

Classifying Publics

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### Communication Behaviors and Problem-Solving Characteristics in Controversial Issues

#### Abstract

Addressing criticisms about the current segmentation methods of publics, this study aims to elaborate on J. E. Grunig and Hunt's (1984) typology of publics in a way that captures the communication dynamics during issue evolution by introducing a theoretical framework of Communicant Activeness in Problem Solving (CAPS). Using 34 qualitative interviews, this study identified seven types of publics based on their activeness in problem solving and explored their communicative characteristics. The findings have implications for further segmenting subgroups within the active and aware publics (the most crucial groups in issues), and contribute to theoretical development in the identification of publics. [100 words]

Key Words: Public, Communication Behavior, Situational Theory of Publics, Segmentation of Publics

Public relations is defined as “the management of communication between an organization and its publics” (J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 6). It is thus important to know who a public is (J. E. Grunig, 1997). This importance becomes clearer when we begin to build and maintain relationships with strategic publics of organizations (Aldoory & Sha, 2006; J. E. Grunig, L. A. Grunig, & Dozier, 2006; Slater, 1995). Our efforts will be aimless unless we explicitly define who the public is and how it behaves (Kim, Ni, & Sha, 2007).

This study is proposed for two reasons. First, by introducing a new theoretical framework of Communicant Activeness in Problem Solving (CAPS), it aims to extend the current research on the segmentation of publics, especially the situational theory of publics (e.g., J. E. Grunig, 1997), and incorporates the communication dynamics among different types of publics. Second, it aims to provide public relations practitioners with a more refined way of specifying who their target audiences are.

#### *Major Premises and Scope of This Study*

There are different perspectives of publics and this paper does not attempt to address all. Rather, the scope of this study is delimited to some specific perspectives or approaches to publics. Hauser (2007) suggested three meanings of “public”: first, as a public expression that is available to all; second, as the people who express opinions in an opinion poll; and third, as “an emergent body of those who are tending to an issue through their active participation in the deliberative processes that bear on it” (p. 335). This third view is the general view adopted in the conceptualization of publics in this paper.

Social theorists such as John Dewey (1927), Hannah Arendt (1958), Alan Wolfe (1989), and Mark Sagoff (1988) share a common conception about publics: “Publics are created when citizens come together to form a community, deliberating about common aims and values” (Monberg, 1998, p. 430). Similarly, Blumer (1966) and J. E. Grunig (1984, 1997) defined a public as a homogeneous social collectivity who identify a similar problem and work together toward problem resolution. A public is thus a “social concept” and requires “social spaces where dialogues may be enacted” (Monberg, 1998).

One classical way of identifying publics is the typology based on the situational theory of publics (STP, J. E. Grunig, 1997; J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984). J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) distinguished four types of publics (i.e., *active*, *aware*, *latent*, and *nonpublics*) based on the independent variables of the STP: problem recognition, level of involvement, and constraint recognition. This typology is by far the most widely adopted approach for segmentation of publics in public relations practice and research (Ni, Kim, & Sha, 2007) and has recently been extended to ethnically diverse publics (e.g., Sha, 2006). One reason for the popularity of this typology is that it rejects the “clustering of opinion polls with elite and journalistic discourse” and acknowledges that “complex public problems bring multiple perspectives to bear, each with its own understanding of what constitutes the salient issue” (Hauser, 2007, p. 335). Therefore this typology allows not only the emergence of different publics for the same issue, but also the possibility of the same person belonging to different publics for issues of different salience.

However, one criticism of this theory, or of the situational perspective, could be the narrow focus on information taking or consumption potential (i.e., information seeking and processing) as its explained variables (Kim, 2006; Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2007a, 2007b). In other words, it captures little of the “discursive interactions” (Villa, 1992, p. 712) or symbolic exchange among members of publics and with other social agents (e.g., organization) (Monberg, 1998). Monberg (1998) emphasized the role of communicative action among publics and public sphere such that “communication produces and reproduces the meanings, social roles, norms, and traditions of a community. Symbolic forms embody and convey our hopes, expectations, fears, and dreams, allowing us to create, maintain, nourish, support, and question interpretations of our world” (p. 430).

Similarly, Vasquez and Taylor (2001) called for additional conceptual explanation on the role and process of “communication process of creating, sustaining a public consciousness around a problematic situation” to account for “the dynamic and communicative nature of the public” (p. 149). However, the critics of STP (e.g., advocates for the *homo narrans* perspective) were muted about the specific ways to identify these multi-individual situations and failed to

provide the conceptual and practical tools. Both practitioners and the publics thus lack the instrumental knowledge for identifying publics to enhance problem-solving effectiveness.

This paper therefore aims to fill the gap in the current research about publics by simultaneously considering the actual process in identification of strategic, situational publics and the importance of the communication process as suggested in the classical literature about publics (e.g., Arendt, 1958; Blumer, 1966; Dewey, 1927; J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Monberg, 1998). To capture the process of emergence and divergence of a public, we conceptualize 1) how the two active<sup>1</sup> segments (aware and active) of publics can be further broken down based on three aspects of publics' problem-solving characteristics in an issue, and 2) explore how each subtype of a public is distinct from others in terms of communication behavior by using the new concept *communicant activeness in problem solving* (CAPS, Kim, 2006; Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2007a, 2007b). The resulting work will provide theoretical and practical guidance on both communicating to the publics and with them respectively.

### Conceptualization

#### *Active and Aware Publics: Creators of Inter- and Intradynamics in Issue Evolution*

In elaborating a public typology, we focus on the *active* and *aware* publics, the critical subgroups who possess most of the strategic potential because they disseminate similar problem perceptions and are mainly responsible for the emergence of an issue or for creating a sense of community (Edwards, 2006; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Heath, 1997, 2006). They are the key groups for explaining how problematic situations arise, and are shared and sustained through discursive interactions or symbolic convergence of messages (Monberg, 1998; Vasquez & Taylor, 2001). We acknowledge that inactive publics as discussed in Hallahan (2000a) are also important and that these publics might require different messages from the organizations (Hallahan, 2000b). However, it is usually difficult to identify these inactive publics and the process of forming inactive publics is not easily observable as that of forming active and aware publics.

Notably, members of an active public can vary in terms of their action orientation. Some are hyperactive in spreading their perceptions and solutions among people who have resources and power (Ferre, 1992; Stewart, Smith, & Denton, 1994; Tarrow, 1998). Such members are activists – they want to create a collective identity and a movement network against the causes of a problem (Klandermans, 1994; Mueller, 1994). In contrast, other active publics remain active but are constrained or not interested in solidarity or collective efforts for problem solving (Gamson, 1992; Mueller, 1992). They are thus individual problem solvers (Kim, 2006).

