to form the agency's ideas about what it is, what it should do and what its publics want and expect from it? (Satyendra, 2014).

15) What is your role in relationship-building/influencing/communicating?

    a) Internal: Employee engagement/buy-in?

    b) Internal: Leadership

    c) External: Stakeholders

    d) Externally: Media

16) (Managing expectations) What are some of the tensions that you are managing in this job?

17) (A basic form of RCT is the lack of clarity in others' expectations.) When is a time you've had conflict with your role expectations and someone else's expectations of your role? (Stryker & Macke, 1978).

b) Have been given contradictory requests or demands from supervisors, stakeholders, co-workers?

18) When is a time you've performed PIO tasks that are at odds with your values?

19) When is a time you've been given a task that you felt you were not trained or qualified or given enough resources to understand the task or complete it?

20) Give an example of when you had a lack of control over a situation or task.

21) Has any of this (role) conflict made you want to leave the PIO position?

22) There is no real playbook or strategy for organizations, they seem to rely on learning from each other and peers in the agency. Do you have a PR or PIO mentor?