

Chapter 1

Introduction and Overview

A Federal Agency Dedicated to Government Reports?

In the first half of the twentieth century, the meaning of the phrase “government report” was very different from its common usage now—early in the twenty-first century. In contemporary usage, government reporting has a very negative meaning. It invokes the image of big brother and bureaucrats intruding unnecessarily in the lives of over-regulated Americans, forcing them to fill out long and unnecessary reports about the most private aspects of their businesses or families. This current meaning is nearly a universal one, given the statement in the 1990s by an activist Democratic president that “the era of big Government is over.”¹ The idea of a government agency dedicated solely to reports would strike the contemporary observer as absurd, silly, and beyond belief.

Yet, to early public administration theorists and New Deal reformers, a government report was an important element of democracy. It represented two related activities. Administrative agencies fulfilled their democratic accountability to the people by reporting to the citizens about their activities and policies and, in the other direction, reported to the government’s leadership about public opinion. During President Franklin Roosevelt’s administration, government reporting was viewed as a very laudable and positive activity, directly related to enhancing democracy in the administrative state.

Believing in the importance of an activist government that engaged in public reporting, when FDR created the Executive Office of

the President (EOP) in 1939, one of its five original agencies was a new agency called the Office of Government Reports (OGR). Two years later, Congress passed a law giving legislative sanction to OGR by authorizing its eligibility for annual appropriations. In that founding legislation, Congress defined the purposes of the agency, including:

1. Provide a central clearing house through which individual citizens, organizations of citizens, and state or local governmental bodies may transmit inquires and complaints and receive advice and information.
2. Collect and distribute information concerning the purposes and activities of executive departments and agencies for the use of the Congress, administrative officials, and the public.
3. Keep the president informed of the opinions, desires, and complaints of citizens and groups of citizens and of state and local governments with respect to the work of federal agencies.²

This congressional declaration of the agency's mission was a forceful and authoritative statement of the general importance of public relations in public administration and specifically of public reporting. However, Congress quickly had second thoughts.

OGR was to be short-lived. A year after its congressional authorization, it was merged into the temporary Office of War Information (OWI) for the duration of World War II. After the war, President Harry Truman dismantled OWI and re-established OGR to its status quo antebellum. In reaction, Congress appropriated only a fraction of the annual funding Truman had requested for fiscal year 1948 and was unwilling to provide any funding for the fiscal year after that. Truman had no choice but to shut down OGR a year and a half after he had restored it. In all, OGR had existed for four and a half years.

What was this OGR? If it was one of the original agencies of the new EOP, it must have been of some importance. After all, in government and politics, nothing happens without a reason. But what led Roosevelt and Truman to try to keep it alive? Up to now, historians and researchers have not been interested in answering that question. Perhaps that OGR barely survived Roosevelt, and the fact that it never became institutionalized within the federal government may have discouraged historical inquiries.

The story of OGR is missing from the record of the Roosevelt and Truman presidencies and from the history of presidential communication activities. Understandably, as an agency that existed only briefly, OGR would be of less interest than some of the lasting and extant legacies of those two presidencies. But failures can also be worth

studying. Some of FDR's failures have been studied, even romanticized, including the Federal Arts, Writers and Theatre Projects,³ Greenbelt cities,⁴ and the two film documentaries *The Plow That Broke the Plains* and *The River*.⁵

Given the vital role of EOP in the emergence of the powerful contemporary presidency, a body of literature is gradually developing about it. Yet, again, these books mention OGR only glancingly even though it was one of EOP's original five agencies.⁶ One of the other five original EOP agencies that didn't survive very long, the National Resources Planning Board—OGR's counterpart in every way, often mentioned by Congress in the same political breath (see chapter 5)—has been studied.⁷ Two recent one-volume histories of the New Deal make no mention of OGR or its predecessor, the National Emergency Council (NEC).⁸ Other books on specific aspects of the Roosevelt presidency occasionally mention OGR and NEC, but only briefly.⁹ It is discussed briefly in a few articles in academic journals, mostly published contemporaneous to its existence or shortly after its demise.¹⁰ Four unpublished dissertations include brief discussions of OGR, but largely focus on other topics or agencies.¹¹

Significance of Studying the Office of Government Reports

When President Roosevelt first created OGR, he had to fight off intense and persistent efforts by the conservative coalition in Congress to kill it. Similarly, when President Truman re-established OGR after World War II, the implacable opposition to OGR by the Republican-majority eightieth Congress overwhelmed him.

