## Public Discourse and Information Sharing:

## A Path to Public Administration Utopia

## Analysis using Critical Theories

**Susan Lucas**

**The Evergreen State College**

## Introduction

Utopia for public administrators is a special place, often one reaching toward self-governance through transparency, information exchange and open government. This vision of utopia operates based on specific principles reflecting the values of the residents of Utopia and each resident is expected to participate in government through regular open conversations and meetings. Utopia is designed to combat the bureaucratic, hidden agendas government is accused of today. This is referred to as “dark times” by Nabatchi. Nabatchi and colleagues describe living in dark times in the quote below.

the disappearance of the public realm, the realm that functions to ‘‘throw light on the affairs of men by providing a space of appearances in which they can show in deed and word, for better and worse, who they are and what they can do’’ (viii). Arendt (1968, viii) asserts that the ‘‘darkness has come when this light is extinguished by ‘‘credibility gaps’’ and ‘‘invisible government,’’ by speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise, that, under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless triviality. (Nabatchi, Goerdel & Peffer, 2011, p. 33)

Utopia is described below as a public administration framework that rejects the weaknesses of “dark times.” Utopia is a small government operating on central principles using critical theory methodologies of public discourse, pragmatism and individual values. Open information exchange using a variety of methods is vital to Utopian government. Valuable methods include data sharing, research, discussion of opinions and sharing personal experiences. The public administrator does not have their own agenda but seeks to help residents become self-governing. Transparent exchange of informtion and delegation of power to the individual help Utopia to maintain itself as a public administration utopia.

Utopia has some dark spots, however. The happy consciousness always lurks on the edge of government as the powerful elite seek to undermine individual ideals for their own use. The public administrator is constantly in danger of placing pragmatic solutions above sound governmental operations, undermining effectiveness and, eventually, citizen support for government. Information sharing must be honest and open – the administrator cannot choose which information to exchange but must share all relevant information at their disposal. The public is a fickle master as well and discourse may fail as a basic principle if residents do not participate in government at the level expected. But, the point made by Bach (1977, p. 135) in his book *Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah* warms the heart: “If you will practice being fictional for a while, you will understand that fictional characters are sometimes more real than people with bodies and heartbeats.” Without stretching our imaginations we will never create a new, more perfect utopia.

## A Public Administration Utopia

Public administration’s transparent, open, self-governance utopia can be conceptualized as a small town. A small town’s characteristics fit more easily into a utopian framework due to a smaller population with more consistent values, easier information exchange and the opportunity for each resident to participate in governing the town. A small town administrator can act as a facilitator in their job and in daily life, prompting participation and action through information exchange and sharing. In a small town true public discourse can occur, at town meetings, on the street and at residents’ homes. Town meetings offer more than fifteen minutes for public comment on a town meeting agenda, more than a microphone set up at meetings in case someone wants to speak. Real public discourse requires going out to the citizens at their homes, businesses and in town – a smaller public entity makes this easier. The smaller number of residents contributes to governmental transparency and information sharing since most residents know the business of each other and of their government. In a small town the residents tend to believe they are independent. Residents resist attempts at new or expanded government programs even if the benefit of those programs is significant. Utopians value their small town, small business climate and any expansion of government must be sustainable given the tax base and community resources in the small town. The public administrator can more easily act as a facilitator if they respect the values of residents without controlling the agenda as residents are well aware of the actions and opinions of the administrator. Information is likely to be shared in a small town environment, requiring the administrator to provide information in an open, honest fashion. A smaller town does not guarantee utopia but it does contribute to the success of a transparent, open self-governance utopian administration.

The small town concept supports a principle based government as well. Principles in Utopia’s public administration framework support the operation of the economy, politics and culture. Principles guide the government’s operation and help residents understand the reasons why government decisions are made. The principles guiding my envisioned utopia are a sustainable society, individual rights, an expectation of resident participation and respectful discourse in government. Utopia’s government refers back to these principles in every decision. When issues arise public administrators consult the principles to develop solutions.