Likewise, members of an aware public can differ among themselves (Kim, Duncan, Niedergall, & Tindall, 2007). Some are not motivated or self-abstaining to the problem solving due to the recency of their problem recognition. Others can be an ex-active public who used to work diligently but is currently holding their effort (e.g., because they experienced a plateau in the problem or have been frustrated with the lack of a solution). They feel burned out by the prolonged problem-solving efforts or have switched their priority to other problems.

As such, active and aware publics are each composed of different subgroups that possess different histories, approaches, and extent of activeness. To advance our knowledge, we must question what kind of different subgroups exist in these two publics, why the internal differences arise, and what implications these different subgroups bear for the problem resolution.

#### *Public and Problem-Solving Characteristics*

According to Dewey (1927), a *public* is a group of people who faces a similar problem, recognizes the problem, and organizes to do something about the problem. J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) classified publics into four types by “the extent to which they participate in active behavior to do something about” a problem (p. 145). Kim (2006) noted that two conceptual cores to define publics are their “problem-solving” efforts and their “purposive use of communication” for problem solving. Kim (2006) described a public as a group of problem solvers who use communication behavior as a coping mechanism to inquire and effectuate a chosen solution. A public may experience an enduring or a transient problem, may behave individually or collectively, and may possess an open or closed approach in using information. <sup>ii</sup>

Kim (2006) identified three characteristics in the problem-solving of publics: the *openness to approaches* in problem solving, the *time or history* of the problem solving, and the *extent of activeness* in problem solving. Based on these characteristics, eight types of publics were proposed: *closed-situational activist* public, *closed-chronic activist* public, *closed-situational active* public, *closed-dormant passive* public, *open-situational activist* public, *open-chronic activist* public, *open-situational active* public, and *open-dormant passive* public.

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Insert Table 3 & Figure 1 Here

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Even though the names of two of these eight types of publics contain “passive,” these are not to be considered as referring to the latent or nonpublics. Instead, all these eight types consist of those publics who are already aware of the problem (i.e., problem recognition), but may vary in terms of perceived connection (i.e., level of involvement), perceived obstacles (i.e., constraint recognition), and their knowledge (referent criterion) in doing something about the problem (J. E. Grunig, 1997). They differ from the latent public or nonpublic who is not aware of the presence or the seriousness of the given problem. If we introduce Kim’s new typology of publics into J. E. Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) typology, we will have ten types of publics for a given problem/issue.

#### *Public and Communication Behaviors*

We assume communication is *instrumental* to problem solving (J. E. Grunig, 1997; Kim, 2006). In addition, we consider communication acts are “epiphenomenal” in problem solving (Kim, 2006; Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2007b). Most problem-solving effort requires some aspects of communicative behavior (e.g., requesting information or resources) (Stewart, Smith, & Denton, 1994; Tarrow, 1998). The ways in which one uses communication behavior influence problem-solving outcomes (e.g., looking for only self-complacent information vs. looking for an innovative solution) (Kim, Duncan, Niedergall, & Tindall, 2007). Thus it is critical to theorize how communicative action connects to problem-solving efforts and outcomes.

Kim and J. E. Grunig (2007a) proposed a model named *communicant activeness in problem solving* (CAPS). This model has a second-order factor structure with six first-order

factors. This new concept originated from the situational theory of publics (STP, J. E. Grunig, 1997, 2003). STP explains when people become communicatively active about the problem they have identified. However, the communication activeness in STP is rather narrowly focused on the *information consumption potential* – when one is likely to actively seek or passively process information (Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2007b). On the other hand, this paper broadens the scope and includes how the publics themselves select and transmit information. These show that publics can work on their own and among themselves to achieve their own purposes rather than being “manipulated” by the organizations, one major criticism of STP (Leitch & Neilson, 2001).

As members of a public become active about a problem they feel is important, they not only tend to seek information to understand it better (“question asking,” Berger & Kellermann, 1990) but also tend to select and give information to others (“opinion-giving,” Price, Nir, & Cappella, 2006). Information giving, such as talking about a problem or asking for others’ attention or resources to the problem, becomes instrumental for problem solving (Tarrow, 1998). In addition, as one continues the problem-solving effort, she or he will encounter a problem of information overload (Evans, 1989) or a problem of inconsistency among available information (Carter, Pyszka, & Guerrero, 1969). This makes a problem solver more selective in information taking and giving to others (Kim, 2006). Therefore CAPS posits that as one exerts more effort in problem solving, the six variables tend to increase. The communicant (i.e., problem solver) activeness will increase the three domains of information selecting, information giving, and information taking. Each domain consists of *proactive* or *active* information behaviors – i.e., *information seeking, information forwarding, and information forefending* – and *reactive* or *passive* information behaviors – i.e., *information processing, information sharing, and information permitting* (Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2007a).

The active or proactive information behaviors are more likely to be premeditated, systematic, and planned with the goal of problem resolution (Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2007b). Information seeking is a problem solver’s likelihood of searching for information about a problem. Information forwarding refers to a problem solver’s likelihood of providing

information regarding the problem even if no one solicited it – self-propelled giving of information. Information forefending refers to a problem solver’s likelihood of fending off certain information by evaluating its relevance and testing its utility for the problem-solving task.

In contrast, passive or reactive communication behaviors are more random, unsystematic, and unplanned (Kim, 2006). Information processing is a random encountering of information, that is, an unplanned “message discovery” (Clarke & Kline, 1974). Information sharing refers to unplanned giving of some information if and only if it is requested by others. Information permitting is the lower state of information selectiveness – the likelihood of permitting any information if it is believed to have any relation to the given problem-solving task.

To compare active and passive publics, we need to understand that active problem solvers are high in all variables of information behaviors (e.g., an active public is high in information seeking as well as information processing) (Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2007b). In contrast, a passive public will *only* be high in reactive/passive information behaviors (i.e., information processing, information sharing, and information permitting).

#### *Communicative Characteristics of Eight Types of Publics*

There are three major characteristics in the problem-solving of publics: the *openness to approaches* in problem solving, the *extent of activeness* in problem solving, and the *time or history* of the problem solving. First, Kim (2006) posited that the *open* versus *closed* problem-solving approaches will be associated with information selectivity among publics. For those open- type publics, information of any kind will be welcomed as long as it demonstrates relevance, utility, or potential of improving the problem-solving process and outcome. In contrast, the closed-type publics tend to prohibit some information with their subjective preference (cf. to avoid cognitive dissonance, Festinger, 1957). As a result of such subjective criteria, some information is filtered without much scrutiny of its value and utility. For the two information selectivity variables in the CAPS model, the open-type publics will be high in information permitting and the closed- type publics will be high in information forefending (Kim, 2006; Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2007a) (see Figure 1).

