

## Historical Notes: Spotlight on Bureaucracy

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# Empirical Experiments in Public Reporting: Reconstructing the Results of Survey Research, 1941–42

*During the first half of the 20th century, public administration developed a normative theory of public reporting. It called on government managers to contribute to an informed citizenry through regular reports to the public, especially annual reports. However, in the only known instance when this theory was subjected to comparative empirical research, a doctoral student at the University of California, Berkeley, conducted some methodologically credible experiments during the early 1940s. Her results demonstrated the ineffectiveness of annual reports. However, rather than adjusting to accommodate this empirical information, leading organizations ignored them and continued pushing for annual reports. With the test results never published in an academic journal and the student's dissertation left incomplete, they were soon lost and forgotten. Public administration's interest in public reporting declined during the second half of the 20th century, perhaps because of the lack of an empirically based approach.*

During the 1920s and 1930s, public reporting was a major topic on the agenda of the emerging profession and discipline of American public administration (Lee 2006). It was a manifestation of the effort to harmonize democracy with the inherently undemocratic character of bureaucracy. Public reporting referred to the obligation of senior civil servants to report regularly to the citizenry on their agencies' activities and accomplishments. Reporting would contribute to an informed citizenry, the sine qua non of democracy.

The tradition of annual reports, of course, preceded the professionalization of public administration that was occurring in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But as the new profession advanced, it accelerated and expanded the reporting concept. Public reports were reformulated as a key element of the democratic obligation of every top administrator in the emerging administrative state (Lee 2002).

A major advocate for better municipal reporting was Clarence Ridley. Ridley, a former city manager with a

PhD from Syracuse University, became the executive director of the International City Managers' Association (ICMA, now the International City/County Management Association) in 1929, stepping down in mid-1956 after 28 years with the association. As head of the ICMA, he was also editor of the organization's monthly magazine, *Public Management*, from 1929 to 1956 and coeditor (with Orin Nolting) of the *Municipal Year Book* from 1934, the first year it was published, through 1956. His position made him an extremely influential figure in municipal administration, shaping the profession of city manager during its formative years (Williams 2004a).

Ridley was interested in promoting improved annual municipal reporting. He wrote several pieces on that subject during the late 1920s and early 1930s. After Herbert Simon became his research assistant in 1936, Ridley passed the portfolio to Simon. They jointly wrote several important pieces on the subject, and Simon then published or edited several others on his own (Lee 2003). Ridley and Simon gradually developed a comprehensive approach to annual public reporting by municipalities. They combined the need for performance measurement with the emerging literature in public administration on the need for public reporting (Williams 2002, 477; 2003, 652). Ridley and Simon's ultimate product was a uniform format for municipal annual reports that was based on performance data. Having accomplished that, they considered the project essentially finished, requiring only minor updates subsequently.

Around the same time, in 1928, the University of Chicago Press published Herman Beyle's *Governmental Reporting in Chicago*. It was the definitive descriptive and normative academic study of public reporting. He provided an exhaustive analysis of all the reports issued by government agencies in the Chicago area in one year and, from that analysis, developed comprehensive recommendations of "Good Reporting Practice" (Beyle 1928a, 241–49). The book gradually came to be viewed as the founding text for

faculty interested in reporting, as well as for leading practitioners. The book made Beyle the expert nonpareil in the subject.

The importance of municipal reporting was prominently on the agenda of not only the ICMA (with its practitioner orientation) but also three other national organizations. The National Municipal League (NML, now the National Civic League) was the major organization for good government reformers, a movement that had started during the Progressive Era. One of the foci of the reform movement was the need for quality research about city government, which led to the creation of nonprofit agencies called “bureaus of municipal research” or “bureaus of efficiency” in most major American cities. The national organization for those bureaus was the Governmental Research Association (GRA).

Finally, many states had leagues of municipalities comprising the major cities of each state. Eventually, a national organization was created called the American Municipal Association (now the National League of Cities). During the late 1920s, all four organizations were intensely interested in improving municipal public reporting. Therefore, in January 1929, the four organizations jointly created a National Committee on Municipal Reporting comprising two members from each organization. The two representatives to the committee from the National Municipal League were Beyle and, oddly, Ridley. The ICMA’s two appointees were former city managers.