This obscure and forgotten agency is significant for three reasons. From the viewpoint of political science and American history, this story is about one round in the ongoing struggle between the presidency and Congress over preeminence.¹² The twentieth century was largely a 100 Years War between the legislative and executive branches of the national government for primacy.¹³ Until then, it was indeed accurate to describe the America's form of national government as congressional government.¹⁴ Beginning with Roosevelt, political science largely applauded the emergence of the presidency as the active and primary branch of the federal government. But, the perception that this is "normal" is largely an artificial construct. Gary Wills argued, recently, that Congress was always intended by the writers of the Constitution as the central branch of the three.¹⁵ The slow and steady emergence of the imperial presidency is not necessarily a natural development. Certainly, from time to time during the twentieth

century, Congress sought to demonstrate its dominance or at least fight a rear-guard action to protect its central role. The 1920 defeat of the League of Nation's Covenant in the Senate and the passage of the War Powers Act in 1973 over a presidential veto epitomize Congress's ongoing battle to be the alpha branch of government. The story of OGR provides a concrete case study of this struggle between the two branches. FDR largely prevailed through 1941, but Congress had the last word in 1942 and then again in 1948. So, even though we think, almost romantically, of these two presidents as the originators of the powerful modern presidency, this arc of power did not grow in one consistent trend. Both sides fought every round vigorously. Through the events described in this book, one sees the tactics and strategies pursued by both branches of government to prevail over the other. And, contrary to the historical flow of power, here was an example of Congress triumphing over the modern expansionist presidency.

The struggle between the White House and Capitol Hill for pre-eminence is more than an abstract competition for power. It is about the consequences of predominance. That is why the opposition of the conservative coalition in Congress to FDR's New Deal was especially heated regarding OGR. Congress has consistently been hostile to public-relations expenditures in executive-branch agencies, before Roosevelt and after Truman, and to this day. Often this stance is associated with other so-called unnecessary categories of expenditures, such as consultants, travel, training, fancy offices, and the like. Like these other administrative-overhead activities, Congress views them as wasteful. Yet, the unflinching opposition by Congress to public-information activities in the executive branch has a more substantive motivation than mere across-the-board parsimony. Public relations and other communication programs give public administrators an opportunity not only to *report* directly to the citizenry, but also to generate *public support* for the agency. Since elected officials are dependent on being popular to survive, they are reluctant to take on popular government programs. And an agency's popularity translates into concrete power: higher budgets, more autonomy from legislative intervention and expanded activities. When an agency has strong public support, a legislature loses leverage to control it. In that respect, the struggle to control public reporting is the struggle over who will set the agency's destiny. Choke off the channel of communication to the public and the legislature has more *de facto* power over the agency. So, irrespective of partisan and political motivations, legislators have an *institutional* interest in minimizing public relations in public administration. No wonder there was so little authentic (as opposed to partisan) support in Congress for OGR. The agency was not merely the public-reporting

program of one federal agency, rather it embodied reporting to the public by the entire executive branch—it was the *president's* public-relations agency. A robust OGR was a direct threat to Congress's institutional interests. As an agency that represented direct communication with the citizenry by the executive branch, the stakes were so much higher than just fighting over one agency's public relations. In short, OGR embodied just about everything that Congress loathed.

Executive/legislative squabbles continue to occur up to the present. For example, in 2002 the US General Accounting Office (GAO) (an arm of Congress) filed a lawsuit against the administration in an effort to obtain records of the vice president's energy task force.¹⁶ This unusual step by GAO occurred even though the same party controlled both the presidency and the two houses of Congress. Other examples that echo OGR relate to the conflict in 2004 over predominance in the policy for occupying and rebuilding Iraq and in 2003 when the House passed a bill to undo new Federal Communication Commission rules regarding concentration of media-outlet ownership.¹⁷ Therefore, the conflict between the two branches reflected institutional concerns that occur irrespective of shared partisan affiliation. Part of the OGR story is similar. Even though during the Roosevelt years the majority party in Congress was Democratic, the president still had trouble getting what he wanted approved by Congress. In the same way, regarding OGR, some people on Capitol Hill had wondered why the agency was in the Executive Branch, under the control of the president as his communication agency. Why shouldn't it be under the direction of Congress, as a generic federal-reporting office, they argued.

A close study of the history of OGR identifies the strands in the continuing institutional conflicts between Congress and the president. Those tugs and pulls for political power over half a century ago illuminate ongoing and current struggles. In that sense, OGR serves as a prime case study in a fight over raw political power that is at the heart of the permanent constitutional structure of the federal government.