Additionally, some members of active publics make more effort to disperse problem perceptions similar to their own (Stewart, Smith, & Denton, 1994), but others may remain hesitant in this size-expansion effort. Based on the CAPS frame (Kim, 2006; Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2007a), those more proactive publics are more likely to do information forwarding – i.e., giving problem and/or solution to others voluntarily. Such publics are activist publics who want to reproduce themselves (Kim, 2006). They prescribe and recommend a preferred solution as more meritorious while they redefine the problem in their own way (Pan, Shen, Paek, & Sun, 2006) against competing problem solvers (e.g., the problem-causing organization).

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Insert Figure 2 Here

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Thus, based on the extent of activeness, Kim (2006) distinguished among *activist*, *active*, and *passive* public (see Figure 1) by illustrating communication behavior sequentially as an *inquiring* stage and an *effectuating* stage in problem solving (Figure 3). In brief, the inquiring stage is an earlier phase of problem solving in which information acquisition is most salient for generating a solution. Some publics who are aware of a problem but continue to remain in the inquiring stage are passive publics. The effectuating stage refers to a problem solver's effort to apply the solution generated from the inquiring stage. Kim (2006) distinguished between “individual” effectuating and “collective” effectuating (p. 65). In the individual effectuating phase, a problem solver works in isolation and makes efforts without connecting with other problem solvers (i.e., an active public). In contrast, a problem solver in the collective effectuating phase (i.e., an activist public) tries to create concerted efforts with comrade problem solvers (Tarrow, 1998). Therefore the collective effectuating groups -- activist publics -- are busy transferring their knowledge and recommendation to others (Price, Nir, & Cappella, 2006; Stewart, Smith, & Denton, 1994).

Finally, even when working on the same problem, some publics consider it a newer problem than others. This happens because problem recognition falls into a subjective experience rather than an objective one (Kim, 2006). For example, in reality the war in Iraq is an old issue,

but for family members who receive news of the deployment only recently, it becomes a new problem. In addition, a problem could exist temporarily and disappear quickly (e.g., food poisoning or a broken arm), or it could last for a long time and become hard to solve (e.g., diabetes or a civil war). Thus the difficulties or the period of time required for problem solving will affect the status of a public. Some publics are more situational or transient in their public status, whereas others are more chronic or dormant (Kim, Duncan, Niedergall, & Tindall, 2007).

From the CAPS framework, *situational* public types are likely to make efforts for information acquisition (i.e., high in information seeking). In contrast, *chronic* or *dormant* public types will be more passive in information acquisition (i.e., high in information processing). Over an extended period of problem solving, they accumulate enough information to understand their problem. For them the problem is not in finding the solution itself but the difficulty in effectuating a solution (e.g., curing diabetes).

#### Research Questions

The main purpose of this paper is to elaborate a comprehensive typology of publics to improve our understanding of public dynamics in issue evolution and devolution. We thus explore the dynamics and characteristics of communication behaviors of each type of public:

RQ1: How do different types of publics engage in different communication behaviors (CAPS)?

RQ2: How do different types of publics perceive problem situations differently?

#### Method

Qualitative interviewing was used for this initial exploration of the new typologies of publics. In total, thirty-four participants were interviewed by graduate students in a graduate seminar in public relations at a Southern university. Prior to the interviews, the investigators provided training to these student interviewers and IRB approval was obtained. Ethical issues were taken into consideration by ensuring that these students used this opportunity to not only learn qualitative interviewing skills under the guidance of the researchers but also acquire a practical tool for their future career in public relations.

#### *Sampling*

This study used volunteer sampling because of its exploratory nature. Some interviewees were students enrolled at the same university, and others were the interviewers' personal contacts. Among the thirty-four participants, twenty-two were female and twelve were male. The age ranged from eighteen to sixty-five, and most of the participants were in their twenties or thirties. Their ethnic background included Caucasians, African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, immigrants of Middle-Eastern descent, and international participants. Their occupations included: undergraduate students, graduate students, sales managers, consultants, and retirees.

#### *Data Collection*

*Interview protocol design.* The interview protocol was based on the original CAPS survey instrument with modifications. Only broad question categories that measured theoretical constructs were used. All questions were changed to open-ended ones, followed by probes.

Two issues were used for the interviews. They were A) New Orleans evacuees coming to Houston after Hurricane Katrina and the alleged crime rate increase that resulted, and B) controversy over illegal immigration. These two issues were chosen after the students brainstormed for issues that they believed their participants would be most interested in or concerned about.<sup>iii</sup> Each student interviewer was then asked to find one participant for each of the two issues and conduct an interview. Therefore seventeen participants were interviewed for issue A and issue B respectively. At the consent of interviewees, the interviews were audiotaped or extensive notes were taken if interviewees declined to be taped.

All student interviewers received training on the theoretical constructs of the CAPS model prior to recruiting the participants. They roughly assigned their interviewees to one of the eight types of publics based on the three dimensions of problem-solving approaches, i.e., their openness in problem-solving process, history of activeness, and extent of activeness in problem solving. However, this classification was not final, as the qualitative method soon showed its advantages in delineating rich information about individuals. After analyzing the data adjustments were made to reassign the participants into different categories.

#### *Data Analysis*

After the student interviewers completed the interviews, they each submitted a report describing the participant's responses. The investigators then analyzed the data according to the types of publics. Eventually the following distribution of public types was shown (see Table 1).

*Coding of key dimensions.* Based on the problem-solving approaches of participants, the investigators looked for key patterns in describing whether the participant was closed or open, proactive or reactive, situational or chronic. The following is a list of illustrative quotes that helped us code these three dimensions (see Table 2).

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Insert Table 1 & 2 Here

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We then sorted through all the major patterns that apply to the participants in one type of public, and used these to provide rich description for each of the available types of publics. Labels were used when describing them to protect their identities. For example, A1 refers to the first interviewee for issue A and B1 refers to the first interviewee for issue B.

### Results

RQ1: How do different types of publics engage in different communication behaviors (CAPS)?

Overall, the majority of participants belong to open dormant passive (ODP). None of the participants was found to be open chronic activist (OCA<sub>t</sub>) for either issue A or B.

*Type 1: Closed-situational activist public (CSA<sub>t</sub>).* The only member of a CSA<sub>t</sub> public engaged in active information acquisition, transmission, and selection. She had even actively contacted a state representative for more information. She was also knowledgeable about the issue and thus actively forwarded information. As for information forefending, she clearly knew what information she needed and said that some Web sites had biased and "wrong" information.

