

# Rediscovering Behavioral Public Administration through Miriam Roher

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**Abstract:** Behavioral public administration is not a foreign take-over of Public Administration from psychology or behavioral economics. We were *behavioral*, we were *experimental*, and we cared more deeply about *citizens'* perception of public services from a micro-perspective. We were all of the above *before it was cool*. However, we somehow lost track. In the following I rediscover a behavioral, experimental, and citizen-centered public administration through the lost work of the little known Miriam Roher. Her pioneering field experiments in Palo Alto in the early 1940s marks a road not taken by Public Administration. With the recent wave of Behavioral Public Administration we have now come full circle and yet again stand at the crossing with the road not taken.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both...  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

– Outtake from Robert Frost's poem *The Road Not Taken*.

A Friday morning in Hotel Senator in Sacramento, 1941. The 9 AM panel is on "Effective Research Reporting".<sup>2</sup> We are at the Fourth Annual Conference for the Western Governmental Research Association. Over one hundred scholars and practitioners are attending the three day event in sunny Sacramento. Russel Barthell, chairman of the panel and employee at the bureau of Public Administration at the University of California, introduces the second presenter on the morning panel, a just 25-year old woman by the name of Miriam Roher.

She is a graduate student at UC Berkeley doing a dissertation on government reporting with the working title: "Public Relations Reporting by City Governments; Nature and Effectiveness". She is here to outline the provocative findings of a number of field experiments she has been conducting over the past 12 months in the city of Palo Alto, California. In short, she has tested different means of informing the public about the quality of local services and she has conducted multiple surveys to measure changes in the citizens' knowledge. Her results provide a straightforward result: citizens know very little about city government affairs. Unfortunately, her surveys show that official city reports distributed to each household do very little to change this depressing fact. Not a popular piece of evidence to present in a conference room where virtually all attendees are professionally preoccupied on a day-to-day basis with collecting and presenting the statistical facts of city government affairs in yearly reports. Luckily, she has the empirical evidence to support an alternative mode of presentation: City governments can place ads in local newspapers as an effective way of improving citizens' knowledge.

Intrigued by Miss Roher's findings a young man of the same exact same age takes the word. He is not on the panel and has never himself conducted an experiment like Miss Roher's but most of his graduate work has centered on the same topic of government reporting. Since 1936 he has served as an assistant and co-author for the country's leading proponent of government reports, professor Clarence E. Ridley. While Roher's work clearly calls into question the effectiveness of the traditional report, the young man argues that a shorter report should still be an option worth considering and that some subgroups of the population also could be expected to digest a longer one.

The young man's name is "Mr. Herbert Simon". He will just a few years later write one of the most important books of the field of public administration, *Administrative Behavior*, venture into psychology, economics, and computer science, generate more than a quarter of a million citations (and counting), and ultimately win the

Ifred Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences "for his pioneering research into the decision-making process within economic organizations." Miss Roher on the hand will stick around academia for just a couple of more years, never hand in her UC Berkeley dissertation on government reporting, and eventually she will become a stay-at-home mom and freelance writer.

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<sup>1</sup>Edited excerpt from the introduction of a book under preparation: *Rediscovering Behavioral and Experimental Performance Information Research Through the Work of Miriam Roher – Public Relations Reporting by City Governments; Nature and Effectiveness*.

<sup>2</sup>A write up of ongoings at the panel can be found in Association (1941).

This book's purpose is to document the ground breaking work of Miriam Roher on government reporting which she published from the 1938 and until 1944 – with the core contributions published around 1941. In total more than 100 pieces of writing ranging from book reviews to proper research papers. Her work was first identified and discussed by Professor Mordecai Lee in a piece in *Public Administration Review* in 2006 (Lee, 2006). It is thanks to Professor Mordecai that we know of Roher's work. With this book I have collected her work in one single source in an attempt to reconstruct what might have been her dissertation on government reporting that she never handed in.