In 1931, the committee’s final report was published. It contained highly detailed recommendations for different aspects of public reporting, including annual, departmental, and current reports. The published report served as the final word in the development of public reporting. Having essentially created a standard and permanent template for these activities, the tone of the recommendations conveyed the impression that the research-and-design phase of this governmental activity was now authoritatively and finally finished. From here on in, it was mostly just a matter of implementation. Yet these two decades of the theoretical and professional development of public reporting did not once see in any empirical research regarding the effectiveness of the kinds of reports being recommended. Apparently, the normative theory was considered self-justifying. Nothing further seemed needed.

This article reviews a forgotten chapter in the history of public reporting, a one-time and failed effort to shift the public reporting literature from normative to empirical. The methodology to be used is that of historical research, a widely accepted and standard research technique (Gabrielian 1999, 178–83; Tuchman 1994). Based on the typology of management

historical research developed by Wrege, Greenwood, and Hata, this inquiry fits into Category III, information that was “once known, now unknown” (1999, 418). However, this research question also has shades of Category II, because “owing to deliberate . . . actions of individuals” (1999, 415), information was partially suppressed. This is discussed in the penultimate section of the article.

A standard methodology for historical management studies is archival research (McNabb 2002, 397–401); however, it was surprisingly unproductive. No relevant records were found in the archival collections of the National Municipal League, the Columbia Foundation, Miriam Roher’s family, or the archives of members of Roher’s advisory committee, including the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Bureau of Governmental Research, Stanford University, the League of California Cities, and the University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley) Bureau of Public Administration.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the major research approach is triangulation, which relies on using three independent sources of primary information (McNabb 2002, 399). In this case, three categories of primary published materials were relied on: (1) periodicals published by different organs of the good government movement, especially the monthly publications of the National Municipal League (*National Municipal Review*), the International City Managers’ Association (*Public Management*), and the League of California Cities (*Western City*); (2) published government documents, especially the annual reports of the California cities of Palo Alto and Berkeley; and (3) newspaper articles, especially from the *Palo Alto Times*.

### **Toward an Empirical Study of Public Reporting**

Ridley’s work with the ICMA and the report of the National Committee on Municipal Reporting focused on practitioners—on how to *do* public reporting. But as an academic, Beyle was not satisfied with the prescriptive approach to public reporting embodied in the ICMA’s work and that of the committee. At the conclusion of his book, Beyle suggested that future follow-up research should investigate the *effectiveness* of reporting. For example, he suggested, “experiments might be planned and executed which would have as their object the determination of the relative effectiveness of various ‘competing’ reportorial devices as devices which attract and hold attention and also as devices which convey accurate understanding” (Beyle 1928a, 253).

However, to ascertain the effectiveness of reporting, one has to have valid quantitative methodologies for *measuring* it. At the GRA’s 1928 annual conference, Beyle began exploring that. He presented a paper titled “Objective Studies as a Basis for Functionalized Governmental Reporting.” He focused on the need

for quantitative studies of reporting. For example, Beyle suggested that if feedback postcards were attached to public reports, then statistics from the returned ones could be used to identify areas of citizen interest, areas of citizen dissatisfaction, and so on. This would create a feedback loop that would present a crude profile of public opinion. He also went a step further: The effectiveness of various formats of reporting could be evaluated. For example, he said, one could study which kinds of pictorial representations attract the attention of citizens more than others. Beyle suggested using a high-speed camera to capture which of two pictures a citizen chooses to look at. Gradually, conclusions could be drawn about the kinds of pictures that should be included in public reports to be most appealing to readers (Beyle 1928b).

Six years later, Beyle was still promoting an empirical approach to studying reporting. In an article in the ICMA's *Public Management* in 1936, he presented the facsimile of a feedback postcard he had suggested at the NML conference. It contained 21 statements and asked the citizen to anonymously mark the ones "which best represent your opinion of the material we have sent you." The postcard also asked for demographic information, such as profession and neighborhood of residence. Beyle then presented a code sheet to measure the answers to those 21 statements according to the "unfavorable-favorable response to publicity material" (Beyle 1936). Similarly, in 1939, Beyle bemoaned the exclusive focus of the reporting literature on the "pitching" (i.e., dissemination) of reports and the "disinclination to check upon the reception of reports" or, continuing his baseball metaphor, of the behavior of the public in "catching" those reports (1939, 16). In general, Beyle wanted to "make popular reporting a two-way street," namely, public administrators doing a better job of listening to public opinion as part of a comprehensive conceptualization of reporting (1939, 18). Ultimately, these kinds of studies would, if implemented, provide both practitioners and academicians empirically valid data on which approaches and formats for public reporting were effective in accomplishing their goal and which were not. Beyle wanted a social science-based practice of public reporting to eventually replace the normative one in use.