*Type 2: Closed-chronic activist public (CCA<sub>t</sub>).* Like CSA<sub>t</sub>, the members of CCA<sub>t</sub> publics engaged in both active information transmission and selection. For example, A3 would actively explain certain facts to friends who attributed the rising crime rate to the New Orleans evacuees. She felt obligated to "bolster the image of the evacuees" whenever she could. B2 also focused

attention on transmitting information to officials who could make a difference. His activist group had meetings with the Houston Police Department to discuss the issue.

In terms of information selection, both felt that first-hand information was important. B2 would go to primary sources such as “law enforcement officials, illegal immigrants, and politicians.” Trying to advocate for the rights of illegal immigrants, he said he would especially discount the information that disrespected “human dignity.”

However, different from CSA<sub>t</sub>, members of the CCA<sub>t</sub> publics only processed information. One reason was that they already knew a substantial amount of information. A3 already knew much from “first-hand accounts” and did not rely significantly on the media. B2 took advantage of any opportunity to process news and preferred only current information, again because he already had much in-depth information as a result of his intensive community connections and his academic studies.

*Type 3: Closed-situational active public (CSA).* CSA publics engaged in active information acquisition and selection, but not in information transmission. All sought information actively as this issue was their top priority, and all engaged in information forefending because they had some kind of criterion when evaluating the usefulness of information. A2 only respected hard evidence and felt that the information from the police department was not valid. To B5, many media reports seemed to be biased. B6 felt strongly that the more she read, the more she thought she was right. However, all would transmit information only when asked. B6 used to forward information, but at this particular time was too busy to do it.

*Type 4: Closed-dormant passive public (CDP).* Like CSA publics, most members of CDP publics did information sharing and forefending. Most would only transmit information when asked because of three reasons. Some (A15) did not feel they knew enough or that they knew more than others. Others (B7) did not feel this was a major problem to begin with, or that it was a “non-issue.” One last reason was suggested by B8, who felt that people would automatically assume his position on the issue based on his background, so they would not come to ask for his opinions. B4 would join in conversation actively, but would avoid bringing up the topic because

it was sensitive. Participants usually exercised some caution when evaluating the information they obtained. In particular, B7 preferred information from activists above that from politicians.

However, one key difference from the CSA public is that members of the CDP public processed information. All of them only paid attention to information when available. For B4, the issue was not of direct concern at this time and he was content with updates here and there.

*Type 5: Open-situational activist public (OSAt).* Members of this public sought information actively, sometimes by attending community forums and keeping up with relevant Web sites. They also forwarded information, for example, by hosting forums and passing out pamphlets to people (B1). For information selection, however, they were more concerned about the source of information than the content. For example, A1 considered much media coverage as sensationalistic and biased and felt that the rising crime rate was not all the fault of the evacuees.

*Type 7: Open-situational active public (OSA).* Like OSAt, all OSA publics engaged in information seeking and permitting. All were actively searching for information, looking at news articles and Internet Web sites to better understand the issue and to try to find solutions for the problem. A5 especially wanted to learn more since she was now making the transition to this city. B9 was different and would only listen when others presented new information. However, they were less active than OSAt in terms of information transmission. They would only transmit information when asked because they did not feel they had enough information. B9 was different and would gladly tell others her thoughts because others regarded her as authority on this issue.

*Type 8: Open-dormant passive public (ODP).* ODP publics all engaged in passive behaviors for information acquisition, transmission, and selection. They would only pay attention to information when it was available. One reason was suggested by A6, who had been active on this issue for a long time and now felt he had already gained enough information.

Members of the ODP public would transmit information only when asked, mainly for two reasons. For some (e.g., A14 and B11), it was because they did not feel they knew enough or knew more than others. For others (e.g., B13), this issue did not come up often in their life. They did not have much preference as to what kind of information was useful since they did not have

any ready-made positions to reinforce. Even though some did, such preferences were about the source of information. For example, A4 mentioned that the interviews with local citizens might be skewed and that statistics are more reliable. A7 also felt that valuable information comes from people with first-hand experiences. A8 knew where to get current information, but did not like to contend with the conflicting news reports that are “more opinion than fact.”

RQ2: How do different types of publics perceive problem situations differently?

*Type 1: Closed-situational activist public (CSAt).* The CSAt participant (B3) had a high level of involvement, high problem recognition, and low constraint recognition. She also had some sort of referent criterion. Such high level of involvement had much to do with her background, in which she had been both personally connected to the issue (external involvement) and engaged in research or academic study related to the issue (internal involvement). B3 was born into a family of immigrants from Haiti and studied social work, and thus had high problem recognition internally and externally. Her constraint recognition was naturally low. Internally, she felt confident that the issue at hand was not difficult to understand, mainly because she had spent much time studying the issue. Externally, she felt confident that she could make a difference. Perhaps because she had spent much time in studying the issue at hand, she already had some kind of referent criterion.

*Type 2: Closed-chronic activist public (CCAt).* Like CSAt, CCAt participants also had high level of involvement and high problem recognition. What differentiated them from members of the CSAt public was that their internal constraint recognition was mixed and external dimension was low. Both felt a strong connection in their minds with the issue at hand as well as a direct personal connection. For example, born in New Orleans, A3 had family members who were victims of Katrina. She currently housed several such victims and made trips back to New Orleans. B2 had family members and former students who are illegal immigrants. He is a local activist on the issue of illegal immigration and had been a former high school Chicano Studies teacher.

Like CSAAt, they both had high problem recognition. B2 had even made fighting for the illegal immigrants his life's work. External constraint recognition was low for both publics. B2, for example, has realized the huge potential that activism has in bringing about change (such as staging protests, doing interviews in the media, and so on).

A mixed level of internal constraint recognition differentiated members of CCAAt public from those of CSAAt public. For example, A3 found it hard to understand why blame was placed on New Orleans evacuees given "Houston's own history of flooding and its own status of not being the safest city to begin with." B2 differed in that he had ten years of experience in the issue of illegal immigration and did not find it hard to understand.

Similar to CSAAt publics, both CCAAt publics had referent criteria. For example, A3 felt that expediting the rebuilding process would solve the problem. B2 felt the need for a comprehensive immigration reform. He was especially fervent about the necessity of coming up with solutions that are "based on human rights and dignity."

*Type 3: Closed-situational active public (CSA).* Similar to types 1 and 2, CSA publics usually had high level of involvement and problem recognition, and some kind of referent criterion. However, they usually had high constraint recognition (both internal and external).

All participants were very connected to the issue at hand. For example, B5 is a descendant of illegal immigrants and still identifies very strongly with illegal immigrants. B6 not only wrote a thesis on the issue out of personal interest, she is also an international student whose job seeking in this country could be affected by illegal immigrants.