A more in depth exploration of the guiding principles may be useful. The principles of resident participation, open information exchange and respectful discourse in government are enacted through regular town meetings. Residents are invited and the agenda and meeting setup are designed to allow for extensive discussion with maximum participation. Information shared using positivist research and personal cases is important to the discussion. As described above town meetings must do more than provide time and a microphone for public comment. The meetings should utilize some aspects of a Native American talking circle where each participant is given the opportunity to talk. Discussions are non-judgmental. Ideas from each individual are built upon to develop workable solutions for each member of the group (Wilson, 2008, p. 100). Through the discussion the public administrator takes on the role of an arbiter of political conflict (Nabatchi et.al., 2011, p. 34). Public institutions are able “to serve as forums where through the process of deliberation, social conflicts are resolved and individual interests are aggregated, resulting in the creation of public goals and policy decisions” (Nabatchi et.al., 2011, p. 34). The perspective of each member is respected and solutions develop from the discussion and shared information. The small town, rural character of Utopia is essential to successful resident participation. A small population allows for regular town meetings but the small population and geographic area allow the administrator to take public discourse and information sharing to peoples’ homes and to community streets. The administrator must facilitate discussion in all parts of life – when visiting neighbors, when meeting others in the town coffee shop and when out walking in the park. The population tends to believe in a similar way of life, emphasizing sustainability of the natural environment and individual rights. These characteristics give public administrators a guide when making decisions.

In addition, public administrators in Utopia must respect residents’ value of limited government. The use of contractors to implement government programs allows Utopian administrators to keep government small but still accomplish public administration goals. The stewardship form of contracting relationship (Van Slyke, 2006, p. 167) is extensively used in Utopia. Several factors contribute to the need for the stewardship contracting model, including the small number of contractors available, the knowledge administrators have of contractors through personal relationships and the focus on longer term contracts in which the contractor participates more fully in the development and implementation of government programs (Van Slyke, 2006, p. 170). There are limits to the use of a stewardship model of contracting however. The reliance on personal relationships may create a discriminatory environment where potential contractors with different ethnic backgrounds, gender identities, religions or those who are not well connected are not successful bidders. The process may become closed to anyone other than the current contractor or those who have a personal connection to the public administrator. The stewardship model relies on relationships and a collaborative operating structure to develop and execute the contract statement of work. Performance measures are either not included in the contract or measures are not an important part of contract monitoring. Data clearly showing how well the contractor is performing is therefore not available; residents or stakeholders may appropriately conclude the contract is not being effectively performed or the public administrator is not objective where the contractor is concerned. Contract monitoring information may help the administrator to maintain credibility with residents but it also may bring weaknesses in the contract process to light, reducing the administrator’s credibility.

To further support this point, a discussion of the administrator role in utopian society may be helpful. Public administrators in Utopia consider themselves a resident first and an administrator second. The relationship-based operation works well in this situation. Administrators are a friend, a colleague and a member of the community before they are a government worker. In Utopia administrators subscribe to the “democratic ethos” rather than the “bureaucratic ethos” as defined by Nabatchi et.al. (2011, pp. 36, 37). Public administrators accept their role as more than a manager or technician. Public administrators must be open, honest and transparent about their decisions and actions. They are committed to receiving and acting upon feedback from residents; the decisions made by administrators are expressions of the public will rather than the administrator’s own decision. Nabatchi et.al. acknowledges the decisions made in a democratic ethos approach may be contrary to the bureaucratic values typically espoused by a public administrator (Nabatchi et.al., 2011, p. 37). The bureaucratic ethos values efficiency in administering public programs. Under the bureaucratic ethos an administrator must use proven managerial processes, focus on measurable effectiveness and avoid value-laden decisions (Nabatchi et.al., 2011, p. 36). The bureaucratic ethos has led to a reputation of unresponsiveness and a lack of accountability (Nabatchi et al., 2011, p. 36) and while the use of scientific management in government is intended to keep government efficient and costs low the actual outcomes may fall short of these goals.