Perhaps most importantly, her work fills a void by ultimately providing a road not taken which would have led us to empirical, experimental, and psychologically-informed studies of citizens in Public Administration. Her work hereby delivers on many of the promises that behavioral public administration envision for the future (Olsen, 2015; Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2017; Moynihan, 2018). In the reminder, I will outline how her work constitutes a road not taken by the field of Public Administration. We see this across three dimensions: (I) her firm grounding in a psychology of people and information-processing, (II) her commitment to field experimental methods as the gold-standard of causal evidence, and (III) her micro-oriented citizen focus.

### **I. The Psychology of Information-Processing**

Roher's theoretical contribution is her understanding of the psychological dimensions of performance information. Roher views the content and mode of presentation of government reports along a number of implicit and explicit psychological dimensions. Most strikingly, she has a clear understanding of the importance of vividness, that is, information needs to be proximate, obvious, emotionally engaging, and as concrete as possible to the observer (Nisbett and Ross, 1980). A theme which has been central in much later work on how to get both managers (Mintzberg, 1971; Moynihan, 2008; Kettl, 2016; Kroll, 2013) and citizens (Grosso and Van Ryzin, 2011; Olsen, 2017) to engage with performance data. In her reviews of the city reports of the time her key evaluative dimension of their merits is almost exclusively along the vividness dimension. Poor report are “dull, statistics-impregnated affairs” (Roher, 1941a, 196) or “another one of those pictorial-chart-cum-sign affairs” (Roher, 1939a). Often this leads to very frank reviews of current public affairs attempts: “The ordinary citizen whose unfledged interest in local government and local sociology must be spoon-fed with sugarcoated pellets of newspaper sensationalism will not be helped by this volume” (Roher, 1939b). On the other hand, reports that do a good job “manages to make everyday facts and figures sound as appealing as one of those down-to-earth sagas of the soil”, rely on “imaginative illustrations” (Roher, 1940b, 1938b), use “words for citizens in their own language” (Roher, 1939c), and they make use of the concrete everyday life by bringing “government back alive to the citizen by reminding him of the relationship between the place in which he lives and the far-away place he calls city hall” (Roher, 1938a).

However Roher's take on vividness goes well beyond colorful graphs and playful words which also was advocated by others at the time (Ridley, 1937; Ridley et al., 1938). Roher's more radical take on informational vividness in engaging citizens in government performance is found in her tour of an exhibit about public services in New York City (Roher, 1939a). At first she is unimpressed by the presentations which initially relies on “big pictorial statistics” which only works in a book format but for an exhibit, she notes, “the visitor to expect something a little livelier”. All branches and departments of New York City government is present but many disappoint with their showing. Among them is the Corporation Counsel for which Roher is less than unimpressed: “It is just that, and unless you are the Corporation Counsel himself, or a victim in search of a city-supported accident, it must leave you cold.” (Roher, 1939a). However, at the other end of the spectrum she notes how some departments rely on highly innovative modes of presentation which even in Roher's summary is rich on vivid content. Her conclusion from this experience is that effective exhibits of government reporting “*did* the things the department does. The police department solved a crime. The fire department put out a fire. The civil service department gave intelligence tests, height tests, and psychical strength tests” (Roher, 1939a). Ultimately this leads her to the idea of not only using colorful words and graphs but to use a completely different delivery vehicle for government information, namely newspaper ads which borrows “from the dollars-and-cents practice of the commercial advertiser, told its story quickly, vividly, prominently” (Roher, 1941c). And she furthermore speculates about the potential for radio and movies to be future messengers of government reporting (Roher, 1941a,e, 1940d). In sum, Miriam Roher had a deep understanding of the psychological variables that affect information-processing in administrative settings.