Problem recognition was high for all participants. A2 usually thought about the issue whenever stories resurfaced in the media. B5 had a very strong position and would think about it all the time despite the fact that he had already obtained U.S. citizenship.

All had high constraint recognition. A2 could not understand why people blamed New Orleans evacuees without hard facts. B5 had not done anything yet, although he did say that if "any more stupid policy appears," he would join protests.

All had some kind of referent criterion. A2 felt strongly that people need to distinguish “the good from bad” and not to “lump all evacuees together.” For B5, simply making the life of illegal immigrants harder was not plausible; there was a need to raise the life standards in those countries from which most illegal immigrants came. In contrast, B6 felt strongly that the government should do something such as sending illegal immigrants back, and engaging in stricter regulations and punishment.

*Type 4: Closed-dormant passive public (CDP).* The pattern for CDP publics is not as clear as the previous three types. Except for high constraint recognition, most CDP publics displayed a mixed level of involvement and problem recognition. High involvement was related to either the connection with New Orleans (A9) and the concern about safety (A16, who had his car vandalized twice after New Orleans evacuees came), or the nature of their jobs (B8 works in retail and realized the need to learn Spanish because of the inrush of immigrants from Mexico). However, others (such as A15, B10, and B16) did not feel much connection, either because their jobs were not threatened by immigrants or they were not too worried about safety.

Problem recognition also had a mixed pattern. Some felt the need to think about the issue at hand. For example, A9 often wondered how it was concluded that the rising crime rate in Houston was due to the New Orleans evacuees. B8 felt that he “lived in the situation” and often thought that border control was needed. However, others did not feel the issue was a major problem (such as B7) because they believed that these immigrants came to perform jobs that Americans do not like to do, and that there would always be such people.

Constraint recognition was generally high, especially externally. Most of the participants did not feel that they could personally do anything, or had actually done anything. However, some did suggest possible ways to help, such as holding meetings or writing letters to politicians. Internal constraint recognition was also high. B7 simply did not understand why this had become such a big problem.

Most CDPs had different kinds of referent criterion, either that people could not place blame only on the New Orleans evacuees (A9) or that these evacuees needed to go back home

(A15 and A17). B8, in fact, had a very clear referent criterion. He mentioned the example of 200 years ago when Chinese immigrants were required to take a literacy test before immigrating, which he felt could help regulate current immigration. B4 thought the solution to illegal immigration came from distinguishing “those who just came to work and those who wanted to start families” in the United States. B16 felt that the government should have a unified front and that two sides of the problem could be considered, e.g., issuing green cards to the existing immigrants and stopping future immigrants from crossing the border. B10, a sixty-five-year-old African American female, had a very strong referent criterion in rules and regulations that everyone should abide by. It was simply “wrong to sneak over.” She suggested that illegal immigrants be “sent back or jailed.”

*Type 5: Open-situational activist public (OSAt).* The OSAt publics had a very high level of involvement, problem recognition, and low constraint recognition. For example, B1 is an active member of a national Hispanic and Latino oriented sorority. She has the desire to speak to politicians to understand the reasons behind their positions. A1 was born and raised in New Orleans, studied political science, and worked in social services. This background contributed to her sharing similar problem perceptions about the New Orleans issue, where she had a combination of “social awareness and personal involvement.” Both have also personally taken action, such as passing out pamphlets to inform people about the dangers of living in the United States illegally (B1) and educating other people, as well as organizing a consortium of scholars and politicians at the community level (A1).

B1’s referent criterion consisted of different ideas, including both publicizing the danger of crossing the border illegally and showing the important role of immigrants by holding a “Day without Immigrants.” A1 strongly preferred solutions based on “reason, instead of emotion.”

*Type 7: Open-situational active public (OSA).* OSA publics had mixed levels of involvement, high problem recognition, and high constraint recognition. A5 did not feel much connection since she was new to the city, but B9 had high involvement as she came from a Mexican family and felt that illegal immigrants created a bad reputation for all Mexican

immigrants. Their problem recognition was generally high, because many people were still talking about the issue (A5), and they stated that they thought about this problem every time they listened to related news (A5 and B9). Both felt high constraint recognition in terms of time, energy, and motivation. For example, B9 did not feel she could do much except to share news.

In terms of referent criterion, A5 was still forming her opinions since she was new to the city and the issue. However, others did have some referent criteria. For example, B9 felt that making it easier to get a work visa would be a solution that benefits everyone. A12 also suggested that sending the evacuees back was not possible or good, so she recommended increasing the local police force to combat what she believed to be increased violence.

*Type 8: Open-dormant passive public (ODP).* Different from all other publics, ODP participants usually had a relatively low level of involvement and problem recognition and high constraint recognition. For both issues, participants had a low level of involvement. Most had no direct connection to New Orleans evacuees, and had only seen reports in the media. Interestingly, even though some (A6 and A14) did perceive somewhat higher involvement, they emphasized that the issue was not particular to themselves but that it affected everyone. The same pattern was found for issue B. For some, the two essential aspects of the issue of illegal immigrants, jobs and safety, did not connect to them. All participants felt low problem recognition. For example, A11 did not perceive a real correlation between evacuees and the rising crime rate, and A13 felt that the issue had been sensationalized. All participants felt high constraint recognition, especially externally. Participants did not feel they could do much as private citizens and that resolution was out of their hands. B15 said that the only way she could have some influence was if she “were in politics or an influential business owner.”

Most had some kind of referent criterion, suggesting some ideas such as the need to increase the size of the police force (A6) and that people needed to pay for their misbehavior (A11). For issue B, B13 suggested using legislation to control immigrants and offering rewards. Interestingly, both B12 and B15 did not care how the issue was solved as long as it did not cost

taxpayers additional money. B15 felt it would be unfair to use her tax money for this issue because she was not connected at all.

### Discussion

In this study we further broke down the *active* and *aware* publics in J. E. Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four types of publics. Active publics could be either supportive to the current organizational needs or hostile (Ni, Kim, & Sha, 2007). They would also be different in the degree of success in problem solving (e.g., curing illness) or in the potential threats and opportunities they bring to an organization as they become more or less communicatively active (e.g., sharing their problem perception with fellow problem solvers).

Aware publics are also of interest to practitioners and organizations when they make efforts to cultivate these publics' awareness of certain problems (e.g., donation or preventive actions for some risky behaviors, Slater, 1995). We conceptually differentiated some publics as more difficult to influence than others. Some members of an aware public -- closed-dormant passive public -- tend to prohibit new information from entering their minds because of their developed forethought or "schemata" (L. A. Grunig, 1985). Other members -- open-dormant passive public -- have more potential for accepting or at least considering efforts to influence.