The second perspective for analyzing the story of OGR is communications and public relations, whether applied specifically to the public sector or generally to society-at-large. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the governmental process had largely evolved to be dominated by communications.¹⁸ To communicate is to govern; to govern is to communicate. President Reagan's moniker as "the Great Communicator" conveyed in a shorthand that required no further elaboration the explanation of his successes and popularity. Political campaigns now largely consist of TV advertising, a president's agenda and political fate is largely pursued by communication plans and strategies, and many government-to-citizen (G2C) transactions are migrating

to e-government. In this context, the effort to establish a permanent presidential communications agency in 1939 comprises a trip wire or early-warning signal of the dawn of the communications age in American government and politics.

Roosevelt had pursued innovative and unprecedented communications strategies to both govern and win elections. According to Winfield, FDR's communication activities, including OGR, had laid the "foundation for the modern presidency."¹⁹ His concept of a permanent communications agency was unparalleled. Today, it is hard to go back to the mindset of the 1930s when such an agency was an astonishing and controversial innovation. Since 1969 every president has had a White House Office of Communications.²⁰ That such an agency should exist as part of a presidency now seems self-evident. It was Roosevelt who attempted to set such a precedent. Yet, he was thirty years and five presidents ahead of his time. OGR was the false dawn of the communications age in American politics and government. It foretold the coming of the information-drenched twenty-first century. Despite its failure to survive, OGR provided the historical template to the later strong focus of contemporary presidents on media relations. As a presidential agency dedicated to communications, OGR was a forerunner of the institutionalization of such efforts within the modern White House as well as of government-by-publicity.

OGR is also significant in the broader context of the history of public relations and publicity in society in general. Effective human communications have been important since the beginnings of organized society. Yet, the history of the modern era presents a distinct pattern of the rapid development of new communication technologies and practices and a subsequent dramatic increase in the central importance of communications as the primary mode of interconnectness of the human community. Whether the commonly accepted moniker for modern era is eventually to be that of the digital age, the computer era, the Internet age, or the Cybernetic era,²¹ the predominance of information exchange as the primary currency of society is unquestionable. The computer had reduced all knowledge to just one binary category, with the resultant explosion in communications and information.

Public relations and publicity have emerged in contemporary history as a central and strategic approach to effectiveness and success in this new era.²² When Marshall McLuhan famously observed that "the medium is the message,"²³ he was thought to be referring to hardware and technology. Yet his insight is equally valid for software and communications methodologies. Public relations has been one of those elements that McLuhan could have meant, whether knowingly or not. The central insight of public relations has been that *the percep-*

tion of the message is the ultimate measure of all communications. The original roots of public relations in press agency and publicity were intended to trump the substance of the message through gimmicks, misleading tricks, and ballyhoo.²⁴ Later, public relations gradually developed respectability under the leadership of pioneers such as Ivy Lee and Edward L. Bernays due to their focus on the substance of corporate actions as well as the consequences of those actions that would lead to a good opinion by the public.²⁵ Yet the acceleration of communications technologies and techniques throughout the twentieth century led partly to a relapse back to the shortcuts of the earlier times. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, it was commonplace to consider *perception as the message*, at times seemingly wholly divorced from the substance. Public image or brand identification became the cynical currency of modern times. The oft-times wholly artificial personae of public figures—whether in show business, politics, or business—became the only thing that counted. Spin, image, branding, and hype emerged as the public-relations practices that appeared to trump all the others.²⁶ Despite the best efforts of the public relations profession for nearly a century, the term “PR” was permanently lodged as an epithet in modern usage,²⁷ to be sneeringly spit out universally by anyone in any context, bound to help win an argument. In that sense, the code phrase PR became a symbol of the era itself, that of persuasion by propaganda, wholly unconnected to facts and substance.

In this broader context, OGR epitomizes an early entity that identified communication as its central function and activity. *What* was communicated was subsumed to the core mission of *communicating*. OGR represented a prototype of the operationalization of the insight that public relations was an end, not just a means. In this view, public relations could, and should, be separated from the substantive work of an organization. Information was an end, in and of itself. OGR represents an important step in the history of public relations.