However, Beyle was losing interest in public reporting per se. In a chapter he contributed to an introductory college civics textbook that he coauthored in 1941, he mentioned the subject only glancingly (Beyle 1941, 300, 305). As hinted by his writings of the 1920s and 1930s, his focus was changing from reporting (pitching) to measuring public opinion (catching) and other related aspects of quantitative political science. His later career concentrated on advancing the sophistication of polling and quantitative data analysis (Williams 2004b, 11). Beyle never implemented his

own suggestions for research that would measure the effectiveness of different forms of reporting. He left that to be done by others. That person was Miriam Roher, a self-described "incurable seeker of facts" (Contributors in Review 1940b, 557). The record is unclear whether the two ever communicated. Roher conducted the first and only known empirical experiments of the effectiveness of different forms of public reporting. Yet her experiments were largely forgotten (more on why later) and are presented here for the first time in an academic journal—65 years late!—in an effort to recover these important historical data.

During the late 1930s, Roher was a staffer at the National Municipal League. Born in 1916 in New York City, she had graduated from Barnard in 1936 (majoring in government) and received a master's degree in political science from Northwestern University in 1937. Returning to New York, she briefly worked for the New York State Commission for the Revision of the Tax Laws and then joined the NML's staff as an editor of its publications (Contributors in Review 1939, 595). Her first bylined article in the League's monthly journal, the *National Municipal Review* (*NMR*), was published in April 1938 (Roher 1938a). By the next month's issue, she had been named a contributing editor to *NMR* in the area of "city manager government." Her first article was followed in rapid succession by four other ones that year (Roher 1938b, 1938c, 1938e, 1938f). Her writings in *NMR* over the next few years reflected the full gamut of the League's interests, covering not just her portfolio relating to the council-manager plan but also a new bureau of municipal research (Roher 1938e), the new mayor of Cincinnati (Roher 1939c), a woman activist in Yonkers, New York (Roher 1940e), and a woman on New York's city council (Roher 1940f). By early 1940, her title at *NMR* had been upgraded to research editor (Contributors in Review 1940a). The *New York Times* (1940) described her as *NMR*'s assistant editor.

Her work as an NML staffer and one of *NMR*'s editors brought her in contact with the civic reform movement's interest in public reporting. In March 1940, she wrote an article about the editor of the daily newspaper in Yonkers, who had succeeded in making news stories about municipal developments interesting and readable (Roher 1940b). That editor had created a formula of putting short news items about city government on the front page, often using a question-and-answer format. They were printed in 14-point type and highlighted in a box. Later, he ran short articles (500–800 words) about municipal developments in other cities. According to Roher, "this suburban newspaper has made a small informational feature pay big circulation dividends, [and] originated a new technique for gathering the facts about governmental experiences" (1940b, 160–61).

The article demonstrated her interest in media coverage of city government and her understanding of the importance of conveying information in interesting ways. She gradually honed and expressed her views about government public relations in general, and public reporting specifically, in seven book reviews that she wrote from 1938 through mid-1940. She described the need for government to engage in public relations (Rohrer 1940a), and when it did that, she applauded reports that were highly readable, used graphics and pictures liberally, contained only brief text, and were oriented to the perspective of the citizen (Rohrer 1938d, 1938g, 1939a, 1939b, 1940c). For example, she reproduced a chart from Cincinnati's annual report and complimented it for such "imaginative illustrations, with their pleasant leavening of humor, [that] make the report even more readable than usual" (Rohrer 1940d).

Using the lessons she had learned from reviewing many public reports, in May 1940, she coauthored an NML publication that was intended to tell, without text, the entire story of a municipality's operations and the need to enact a council-manager form of government (Rohrer and Modley 1940; *Who's Boss?* 1940). She had worked with a graphic artist to create eye-catching graphs, cartoons, and other visuals. The main purpose of the brochure was to help local citizen groups in their fight against urban corruption and their advocacy of having their city run by a city manager. The cartoons could be reproduced in local brochures and publicity materials. As it turned out, the publication ended up serving a second purpose, as Rohrer's sourcebook for preparing visually interesting and effective reports.

In mid-1940, Rohrer beat out 54 other applicants to win the Women's National Public Service Fellowship, which was "to be used for graduate study in preparation for public service work" (*New York Times* 1940). She promptly moved to the Bay Area in California (rejoining her parents, who had previously moved there from New York City) to use the grant to enroll at UC Berkeley as a doctoral candidate in political science. She already knew that she wanted to write her dissertation on the "public relations of municipal government" (Jones 1940).