In addition, a limit to the democratic ethos can occur if the administrator avoids all consideration of scientific management, including sharing information on the results of government action. Decisions can be made pursuant to public will along with the recognition that residents and stakeholders believe the business of government should be operated in an efficient, cost effective manner. The public administrator in government today risks the loss of credibility and support if residents perceive systems and processes are inefficient or out of control. This perception may be enhanced by a lack of information sharing by the administrator. Scientific management may create bureaucratic processes but the checks and balances incorporated into government guard against successful claims of ignorance, fraud or abuse by administrators and employees. The successful public administrator must devise a balance between the democratic ethos and the bureaucratic ethos to allow implementation of public goals in an efficient, least cost manner.

## Critical Theories and the Public Administration Utopia

Critical theories useful in analyzing the public administration utopia include Habermas’ theory of public discourse (Bronner, 2011, pp. 46-47), the theory of pragmatism espoused by a number of theorists including Dewey and McSwite (Box, 2005, p. 97) and the Happy Consciousness discussed by Bronner in Chapter 6. The Happy Consciousness is an ever-present concern in Utopia (Bronner, 2011, p. 77). How can an administrator ensure residents are thinking clearly and accurately about their preferences and goals for government? Advertising and publicity may manipulate or skew information and dupe citizens into thinking according to the desires of elite residents, commercial interests or a powerful business with plans for developing Utopia’s natural resources. Public discourse and information sharing have the power to provide residents of Utopia with the information they need to ensure the happy consciousness does not take hold. Citizens can effect change through open discourse and with administrators who share knowledge, information and decision making power with citizens (Box, 2005, p. 74). The administrator will use a pragmatic approach to government in Utopia. The pragmatist makes government responsive to the will of residents since results are not governed by any specific method but adjust to fit the needs of residents. Pragmatism must be balanced with adherence to the principles of Utopia to avoid a hijacking of the process by the power elite (Box, 2005, p. 99).

### *Critical Theory and Utopia: Public Discourse*

Public discourse provides a way for citizens to engage in the political process, shifting control away from public administrators and “the elite” toward citizens (Box, 2005, p. 70). Public discourse helps to ensure public access to and knowledge about information on governmental issues. The public administrator can promote citizen self-governance through public discourse – promoting two-way communication in a transparent fashion. The theory’s assertion is that citizens obtain the information needed to formulate their own responses to governmental and societal problems. The public administrator facilitates information sharing, problem resolution and solution development. The administrator is a conduit for citizen solutions; the administrator does not pursue their own agenda in the policy development process (Box, 2005, pp. 80-82).

Alternatively, the administrator will be successful in promoting meaningful public discourse only if communication takes the role of perception into account. Research by Auerbach, Gale and Harris on the economic effects of tax and fiscal policy shows communication of tax cuts is as important as the characteristics of the tax cut itself in promoting consumer spending. Specifically, a reduction in withholding for taxes has an equivalent impact as an actual tax reduction on saving and consumption for taxpayers. The manner of communication and presentation to taxpayers has as much effect as the actual tax law change (Auerbach, Gale & Harris, 2008, p. 145). Both the tax reduction and the withholding change were communicated as increases in the taxpayer’s resources – more money in a citizen’s pocket – to provide spending ability. The public administrator in Utopia needs to keep this dynamic in mind as they facilitate group and individual discussions with residents on important issues. The obvious question arises: Isn’t the public administrator exercising control over individual thoughts and desires? The answer may be “yes, to a degree,” but one could also argue human nature is all about perception. Perception is reality. The administrator’s role is to facilitate the formulation and examination of Utopian residents’ reality without placing the administrator’s priorities above those of other residents. Open information sharing plays a key role in this process.