Public Reporting in Early Public Administration Theory

OGR was the most prominent manifestation of the theory of public reporting that had been nurtured by public administration theorists and practitioners during the 1920s and 30s. The intellectual roots of OGR start with the emergence of the profession of public administration in the United States in the early twentieth century. For good-government reformers (sometimes called “goo goos”—reform minded politicians and professors of government), American politics needed to replace the spoils system, patronage, “no-show” jobs, and the corruption

of urban machines. They wanted to substitute it with a new profession of trained managers. These managers would be apolitical, hired and promoted based on merit, specialists in their field, given tenure in their jobs so as to provide continuity regardless of election results. Above all, their focus would be on the delivery of government services in the most efficient method possible. Politicians would determine the ends; heads of bureaus (“bureaucrats”) would select the most efficient means. Elected officials would set policy and public administrators would merely implement it as vigorously and successfully as possible. When election results led to a change in policy, perhaps by 180 degrees, the professional manager wouldn’t hesitate to administer a new program that was the opposite of the previous administration.

Yet, the promoters of this revolution in the delivery of public services in American government needed to reconcile their vision with democracy. After all, if the purpose of democracy was to give the voters the power to hold elected officials accountable for their decisions, then how could the public hold government administrators—who were protected by civil-service rules from arbitrary firing—equally accountable? So, was born, the theory of government reporting in American public administration.

Government agencies engage in external communications for many different reasons. In some cases, they seek to increase the utilization of their services by engaging in a marketing effort of informing potential clients about the availability of such services. Sometimes agencies seek to maximize public compliance with laws and regulations by broadly disseminating information about those requirements. At other times, the dissemination of information is an end in itself, since the information is the “product” of the agency, such as educational booklets from the US Department of Agriculture on food and nutrition. Other examples of the purposes of external relations include public service campaigns intended to modify mass behavior (e.g., “Only you can prevent forest fires”) and seeking assistance of citizens as the “eyes and ears” of an agency (e.g., the 911 system). All these external relations purposes are integrally tied to implementing the agency’s mission.

By using communications strategies, an agency is able to increase its efficiency at accomplishing its goals. In other words, these activities have a utilitarian purpose in that they are intended to facilitate the administrative delivery of governmental goods and services.²⁸

Beyond these utilitarian communications purposes, the public administrator also has a normative democratic obligation to conduct an additional external-communication program that has no benefit to the efficiency of the administrative process. Called public reporting, this entails enhancing democracy by helping maintain an informed

citizenry. Because the government manager is operating in the public sector, he/she has an obligation to report to the public-at-large on agency activities. This is part of the accountability process in a democracy. Since the agency is exercising its powers derived from the sovereignty of the public and is spending public funds, the agency must give an accounting of its performance to its ultimate "bosses." Public reporting focuses on the agency's current and past activities and is for informational and democratic purposes, whereas efforts to enhance citizen participation in agency goals focuses on future activities and are for planning, decision-making, and implementation purposes. Yet the two are very much connected, because effective citizen participation in democracy cannot occur unless it is preceded by efforts to inform the public—hence reporting.

The theory and function of public reporting should not be viewed in isolation. Rather, reporting is a step in the democratic process. There are some effective tools to build the public's credibility and trust in government through public involvement.²⁹ They include advisory committees, public hearings, citizen participation in decision-making, surveys and questionnaires, public-listening sessions and cards seeking feedback on services. But, public involvement can't occur in a vacuum. The public can't give the government useful feedback if it doesn't have the information needed to develop an informed opinion.³⁰

Information is not only needed for voting. Between elections, public opinion is the ongoing gauge that expresses the judgment by the citizenry of how government is performing its mission. Just as with elections, for public opinion to work in a democracy, the citizens need information about what government is doing. Based on the results of this reporting, citizens would then have the information they need to be involved in agency decisions, policies, and operations. They would be able to develop informed judgments and public opinion could coalesce in one direction or the other.³¹ In that respect, public reporting is the prerequisite to successful citizen participation in public administration.

Therefore, due to its underpinnings in normative democratic theory, public reporting is unique to the public sector, and is not a mandated activity in the business and nonprofit sectors.³² Although some private and nonprofit agencies engage in external communication activities that are comparable to public reporting, these efforts are voluntary and goodwill oriented, rather than an absolute requirement.