### *Patterns of Publics Identified*

There are a few patterns worth noting. First, the majority of participants belong to open dormant passive (ODP). In fact, of the thirty-four total participants, ODP accounted for fourteen. Second, none of the participants were found to be open chronic activist (OCA<sub>t</sub>) publics for either issue A or B. Third, only one closed situational activist public (CSA<sub>t</sub>) was identified in this study.

This finding is consistent with the situational theory (STP, J. E. Grunig, 1997; STOPS, Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2007b). The probability of observing each type of public is not the same. People are more likely to become certain types of publics (in our case, ODP) than other types (in our case, CSA<sub>t</sub> and OCA<sub>t</sub>) based on their perception of the situation – i.e., problem/issue specific. In reality only a small portion of the population cares; for this reason public relations

practitioners need to identify these crucial publics (J. E. Grunig, 1997). Of course, the missing publics in this study may also be a result of our sampling or the uniqueness of the issue.

*Perceptions about Problem Situations*

Based on the identified patterns of the seven types of publics, it seems possible to suggest that the publics' perceptions about the problem situations change as publics change from open to closed, and from activist to active to passive.

*Constraint recognition.* Among the four variables in the STP, constraint recognition distinguishes publics at different levels of activeness. The low level of constraint recognition is the most distinct feature of activist publics. Even though all three types of publics (activist, active, and passive publics) exhibited a mixed level of involvement, problem recognition, and clear or unclear referent criterion, activist publics are always the only groups that exhibited a low level of constraint recognition. Active and passive publics may share the same features with activist publics in terms of other variables, but never in terms of constraint recognition.

*Two extreme cases.* The two types of publics that were somewhat "extreme" cases, the closed-situational activist and the open-dormant passive, had the most clear and consistent patterns. The closed-situational activist publics all had high level of involvement, problem recognition, and low constraint recognition, and some sort of referent criterion. These features were the exact opposite to the publics at the other extreme, the open-dormant passive publics. Most other types of publics did not have such a consistent pattern.

*Referent criterion.* All closed-type publics have some sort of referent criterion for how the issues should be solved. This may be because of their high level of involvement and problem recognition, a consistent pattern among all four types of publics. Since they have spent considerable time thinking about the issues that connected them in certain ways, it was natural that they have some preconceived ideas (Kim, 2006). However, whether they tended to take any actions and implement those ideas depended more on how much constraint they perceived.

Interestingly, even some open-type publics (such as open dormant passive) had some sort of referent criterion. This finding supported earlier research that some publics' lack of cognition

or knowledge about certain issues does not necessarily prevent them from having some kind of attitude, no matter how ill-informed these attitudes are (J. E. Grunig, 1997).

*Communication Behaviors and Problem-Solving Approaches of Publics*

As predicted in the CAPS model, the different problem-solving characteristics of publics (e.g., history of problem solving) were closely related to their features on communication behaviors, i.e., how they acquire, transmit, and select information.

*Information selection and open vs. closed problem-solving approaches.* The CAPS model predicted that information forefending is associated with a closed or dogmatic problem-solving approach; and information permitting is associated with an open approach. This tendency was partly supported by this qualitative study. All four closed-type publics were indeed engaged primarily in information forefending. However, the pattern is less clear when it comes to open-type publics. In fact, certain open publics still chose to forefend information, which is an unexpected finding. However, if we look at the concept of information forefending further, this finding made sense. When participants talked about the kind of information that they would select, many mentioned two major aspects—the content and the source of information. Some participants focused on whether the information source was reliable and objective. Others focused on whether the information supported their original ideas. The former was termed as an “objective referent criterion” and the latter was termed as a “subjective referent criterion.” This finding supported the importance of differentiating the types of referent criterion (Kim, 2006).

*Information transmission and the proactive vs. reactive problem-solving approaches.* The CAPS model posited that information forwarding is associated with a proactive problem-solving approach, and information sharing is associated with a reactive approach. The interview data supported the claim that all the activist publics identified in the study were engaged in proactive behaviors and trying to increase people’s awareness to facilitate collective problem solving. Active and passive publics, on the other hand, mostly only shared information.

*Information acquisition and the situational vs. chronic problem-solving approaches.* The CAPS model suggested that information seeking is associated with a situational or current

problem-solving approach; and information processing is associated with a chronic or dormant approach. The findings supported the claim that all the situational publics were engaged in information seeking because the issue was their priority at this time. Chronic or dormant publics, on the other hand, mostly processed information. One interesting case was B2, who had been fighting for the rights of illegal immigrants for over ten years. Even though he is still actively engaging in all the activities, he no longer sought additional information but only relied on new updates available from the mass media (i.e., information processing).

### *Implications and Significance*

This study explored the new typologies of publics based on the CAPS model. Theoretically speaking, this new typology of publics has taken into account the conceptualization of publics in terms of deliberative democracy and public sphere as advocated by Habermas (1989, 2006). Bohman (2007) argued that the best organization of the public sphere is “as a ‘public of publics’ rather than as a distinctively unified and encompassing public sphere in which all communicators participate” (p. 354). The new typology presented in this paper, along with its predecessor, the STP, argues just that. Instead of treating the entire population as caring about all issues in public life, we need to work on the concept of “minipublics” because such smaller publics “are able to deliberate within specific institutional, functional, and temporal constraints in ways that the public at large cannot” (Bohman, 2007, p. 351).

This qualitative exploration identified and described most of the new types of publics. It advanced the theoretical development in the segmentation and identification of publics. In particular, this exploration supported earlier research on the segmentation of publics that simple methods such as demographics or geographics do not provide enough information about publics (J. E. Grunig, 1989; J. E. Grunig & Repper, 1992). For example, B13 was in the United States only to study as an international student and thus did not care about the illegal immigration issue. However, for the same issue, another participant with a similar background (B6) turned out to be a member of a closed-situational active public. She wanted to stay after graduation to look for a

job; thus the same issue concerns her. This and other examples suggested that the same issue may have different implications for different subpopulations that should not be lumped together.

Even active publics are not all the same. Some active publics are very selective in information use and are more dogmatic; they would bolster more schism and escalate conflict around the issue. Other active publics who are more permitting in information use and thus nondogmatic would possibly reduce conflict and schism. The classic typology of publics only distinguishes active from nonactive publics. However, we demonstrated that those active publics, critical in the evolution/devolution of issues and conflicts, may be quantitatively similar (i.e., similarly active) but qualitatively different (i.e., approach the problem differently). Thus our qualitative study has provided good support for the new typology of publics (Kim, 2006).