## II. Unapologetically Experimental

While Roher's psychological view of the problem is quite mature for its time, we also find other scholars of the time drawing on human psychology in their writing on government reports. Both Herbert Simon and Clarence Ridley makes references to both informational vividness and the importance of comparisons in their writings from 1936 and onwards (Ridley, 1937; Ridley et al., 1938). They are also cognizant of the importance of individual differences. However, Roher's methodological push for deep empirical and experimental investigations are strong methodological innovations, in particular using (1) experimental designs to study citizens, and (2) rely on survey data which for the time was very innovative. Roher is a self-identified "experimentalist" who in her own paper uses phrases like "the experimenter herself" (Roher, 1941a,b). Unlike most people of her time she actually uses the word experiment to reference a method of studying the world by conducting interventions and not merely as another term for "trying out things" in a more casual way. Early on in her writing Roher notes the "deductive" nature of most research on government reporting. By deductive she does not mean theory testing but rather that what counts as true and false with regards to reporting is not decided by data but by sitting in an office and formulating checklists. She wants to move from "intelligent armchair discussion" (Roher, 1941e) to experimental tests in the field. This point is most clearly voiced in her review of Clarence Ridley's checklist for city reports (Roher, 1941d).

## III. Citizen-centered Micro Research

Underneath the behavioral and experimental focus of Miriam Roher is at its core a set of big questions about citizens' knowledge, perception, and evaluation of public services. She is fundamentally concerned about citizens' ability to hold politicians accountable in an increasingly complex nexus of administration and politics. Here her core contribution is a substantive focus on citizens from a micro-perspective with a sensibility to individual differences in information use, skills, knowledge, and preferences, and how these individual differences and psychological aspects of information interact. Her point of departure is an implicit view of citizens as bounded rational as they "have at best the most fragmentary and inaccurate conception of what is being done with their money; at worst, they do not even realize it is their money that is being spent" (Roher, 1941d). However, while citizens are viewed as generally ignorant they are also seen as a very diverse crowd. She speaks about the many "publics" and how "the knowledge, attitudes, habits, desires, and needs of those publics must be a prime consideration in the shaping of any public relations policy" (Roher, 1941d). In her work these publics have many names: "ordinary citizens" (Roher, 1939a), "college-age sophisticate" (Roher, 1939a), "average John Jones" (Roher, 1941d), "John Q. Citizen" (Roher, 1940a,c), "confused layman" (Roher, 1941f). Her view of these individual differences are multifaceted and goes well beyond concepts of knowledge or education as she aims to "find out something about the prejudices, predilections, knowledge, and ignorance of the voter and taxpayer" (Roher, 1941a). In doing so she touches on current topics about the role of motivated reasoning (Baekgaard and Serritzlew, 2016) and anti-public sector bias (Marvel, 2015) in citizens processing of performance data. The lack of attention to individual differences and sensibility to different "publics" also remains one of her strongest criticisms of the work of Clarence Ridley and Herbert Simon. In a review of one of their many reports on measuring municipal activities she notes: "Nowhere is a clear-cut distinction made between measurement for the benefit of the citizen and measurement for the benefit of the administrator. By implication, at least, the authors seem to find these one and the same thing." (Roher, 1944). In sum, for Roher citizens are too important to only be studied at election time by political scientists. For her citizens are a natural object of study in public administration as most of citizens' day-to-day interactions are with the administrative part of the state.

### The Road not Taken

The work of Roher road marks a road not taken for the field of Public administration. We were *behavioral*, we were *experimental*, and we cared more deeply about *citizens'* perception of public services from a micro-perspective. However, the field went down another road. There is interesting work to be done on why fields develop as they do. For now Miriam Roher can serve as a tale of how curiosity about a big question (e.g., how can we improve citizens knowledge about public services?) was the gateway into advanced behavioral and experimental work in Public Administration. Behavioral public administration is not a foreign take-over of Public Administration from psychology or behavioral economics. With the recent wave of behavioral public administration we have now come full circle and yet again stand at a crossroads facing an old road not taken.

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