To the contrary, the theory of public discourse has limits on its usefulness. Elected officials often value their own political goals above citizen-formulated goals; politicians can prevent public administrators from engaging in true public discourse and information sharing (Box, 2005, p. 75). Administrators take significant risks if they contradict the requirements of politicians in favor of developing citizen-based solutions. A deeper limitation of public discourse exists as well according to critical theorists. The public administrator’s facilitation of the process of public discourse could be perceived as a controlling action over citizens (Box, 2005, p. 73), creating a challenge for the administrator. The public administrator needs to let go of their own agenda. In meetings, information sharing and discussions with citizens the administrator may be (potentially unknowingly) pushing their own agenda. The administrator may become the controlling entity, stopping proposals not in compliance with the administrator’s goals and promoting proposals in tune with those goals. Residents may feel satisfied with the process on the surface but a deep discomfort will grow if people suspect they are not an integral part of the public discourse process (Box, 2005, p. 74). Utopia may fail due to no citizen engagement outside the control of government administrators; citizens stop contributing once they realize their ideas do not have meaning in the process. The administrator has the dual responsibility of promoting citizen engagement through discourse, transparent information sharing and providing the leadership necessary to accomplish citizens’ goals.

### *Critical Theory and Utopia: Pragmatism*

Pragmatism is similar to other critical theories partly because pragmatism values open public discourse and the use of data and information where appropriate. Pragmatic theorists believe decisions can be made in response to citizen discourse with a view to the future and using past, traditional practice where it makes sense. Pragmatism is touted by McSwite as rising above the “grubbiness of self-interest, control by elites for their own benefit” (Box, 2005, p. 97). Pragmatism involves collaborative discussion and decision making with citizens. Pragmatism is most effective when citizens are able to participate fully in development of solutions using all available data, minimizing the ability of those with power to circumvent citizen-driven solutions. One of the strengths of pragmatism is its applicability to a problematic public administration situation. A process of purposeful inquiry using available information is used to link the problem with a realistic solution with meaning in the real world (Shields, 2008, p. 206). Past practice and tradition do not have inordinate sway over the decisions made using pragmatism – a solution must fit the problem and respect the individual needs of involved citizens (Box, 2005, p. 98). Pragmatism identifies a measure for success – does the solution work? The definition of a successful solution is vital. The solution as defined must work for citizens. It should avoid future problems and it must benefit society more than it costs. Larger societal benefits and long term success is not a required solution with pragmatism (Box, 2005, p. 98).

As defined above pragmatism has appeal to the public administrator who is interested in solutions and who is forward-thinking but pragmatism also entails risk. Pragmatism is limited by its definition of success. Pragmatism only counts workable solution as successes – solutions may be based on the values of those defining the solutions (Box, 2005, p. 98). It is possible that the happiness of residents is not considered, nor is the overall benefit to society when the pragmatist defines solutions. When pragmatism is more deeply explored the same questions arise as were discussed with public discourse. Can citizens contribute freely and be assured their ideas will be reflected in implemented solutions? Will those in power take steps to ensure their policy objectives are given priority over citizen concerns? Will citizens opt out of the process as they realize their contributions have little effect? The pragmatic administrator will not consider these questions when thinking about the success of governance. The only question to be answered is whether the solution works – does the solution make governing easier and more effective? Under pragmatism an effective government does not need to ensure citizens have contributed freely, nor will the administrator be concerned with placing public will over the objectives of people in power or of the administrator themselves. The public administrator must temper their pragmatism by adopting broader measures of success. This dynamic was identified by Stivers who “according to McSwite, is interested in finding ways to accommodate discourse to existing patterns of power so that administrators and citizens can form better relationships” (Box, 2005, p. 98). Governing must be more than a workable solution. The happiness of residents must be considered along with adherence to the guiding principles of Utopia.