### **Rohrer's Experiment, Part I: How Effective Is an Annual Report?**

A summary of Rohrer's thinking on the subject of municipal public relations in general, and public reporting in particular, was reflected in a book review she wrote for *NMR* in January 1941. She reviewed two ICMA publications, *A Checklist of Suggested Items for the Annual Municipal Report* and a handbook on *Municipal Public Relations* by Elton Woolpert, an ICMA staffer and assistant editor of ICMA's *Public Management*. She opined that both publications were

competent and useful. However, both were based on "deductive reasoning." The problem, she suggested, was "the complete lack of *experimental* data on just what is a good report" (Rohrer 1941a, 65, emphasis in original). But she needed a methodology that could validly test such experiments.

Survey research was the answer. From her work at *NMR*, Rohrer was becoming familiar with the new methodology of public opinion polling. For example, George Gallup (founder of the Gallup Poll) had written an article in *NMR*'s February 1938 issue saying that accurate polling was not limited to very large populations such as the entire United States, as had been practiced up to then, but—with the correct construction of a sample—could also measure public opinion in just one city (Gallup 1938). This was an application that had not occurred before. Rohrer would surely have seen that article. A few years later, she reviewed a book titled *Public Opinion* (Rohrer 1940g). On another occasion, she referred with familiarity to the June 1940 issue of *Public Opinion Quarterly* regarding the use of sampling methods and attaining confidence levels in surveys (Rohrer 1941c). Finally, in a 1941 review, she conveyed her comfort level with polling methodology by critiquing its application and use by others. Appraising a report on *Public Relations of Public Personnel Agencies*, Rohrer complimented its writers for using "various polls and surveys" to measure the reaction that the public at large had to such public relations efforts. She opined that the use of empirical research techniques, no matter how flawed, was better than doing nothing at all to measure effectiveness of public relations on public opinion: "While admittedly inadequate because of the small, unrepresentative samples which were used, the surveys are a genuine pioneering effort" (Rohrer 1941d). Rohrer clearly knew her way around survey research, based on the standards of the times.

Whether she was influenced by Beyle's thinking or not, Rohrer was picking up the gauntlet Beyle had thrown down just a few years earlier (Beyle 1936). Indeed, how effective was the ICMA's orthodoxy regarding annual municipal reporting? That would make an interesting dissertation topic, she thought.

Upon arriving in California in the fall of 1940, Rohrer promptly set out to spend her first year there conducting experiments regarding the effectiveness of various forms of public reporting. She focused on the city of Palo Alto because of its proximity to Berkeley, modest-size population (about 17,000), and above-average demography in income and education. She convinced the chamber of commerce, the city government, and the local daily newspaper to participate in an experiment to test the effectiveness of different forms of public reporting.

First, using rudimentary public opinion polling techniques, Roher conducted a “before” survey. For one week in December 1940, she polled citizens at random both by selecting residences and by standing on a downtown street corner. She took care that her sample was stratified to reflect the correct ratio of age, gender, and income groups in Palo Alto’s population. She also made sure that the size of her sample would provide statistically adequate results based on recommended polling standards of the time (Roher 1941c). Her survey instrument consisted of nine items that asked relatively specific questions about the operations of city government, including the following:

- Are city taxes higher or lower than five years earlier?
- Is the city more or less in debt in 1940 than in 1935?
- Does the city government pay for part of a resident’s costs as a patient at the municipal hospital?
- Are the city’s rates for water, electricity, and garbage collection higher or lower than in similar-sized cities?

Next, in late December 1940 and early January 1941, the city mailed its annual report for 1939–40 to every household (City of Palo Alto 1940). It was written by the manager of the local chamber of commerce, who apparently was a professional writer (*Palo Alto Times* 1941b). Roher helped plan it. The report complied fully with the normative guidelines of the ICMA. In particular, it was “attractive, [and] readable” (Roher 1941b, 196) rather than an eye-glazing accountant’s report. Roher made sure it contained many photos, graphics, easy-to-read tables, and only brief bursts of text. One graphic came from the Roher and Modley (1940) publication. The contents of the report included information that addressed the questions that were in Roher’s survey instrument, some in great detail and others briefly. In general, the report was, based on Ridley’s teachings, about as close as a city could get to his ideal annual report (Roher 1941b, 193).