In addition, like Hauser (2007), we believe that numerous public problems “invite an intersection of various interest publics, each with its own interests at stake” and the public deliberations “occur in multiple discursive arenas spread across society and, in some cases, across national borders” (p. 335). Our typology attempts to capture the process of these multiple discursive arenas where publics engage in dialogue, discuss issues, and respond to others’ views by acquiring, transmitting, and selecting information at different levels of activeness. As Hauser (2007) argued, these processes are what “any viable and vital public sphere requires” (p. 337).

Practically speaking, this new typology of publics provides public relations practitioners a refined way to identify the critical publics that they need to communicate with. The classic typology of nonpublic, latent public, aware public, and active public has been used extensively in this regard; practitioners are advised to focus more on the active or aware publics given the constraint in resources. This new typology, on the other hand, further suggests the need to differentiate among those two types (aware and active) so practitioners can better understand the flow of communication among these critical publics.

#### *Limitations and Directions for Future Research*

First, the selection of issues used in this study may have limited the emergence of public types. In addition, the number of participants in each type of publics was limited and may not be

representative. However, we did not claim that the participants in the different categories were “the” publics; they were only members of a “public.” This exploratory, qualitative study does not aim to reach the statistical representation required by quantitative studies. Instead, the study attempted to see whether the relationship among variables in this new theoretical framework for the typology of publics would be supported by qualitative data. In other words, “analytical generalization” (Yin, 2003) should be the focus.

Second, in addition to interviewing, observations of actual exchanges among different types of publics would be needed to better capture the dynamics in communication process. This can be the next step in this research direction.

Third, the use of student interviewers had its limitations. Different student interviewers may not approach the participants in the same way, and the resulting interview reports were not the same in terms of richness and degree of details. However, we tried to address this issue by 1) providing training prior to their fieldwork and 2) asking for further information in the data analysis stage.

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Table 1.

*Distribution of Public Types*

	Issue 1	Issue 2	Total	F:M
1. CSAt		B3 (F)	1	1: 0
2. CCAAt	A3 (F)	B2 (M)	2	1: 1
3. CSA	A2 (F)	B5 (M), B6 (F)	3	2: 1
4. CDP	A9 (M), A15 (F), A16 (M), A17 (M)	B4 (M), B7 (M), B8 (M), B10 (F), B16 (M)	9	2: 7
5. OSAAt	A1 (F)	B1 (F)	2	1:1
6. OCAAt	0	0	0	
7. OSA	A5 (F), A12 (F)	B9 (F)	3	3: 0
8. ODP	A4 (M), A6 (F), A7 (F), A8 (F), A10 (M), A11 (M), A13 (F), A14 (F)	B11 (F), B12 (F), B13 (F), B14 (F), B15 (F), B17 (F)	14	11: 3
Total	17	17	34	
<b>F:M</b>	11:6	11:6		22: 12

Table 2.

*Illustrative Quotes*

Dimensions	Examples of quotes
Closed	<p>There might be multiple solutions to the issue, but there should be a fundamental principle or premise that should be human-rights based.</p> <p>I would have to be “reborn” to change my mind.</p> <p>The more I read, the more convinced I am.</p>
Open	<p>There are many ideas to this issue and I can see both sides of the issue. For example, the country was built on immigrants and I feel that we need to appreciate them instead of trying to keep them out with some fence. But on the other hand, I also see the safety reasons that prompted the fence.</p> <p>The solution depends on what your view of the “issue” is. Is it the government’s responsibility to feed, clothe, and house the victims until they get back on their feet? Or should they just be cut off and told to fend for themselves and figure it out?</p>
Reactive	<p>I’m really not concerned about this since it does not involve me personally.</p> <p>I want to learn more about this issue, but I have not actively shared any information with others.</p>
Proactive	<p>I have been working on the issue of illegal immigration for many years before it became a national concern.</p>
Chronic	<p>I’ve been “desensitized” and do not believe that the issue will get better.</p>
Situational	<p>The issue will not fade away any time soon, and I believe that I will always care about this issue.</p>

Table 3.

*Breaking Down Active and Aware Publics by Three Dimensions of Problem Solving*

		<b>Extent of Activeness in Problem Solving</b>			
		<b>Proactive</b> (Information Forwarding)		<b>Reactive</b> (Information Sharing)	
		<i>History of Problem Solving</i>		<i>History of Problem Solving</i>	
		<b>Situational</b> (Information Seeking)	<b>Chronic</b> (Information Processing)	<b>Situational</b> (Information Seeking)	<b>Dormant</b> (Information Processing)
<i>Openness to Approaches in Problem Solving</i>	<b>Closed</b> (Information Forefending)	Closed-Situational Activist Public (Collective Problem Solver)	Closed-Chronic Activist Public (Collective Problem Solver)	Closed-Situational Active Public (Individual Problem Solver)	Closed-Dormant Passive Public (Individual Problem Solver)
	<b>Open</b> (Information Permitting)	Open-Situational Activist Public (Collective Problem Solver)	Open-Chronic Activist Public (Collective Problem Solver)	Open-Situational Active Public (Individual Problem Solver)	Open-Dormant Passive Public (Individual Problem Solver)

Figure 1. Illustration of public evolving from three key problem-solving characteristics.