Pragmatism introduces other public administration constraints as well. Theorists who developed pragmatism believed people could govern their own community, using their own beliefs and solutions to fit their unique situation. Box identifies several issues with this framework, including whether citizens have access to available information on the issue, whether they know there is a problem to be solved, whether they can come together to form a solution and whether power elites will take over the process to ensure their objectives are met. Conditions in society today are simply not conducive to pragmatic solutions to be effective (Box, 2005, pp. 103-104). It is possible, however, for a modified pragmatic approach to be more successful. The public administrator in Utopia must lead residents to consider the issues at hand through information sharing rather than waiting for residents to discover solutions. Administrators will be more successful if they remind residents of their own guiding principles and help to formulate solutions true to the principles while meeting resident needs. Pragmatism can be successful if it is more broadly implemented to accommodate the higher level goals and needs of Utopia.

### *Critical Theory and Utopia: The Happy Consciousness?*

Marcuse identified the concept of the “happy consciousness – the belief that the real is rational and the system delivers the goods” (Box, 2005, p. 58). This concept describes a mindset of the public that prevents public discourse effectiveness and limits the capacity of citizens to approach self-governance. Modern culture is subject to public institutions, business advertising and cultural conventions, all of which tends to limit individuality and reward compliance (Bronner, 2011, p. 79). This dynamic may cause residents to reject available information as suspect or threatening. A utopian society can start out as a governing structure relying on transparent information sharing and open public discourse; the ultimate goal of utopia is to reach toward self-governance through the will of citizens. Over time, however, individuality and critical reasoning become less admirable. Important information may be rejected or ignored. Mass media gains dominance and citizens surrender their opinions to organizations and bureaucracies. Consensus becomes more important than discussion and solutions offered are within a narrow range of debate (Bronner, 2011, p. 83). Citizens are happy and contented, dedicated to their sports teams, schools and towns. The importance of participation in their government escapes citizens’ notice – people no longer understand the value of public discourse or pragmatic solution development. When problems arise (often through one horrific event) citizens first turn to the identified civic and cultural leaders for direction on what the response or solution should be. The second response is often to fault government administrators for allowing the problem in the first place. Citizens never realize their own role in the problem, let alone their responsibility for contributing to a solution. The lack of information available or accepted hampers citizens’ ability to resolve the problem.

This discussion reminds us that Utopia is always at risk of the development of the happy consciousness. Once citizens begin to transfer their authority and responsibility to a powerful entity such as business, media or a bureaucracy the promise of utopia is lost. The move from valued individual participation to group inclusion as the top goal of citizens signals the deterioration of public discourse and the loss of pragmatic solutions tailored to the needs of citizens.

## Can Utopia overcome Critical Theory Limitations?

The Utopia described in the first part of this paper must guard against the constraints and barriers of critical theory public administration as discussed. Utopia relies on open, transparent public discourse and information sharing to develop solutions to issues. If residents lose their individuality and adopt the opinions of mass media or business interests, public discourse becomes ineffective. Citizens become disenfranchised, stop contributing and may even undermine Utopian government through negative talk or actions. The possibility of outside control is a threat even from the public administrator if the administrator is unable to let go of their own agenda or political goals or if they fail to share information in a transparent way; the administrator is positioned to take control of the process and undermine public will. The role of a public administrator in Utopia is described well by O’Leary as follows:

Public managers now find themselves not as unitary leaders of unitary organizations. Instead, they find themselves facilitating and operating in multiorganizational arrangements to solve problems that cannot be solved, or solved easily, by single organizations. (O’Leary, 2011, p. 2)

O’Leary was describing the difficult task of public administration in today’s complex world full of wicked problems, but the description of a facilitator operating in a structure with many organizations and individuals, each of which has its own information, goals and agendas, also describes Utopian public administration.

Public administrators in Utopia face many obstacles. Residents are always at risk of sinking into happy consciousness, eliminating their ability to work toward self-governance. People are comforted by being able to look to others for their opinions and decisions. Life is easier if thought can be no more than checking on what a media authority, employer or political figure thinks about an issue. Thinking for oneself can be difficult and taxing; residents of Utopia may become tired of extensive information sharing, public discourse and meetings. Over time the tendency is to allow others to make difficult decisions and to solve wicked issues. To the contrary, Utopian residents have deep roots in individuality and thinking for themselves. Public administrators can build upon this characteristic to keep public discourse open and residents engaged. Even so, the possibility of powerful interests ensnaring residents through media and inclusion in societal groups is a real risk for Utopian public administration.