Then, in February 1941, four weeks after the city had mailed the annual report, Roher conducted a second identical poll. She asked the same questions and used the same techniques to construct a stratified sample. Of the respondents, 67 percent remembered getting the report, and 79 percent of those said they had read it. Yet, despite that, the “after” results were surprising (see table 1). Roher’s two conclusions from the results were that (1) citizens had “learned very little more about city government” from having received the well-designed annual report, and (2) whatever “learning as occurred on each subject appears to be directly correlated with the amount of space and graphic material on the subject contained within the report” (Roher 1941b, 197).

In general, Roher concluded from her data that “Palo Alto’s citizens liked the report, but as far as learning anything from it is concerned, the report may be candidly said to have been a failure” (Roher 1941f, 19). In fact, oddly, opinions about city government were more incorrect after receiving the report than before!

### **Roher’s Experiment, Part II: How Effective Is a Newspaper Series?**

After concluding the second poll, Roher worked with the local afternoon newspaper, the *Palo Alto Times*. She convinced its editor to do something similar to what his counterpart at the *Yonkers Herald-Statesman* had done (Roher 1940b). The editor of the newspaper agreed to run on the front page of the paper, once a week for eight weeks, a blurb about city government. Roher designed each of the eight installments with a goal of “simplicity, eye-appeal and brevity of the kind of newspaper advertisements used by, say, a soap company” (Roher 1941f, 19). Each was three columns wide and ranged from three to six inches high. There would be only a small amount of copy (60–80 words) in a large font, with half of the space taken up by “a cartoon or pictorial chart” designed to convey some basic information about municipal operations, with contents identical to the annual report. Most of the graphics came from the Roher and Modley (1940) brochure. At the top of each installment was a large-size headline aimed at catching the attention of the reader.

The series began running on Thursday, April 3, 1941, with an explanatory sidebar from the editor. It explained that “We ALL pay for city government . . . What are we getting for our money? Today the *Times* begins a series of articles which will answer that question” (*Palo Alto Times* 1941a; capitalization in original). The first installments ran for six consecutive weeks on the front page of the Thursday edition. Then, for unstated reasons (perhaps the urgency and quantity of war news, even before the United States was a combatant), the last two weekly installments each ran a few days late, the seventh on Saturday, May 17 and the last on Friday, May 23.<sup>2</sup>

In late May, Roher used the same survey instrument to conduct an identical public opinion poll for the third time. This time, when comparing the results prior to the newspaper series (the same results obtained after the annual report) with those following the newspaper series, “The results were impressive” (Roher 1941f, 19). The impact of the newspaper series was that more citizens knew about city operations and that their knowledge was *accurate* (see table 2). According to Roher, “the newspaper articles made a real change in what people knew about the city” (Roher 1941e, 241). She concluded that the newspaper strategy “is one of the most effective means of reaching the public” (Roher 1941e, 241), certainly

**Table 1** Selected Results Before and After Receipt of the Annual Report

	Before (percentage)	After (percentage)
Are city taxes higher or lower than five years earlier? (Correct answer: lower)	Higher: 25 Lower: 15.5 Same: 7 No opinion: 52.5	Higher: 39.5 Lower: 15.5 Same: 7 No opinion: 38
Is the city more or less in debt in 1940 than in 1935? (Correct answer: less)	More: 8.5 Less: 28.5 Same: 0 No opinion: 63	More: 17.5 Less: 31.5 Same: 1.5 No opinion: 49.5
Does the city government pay for part of a resident's costs as a patient at the municipal hospital? (Correct answer: yes)	Yes: 61.5 No/no opinion: 38.5	Yes: 58 No/no opinion: 42
Are the city's water rates higher or lower than in similar sized cities? (Correct answer: lower)	Higher: 26.5 Lower: 37 Same: 11.5 No opinion: 25	Higher: 25.5 Lower: 41.5 Same: 12.5 No opinion: 20.5

Source and complete results: Roher (1941f, 18).

more effective than annual reports—regardless of how attractively the annual report is designed, written, and presented.

Roher's results were methodologically sound, if primitive. Considering that the central journal for survey research, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, had only been publishing since 1937, her work was creditable and deserves to be respected. The validity of her results is that much more striking because no other social scientist followed in her footsteps. Hers was the only effort to use empirical techniques to research public reporting.