The theory and profession of public administration had emerged as part of the progressive movement at the beginning of the twentieth century. It sought to reform government, largely to improve its efficiency and professionalism, but also strengthen the democratic

accountability of government agencies. Some of the earliest writings by public administration theorists focused on the need to promote democracy simultaneous with the creation of permanent and professionalized administrative institutions that implement government policies. According to (professor, later president) Woodrow Wilson in his seminal article on creating professional public administration in the United States:

administration in the United States must be at all points sensitive to public opinion . . . The ideal for us is a civil service cultured and self-sufficient enough to act with sense and vigor, and yet so intimately connected with popular thought, by means of elections and constant public counsel, as to find arbitrariness or class spirit quite out of the question.³³

One way to harmonize public administration with democracy was for government officials to report about their activities to the public. That would make public administrators accountable to the citizenry and thus strengthen democracy in the administrative state. This led to the emergence of public reporting as a feature of the new profession of public administration. In 1928, Herman Beyle stated that “official reports of governmental authorities submitted or made available to the public as an accounting of official conduct might be made a more effective agency for the promotion of good government and an essential foundation of popular rule.”³⁴

Much of the early literature of government reporting focused on municipal administrators.³⁵ In 1919, Morris Cooke had described municipal reports as having “the greatest room for improvement” of all aspects of government publicity. He lauded New York City’s 1915 annual report as “a neat volume printed in good type filled with many easily grasped facts and altogether enjoyable reading. It is in reality a citizen’s handbook.”³⁶ In 1927, Clarence Ridley began a systematic effort to survey municipal reports, recommending more informative and easy-to-read approaches and conducting an annual contest on best reports.³⁷ A decade later, he passed the project on to Herbert Simon, then his research assistant at the International City Managers’ Association.³⁸ By 1938, public reporting by municipalities was a well-established activity. Simon and Ridley suggested its benefit in helping create an informed citizenry that, in turn, could fulfill its role in a democracy:

The traditional description of the municipal report as the means by which the public official gives an accounting to the citizenry of his stewardship is therefore a very incom-

plete picture. The report is equally important in helping the citizen discharge *his* responsibly to his government. Many progressive reports undertake the additional task of educating the citizen on questions of public policy, which he may later have to determine at the polls.³⁹

The focus on government reporting was extended to all levels of government, not just municipal administration. One of the earliest textbooks in general public administration, not limited to municipal government, dedicated an entire chapter to the subject of government reports.⁴⁰ Reporting became a standard topic in public administration education, appearing in pioneering handbooks and academic reviews of public and municipal administration.⁴¹

Plan of the Book

This book tells a story that encompasses the three threads in American government in the twentieth century described above. OGR's tale is that of three parallel corners turned—or attempted to be turned—in the evolution of the modern federal government: the struggle for preeminence between presidents and Congress, the transformation of the presidency by the rise of the information age, and reporting by government agencies to the public. These three themes are, respectively, of interest to political science, communications, and public administration.

The story of OGR is largely told chronologically (except for chapter 4). This is intended to help convey the sense of how things seemed at the time of the events described. *During* the struggle over its existence, no one knew if Presidents Roosevelt and Truman would succeed in institutionalizing the agency or if the opposition by the conservative coalition in Congress would prevail. Eric Foner, in his history of Reconstruction, emphasized that the historian “must avoid telescoping the actual course of events into a predetermined linear progress.”⁴² Therefore, the sequence of the chapters traces the life of OGR chronologically.

The next chapter reviews the work of NEC, OGR's organizational antecedent. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 present the tangled story of Roosevelt's effort to establish a permanent presidential communications agency. Chapters 6 and 7 describe the agency at its zenith—in late 1941 and early 1942. Chapters 8 and 9 cover FDR's fight with Congress and the press over a wartime-headquarters building for OGR, called the US Information Center. Although Roosevelt won the battle to build and open the Information Center, that fight weakened OGR politically so much that Roosevelt reluctantly decided to reverse himself

and merge OGR into the wartime Office of War Information. After the war, President Truman re-established OGR, although with slightly different responsibilities, which are described in chapter 10. However, the Republican Eightieth Congress refused to provide continuing funding for the agency and Truman had no choice but to shut it down.

The final chapter examines whether OGR's abolition was authentic or merely *de jure*. A close examination discloses that nearly all of its functions continued under the aegis of different agencies. Many of OGR's programs exist to this day (2005) in the White House Office of Communications, demonstrating that OGR was indeed the first presidential communications agency. Finally, the chapter analyzes in detail the roots of congressional hostility toward OGR, tying that opposition to the three themes of congressional-presidential relations, the rise of the information age and advocacy for government to engage in public reporting. The fight over OGR's fate was a fight about power, because reporting efforts can increase public support for executive-branch agencies, thus limiting Congress's power to cut programs that are popular with public opinion.

In the years immediately after the OGR blowout, public reporting faded from importance in both theory and practice. This suggests the final significance of telling the story of this unusual federal agency. The demise of OGR contributed to the demise of public reporting. This was a regrettable development if one accepts the theory that public reporting is one way to harmonize the modern administrative state with democracy.