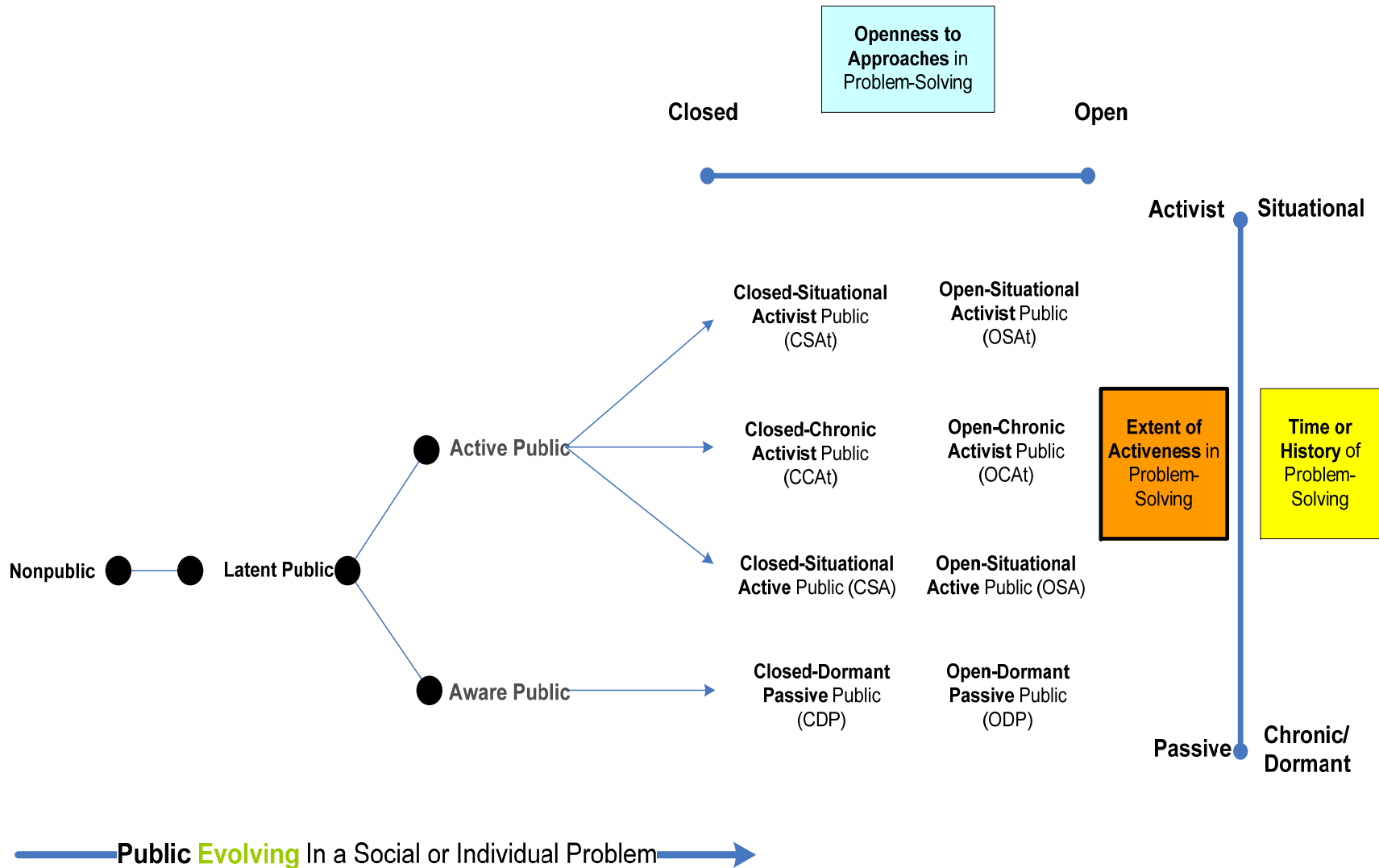
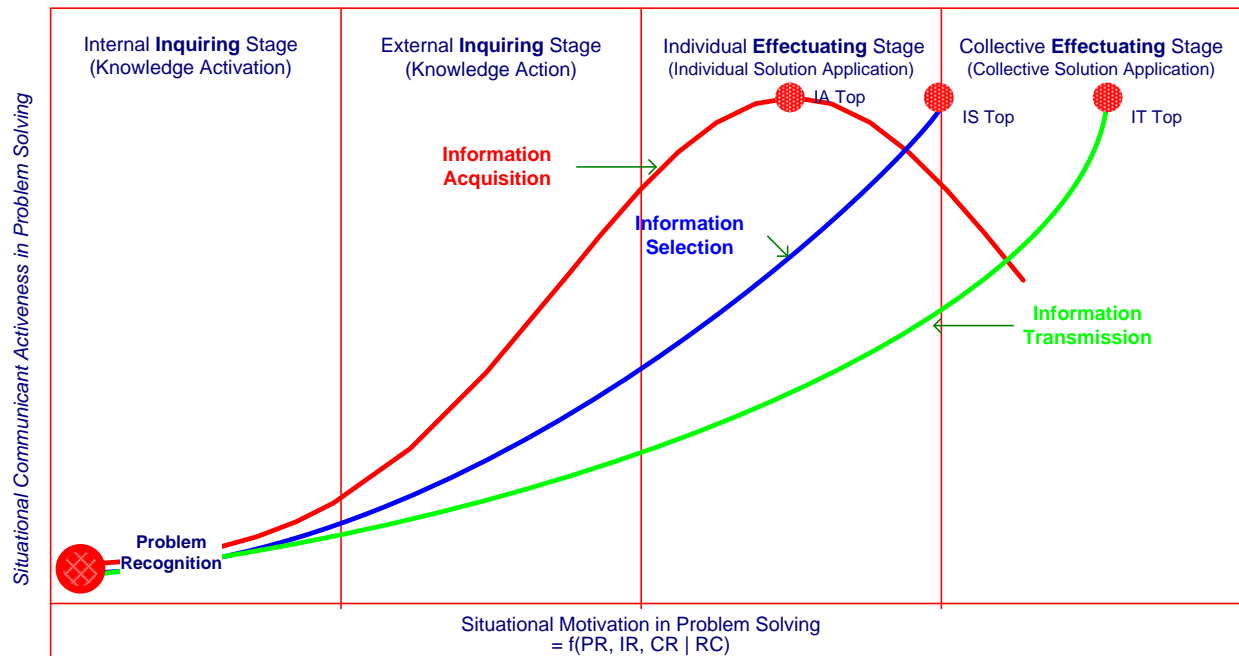


Figure 2: Sequence model of communicant activeness. (Reproduced from Kim, 2006)



<sup>i</sup> A public arises when they feel problematic about an experiential state that differs from their expected state. Such a difference can be caused by various things, such as some organizational decision or policy, or social/political turbulence. Any changes that violate their expectation will lead individuals to recognize a problem to be dealt with. A public may create an issue – “a contestable question of fact, value, or policy” (Heath & Nelson, 1986, p. 37). They make an issue “out of problems that have not been resolved” (J. E. Grunig & Repper, 1992, p. 146). Thus, like a living creature, issues can evolve and devolve as the creators’ problematic perception becomes aggravated and resolved in some ways.

<sup>ii</sup> Different from that used typically in the rhetorical tradition, information used here follows the conceptualization in social psychology and is defined as “certain data that are judged to be specific and relevant to a given problem situation.” “All data are candidates for information (or knowledge), but not all data become information unless they prove their applicability and relevance to specific problem solving” in one’s mind (Kim, 2006, pp. 25-26).

<sup>iii</sup> The issues were not chosen by the researchers to avoid starting from an organizational perspective, as criticized by the postmodern view of the publics (e.g., Leitch & Neilson, 2001). Rather, the publics in this study were people spontaneously concerned about a certain problem situation and communicating to address this situation, even though their activeness in communication varies. However, several organizations can be identified for each of these issues, so that practitioners from these organizations may also find useful practical guidance. Some possible organizations for the illegal immigration issue are: relevant government agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security, and businesses or industries who want to use cheap labor. Possible organizations for the New Orleans evacuees are: Houston police department, the city government, and so on.