As a researcher, Roher was also careful to note the limits of her experiments. She had only measured the impact of two forms of public reporting (and implicitly, a third, an open house exhibit at Palo Alto's city hall). For a comprehensive empirical theory of public reporting effectiveness, she suggested follow-up studies to similarly measure radio, movies, and direct mail (Roher 1941e, 242).

But regardless of what work was left to be done, she had authoritatively debunked the value of annual reports in terms of their *raison d'être*, namely, their supposed centrality and effectiveness in contributing to an informed citizenry in a democracy.

### Showdown: Roher's Empiricism Versus Ridley's Normativism

As a doctoral candidate, Roher had formally registered her dissertation topic as "Public Relations Reporting by City Governments; Nature and Effectiveness" (Pfankuchen 1941, 758). However, as she was part of the good government reform movement as well as an academic, Roher did not want to wait until she had completed her dissertation to release her results. She wrote up short articles summarizing the results of the first experiment in *NMR* (Roher 1941b) and of both experiments in *Western City* (published by the League of California Cities) (Roher 1941f) and *Public Management*, ICMA's monthly (Roher 1941e). Her *NMR* article triggered a letter to the editor from a local official saying, "I have never been convinced

**Table 2** Selected Results Before and After the Newspaper Series

	Before (after annual report delivered, percentage)	After (percentage)
Are city taxes higher or lower than five years earlier? (Correct answer: lower)	Higher: 39.5 Lower: 15.5 Same: 7 No opinion: 38	Higher: 32 Lower: 13 Same: 11.5 No opinion: 43.5
Is the city more or less in debt in 1940 than in 1935? (Correct answer: less)	More: 17.5 Less: 31.5 Same: 1.5 No opinion: 49.5	More: 11 Less: 34 Same: 1.5 No opinion: 53.5
Does the city government pay for part of a resident's costs as a patient at the municipal hospital? (Correct answer: yes)	Yes: 58 No/no opinion: 42	Yes: 65.5 No/no opinion: 34.5
Are the city's water rates higher or lower than in similar-sized cities? (Correct answer: lower)	Higher: 25.5 Lower: 41.5 Same: 12.5 No opinion: 20.5	Higher: 20.5 Lower: 56.5 Same: 10 No opinion: 13

Source and complete results: Roher (1941f, 18).

that the annual report in the form generally used is an effective instrument” (Faulkner 1941, 318). Without even knowing of the second experiment, he suggested replacing the annual report with a series of very brief pamphlets on one topic at a time.

As the official publication of the ICMA, *Public Management* was Clarence Ridley’s turf. Not only was he the executive director of the association, but also he was the editor of *Public Management*. And since the 1920s, Ridley had been using all his powers to push for annual reports by municipalities. He was “Mr. Annual Reports.” Publishing Roher’s results in his journal was like stepping into the lion’s den. Roher worded her story carefully, so as to not look like a personal attack on Ridley. But she did not pull punches either. She stated that, based on her survey, “the annual report, however ‘streamlined,’ seems to have little effect on popular attitudes and knowledge” (Roher 1941e, 241). The final sentence in the article concluded that, unless it was shortened to three or four pages—more a pamphlet than a report—the annual report “is of questionable value in the important municipal job of telling the citizens what government is all about” (Roher 1941e, 242).

This was a direct challenge to Ridley’s dogma. To his credit, he published her article. But he did everything else he could to minimize the damage. He led the issue with a strong two-page editorial titled “The Case for the Annual Report” (Editorial Comment 1941). He began by seemingly conceding, “At first glance Miss Roher’s findings appear to contradict, or at least to challenge, our longstanding espousal of the annual report as the keystone of a municipal reporting program” (225). But the rest of the editorial was an extensive defense of the annual report, giving six different reasons for its importance, especially relative to such other approaches as a newspaper series. He concluded that, despite her survey results, “in our opinion no other reporting device or combination of devices can take the place of the general annual report” (226).

To Ridley’s chagrin, a few months later, the city manager of Pasadena wrote a letter to the editor complimenting Roher and declaring his intention to continue publishing an annual report, “but locally I believe people would get more out of it if the material were carried in five or ten serial articles” (Koiner 1941). Ridley published an editor’s note immediately following the letter that was almost twice as long as the letter itself. In it, he summarized the points he had made in his August editorial. Clearly, Ridley’s normative advocacy of annual public reporting was unaffected by Roher’s empirical results.