Further, Utopian government uses information sharing and underlying principles to guide its processes and decision making. Use of basic principles assumes the residents subscribe to these principles but under pragmatic critical theory decisions must be made and solutions implemented to work for whatever the public will is at the time. If residents change their guiding principles or decide to ignore the principles adopted, pragmatic theory would accept the change as appropriate. Pragmatism may lead to solutions faster and it is not concerned with a solution based on sound practice or underlying higher level principles; this combination could lead to a Utopian government constantly changing its goals and contradicting previous decisions as pragmatic solutions are sought quickly and without regard to past practice. Attention to history, methodology based on sound practice, complete information and higher level principles used to test decisions made are all sound governmental practices not promoted in a pragmatic framework.

## Conclusion

Utopia starts out with underlying principles of operation based on promoting resident participation, sharing information openly and moving toward self-governance. The transparent sharing of information, extensive reliance on public discourse and a balanced use of techniques designed to promote community relationships help to stack the deck on the side of success for Utopia. Over time Utopia could succumb to the effects of political agendas and mass media messages, with residents losing interest in and support for their government. Public administrators are in a position to maintain the structure for resident self-governance if they can share information openly and avoid the temptation to take control of the process for their own agendas.

Finally, Bach states “You are never given a wish without also being given the power to make it true. You may have to work for it, however” (Bach, 1977, p. 119). This thought brings to mind the difficulty of actually implementing Utopia, given the pitfalls of the happy consciousness, the shallowness of pragmatism and the distinct possibility public discourse will fall short in educating the public to self-govern. Bach states we have the power to make a wish true; a public administrator with a deeply held commitment to transparent public discourse will go far toward successfully implementing a utopian government. The risks will be significant, however, and Bach’s final statement on page 180 – “everything in this book may be wrong” plants a seed of doubt utopian dreams are actually possible. The critical theory public administrator must continue to act as Don Quixote and tilt at windmills until the goal is achieved.

## References

Auerbach, A, Gale, W & Harris, B. (2008). Activist fiscal policy. *Journal of Economic Perspectives,* 24, number 4, 141-164. doi:10.1257/jep24.4.141

Bach, R. (1977). *Illusions: The adventures of a reluctant messiah.* New York: Dell Publishing.

Box, R. (2005). *Critical social theory in public administration*. Armonk: ME Sharpe.

Bronner, S. (2011). *Critical theory: A very short introduction.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Nabatchi, T, Goerdel, H & Peffer, S. (2011). Public administration in dark times: Some questions for the future of the field. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, Inc.,* 21, i29–i43. doi:10.1093/jopart/muq068.

O’Leary, R. (2011). Minnowbrook: Tradition, idea, spirit, event, challenge. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, Inc.,* 21, i1–i6. doi:10.1093/jopart/muq066

Shields, P. (2008). Rediscovering the Taproot: Is Classical Pragmatism the Route to Renew Public Administration? *Public Administration Review,* 68, 205-221. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-6210.2007.00856.x

Van Slyke, D. (2006). Agents or stewards: Using theory to understand the government-nonprofit social service contracting relationship. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, Inc.,* 17, 157–187. doi:10.1093/jopart/mul012

Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods*. Black Point: Fernwood Publishing.

**Susan Lucas** (lucsus01@evergreen.edu) is a Master’s degree student at the Evergreen State College, Public Administration program in Olympia, Washington. She has worked in public administration and finance for the State of Washington for over twenty years, managing the finances for Washington State Medicaid, Washington’s public mental health system and Washington State Corrections finances and health care. Susan is currently employed as the Chief Financial Officer for the Employment Security Department in Washington State.