Undeterred by Ridley’s discrete opposition, Roher pushed ahead to implement the lessons of her

research. In the late fall of 1941, the San Francisco-based Columbia Foundation approved a grant to the National Municipal League to fund a Municipal Reporting Consultant Service in California. The purpose of the project was for Roher to offer her consulting services to local governments in California to improve the effectiveness of their public reporting (Jones 1941). The service would be offered “on an experimental basis and limited to communities in the state of California for the first year” (Jones 1942a, 61). She organized a blue-ribbon advisory committee that included the executive secretary of the League of California Cities (serving as chair), several leading practitioners (elected and professionals), and key practitioner-oriented academicians. The latter included the head of the UC Berkeley Bureau of Public Administration and the head of the Bureau of Government Research at UCLA (Jones 1942b). Assuming the experiment would be a success, the NML’s plan was to expand the service nationwide on a “self-supporting and nonprofit” basis (Jones 1942a, 61), comparable to other consulting services it provided.

Roher’s first client was the city of Berkeley. She helped draft and format its annual report summarizing operations during fiscal year 1941 (i.e., July 1940–June 1941). Unlike the traditional annual reports of the time (reflecting Ridley’s approach), this report had only a modest amount of text and instead had many pictures, simple graphs, and catchy banner titles. What little text there was focused on its relevance to the reader, with headlines such as “This is Your Story,” “If You Smoke,” and “For Your Convenience” (City of Berkeley 1941, 9, 14, 24). Clearly, she was trying to apply the lessons of her Palo Alto experiments, namely, a simplified publication that followed attention-getting principles of her newspaper advertising series and presented information “from the point of view of the average citizen” (Jones 1942b).

The impact and influence of this template-shattering model of an annual report was demonstrated when a long-running monthly series in *American City* on “The Human Side of City Hall” twice reproduced parts of it as an example worth emulating: the report’s cover in the December 1944 issue (Bradley 1944, 76) and the city’s table of organization in the March 1945 issue (Bradley 1945, 90). Earlier, the series had also reproduced a page from the Palo Alto annual report that Roher had helped design (Bradley 1941, 65). These were tantalizing indications of the national impact that Roher’s model annual reports could have.

After completing the Berkeley annual report, Roher then helped draft similar public reports from the civilian defense organization in Oakland and in San Francisco.<sup>3</sup> By then, the National Municipal League thought that the service “had demonstrated its value

in setting standards and developing new methods of teaching people basic facts about their local government” (Jones and Willoughby 1943, 91).

But Roher had the bad luck of poor timing. The attack on Pearl Harbor and the entrance of the United States into World War II as a combatant in December 1941 shifted everyone’s attention to more pressing matters. The declaration of war had a stronger impact on California than most states: The destruction of the U.S. Navy fleet anchored at Pearl Harbor made Californians extremely anxious that there was nothing preventing the Japanese navy from proceeding to the next U.S. target, the West Coast. The entire state shifted to a war footing much more dramatically than, for example, heartland states. Indeed, there were a few minor Japanese attacks, with submarine torpedo strikes against cargo ships just off the coast of California in late December 1941 and an airplane bombing over an Oregon forest in September 1942.

Given this radical shift in governmental priorities, the public reporting consulting service seemed trivial. In August 1942, the consultant service and its funding from the Columbia Foundation grant were discontinued (Jones and Willoughby 1943, 91). By then, the Public Service Fellowship from Barnard that had covered Roher’s living expenses for her first year in California had expired. She had no choice but to seek other work, finding positions with several boards and commissions including the State Council of Defense (With the Researchers 1941) and the State Reconstruction and Reemployment Commission (Roher 1945, 484). Though she maintained her status as a PhD candidate throughout the war and even into the early 1950s (Huitt 1951, 792), she never completed her dissertation.<sup>4</sup> The war and the need to earn a living took her out of the picture of actively promoting her new approach to public reporting. The last two times she wrote about it were in book reviews. In mid-1943, she praised the annual report of the Los Angeles Housing Authority as “perfection . . . Conservatively speaking, it is the best piece of local government reporting that I have ever seen” (Roher 1943). The next year, she briefly reviewed a how-to manual for Connecticut municipal reports (Roher 1944). She never returned to the subject, not even mentioning reporting in an American government textbook she cowrote in the 1960s (Resnick and Nerenberg 1969).

On the other hand, Ridley was still in the midst of a long-standing career and at the apex of influence in the municipal management movement. He continued as the ICMA’s executive director, editor of *Public Management*, and coeditor of the *Municipal Year Book* until 1956. And he was not about to change his mind just because of some empirical data. For him, normative standards trumped survey research. Ridley’s strat-

egy was simply to ignore Roher’s results and continually reaffirm the importance of annual reports. All subsequent articles in *Public Management* and the *Municipal Year Book* took that approach. It was as though Roher’s results had evaporated.

Ridley also had some influence with the National Municipal League, Roher’s organizational home and the sponsor of the California Municipal Reporting Consultant Service. It will be recalled, for example, that Ridley had been one of the League’s two appointees to the National Committee on Municipal Reporting, leaving open the two ICMA appointments to others. During the late 1930s and early 1940s, he was a member of the League’s council (akin to a board of directors) and occasionally contributed articles to *NMR*.

An editorial in *NMR* in April 1943, less than a year after the discontinuance of the consulting service, reflects the asymmetry of Ridley’s and Roher’s respective power within the League. The editorial seemingly endorsed the importance of both substantive annual municipal reports (Ridley’s approach) along with proper and interesting presentation (Roher’s). But, significantly, it explicitly gave credit to the ICMA for its contributions to advancing public reporting without even mentioning the Municipal Reporting Consultant Service, Roher’s name, or the results of her work (Willoughby 1943)—all this when she was listed on the masthead of that issue as its contributing editor for research. This may have been a subtle and early signal, with its meaning becoming clearer in retrospect.

Ridley had won, if only due to his staying power. It wasn’t even close.

## Summary and Conclusions

Public reporting gradually faded from public administration’s agenda (Lee 2005, 203–5). In hindsight, one of the explanations might be that, with Ridley’s victory over Roher, the subject area continued to be dominated by a normative literature instead of gradually being replaced by a research-based and empirical one. But there were many other reasons, too. Legislators did not like bureaucracies reporting directly to the public because that threatened their own role as intermediary between the citizenry and government. Also, lawmakers feared that effective reporting would generate public support for the agency and thereby reduce their own freedom of action. Finally, during the second half of the 20th century, there was a general demise of public administration’s interest in its “publicness” and a shift toward the nuts and bolts of management, in particular the New Public Management movement.

Yet Roher’s unprecedented and never-repeated experiments provide a glimpse into an alternative scenario in the evolution of public reporting. It could have



turned into a valid and methodologically sound field of social science. That would have given it a standing and credibility that Ridley's normativism could never sustain.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps with this reconstruction of Roher's forgotten results, researchers interested in government public relations can pick up where she left off, albeit after a 65-year hiatus.

## Notes

1. Author's files.
2. The series consisted of eight front-page articles in the *Palo Alto Times*: "Who Pulls the Strings? Do You Know Who Is Boss of Palo Alto?" (Thursday, April 3, 1941); "Said the Dollar to the Citizen: Eenie, Meenie, Minee, Mo—Which Collector Gets My Dough?" (Thursday, April 10, 1941); "Palo Alto Watches Its 'Debt Line': Do You Know That City Buys on 'Time' Too?" (Thursday, April 17, 1941); "How Do You Feel Today? If You Should Get Sick City Might Have to Pay" (Thursday, April 24, 1941); "Having Wonderful Time! Do You Know Where?" (Thursday, May 1, 1941); "Fireman, Save My Child! What Good Are Police and Fire Brigades?" (Thursday, May 8, 1941); "Save Enough for Sables: Your Utilities Bills Are Lower in Palo Alto!" (Saturday, May 17, 1941); and "Where Does Democracy Begin? It Starts with 'Mr. and Mrs. You'" (Friday, May 23, 1941).
3. This researcher has been unable to identify or locate those two publications.
4. Roher was briefly an assistant professor of government at San Jose State College in the South Bay Area (Resnick and Nerenburg 1969, iv), but because she was ABD, she could not proceed to have an academic career. During and after World War II, she continued working for several governmental entities and authored many of their reports covering a wide variety of public policy areas. She also published several articles in nonacademic journals. In 1947, she married Sydney Resnick and assumed the then-traditional role of a full-time housewife and mother. After that, under the name Miriam Roher Resnick, she wrote only sporadically, coauthoring three books: a high school textbook on American government (Resnick and Nerenburg 1969), a 1980 volume on childhood development and, in 1984, a book on self-actualization. She died in 1992 at age 75.
5. Professor Daniel Williams suggested to the author that the ICMA finally broke free of Ridley's dogma in 1963 when, seven years after his retirement, it published Ned L. Wall's *Municipal Reporting to the Public*. However, by then, the study and practice of public reporting was already in decline.

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