Managing Mass, Computer-Generated, and Malattributed Comments

Committee on Rulemaking

Proposed Recommendation | June 17, 2021

Under the Administrative Procedure Act (APA), agencies must give members of the public notice of proposed rules and the opportunity to offer their “data, views, or arguments” for the agencies’ consideration.¹ For each proposed rule subject to these notice-and-comment procedures, agencies create and maintain an online public rulemaking docket in which they collect and publish the comments they receive as well as other publicly available information about the proposed rule.² Agencies must then process, read, and analyze the comments received. The APA requires agencies to consider the “relevant matter presented” in the comments received and to provide a “concise general statement of [the rule’s] basis and purpose.”³ When a rule is challenged on judicial review, courts have required agencies to demonstrate that they have considered and responded to any comment that raises a significant issue.⁴ The notice-and-

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¹ 5 U.S.C. § 553. This requirement is subject to a number of exceptions. See id.
⁴ Perez v. Mortg. Bankers Ass’n, 575 U.S. 92, 96 (2015) (“An agency must consider and respond to significant comments received during the period for public comment.”).
comment process is an important opportunity for the public to provide input on a proposed rule and the agency to “avoid errors and make a more informed decision” on its rulemaking.5

Technological advances have expanded the public’s access to agencies’ online rulemaking dockets and made it easier for the public to comment on proposed rules in ways that the Administrative Conference has encouraged.6 At the same time, in recent high-profile rulemakings, members of the public have submitted comments in new ways or at new scales that can challenge agencies’ current approaches to processing these comments or managing their online rulemaking dockets.

Agencies have confronted three types of comments that present distinctive management challenges: (1) mass comments, (2) computer-generated comments, and (3) a type of fraudulent comment called a “malattributed comment.” For the purposes of this Recommendation, mass comments are comments submitted in large volumes by members of the public, including the organized submission of identical or substantively identical comments. Computer-generated comments are comments whose substantive content has been generated by computer software rather than by humans.7 Malattributed comments are comments falsely attributed to people who did not submit them.

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7 The ability to automate the generation of comment content may also remove human interaction with the agency and facilitate the submission of large volumes of comments in cases in which software can repeatedly submit comments via Regulations.gov.
These three types of comments, which have been the subject of recent reports by both federal\(^8\) and state\(^9\) authorities, can raise challenges for agencies in processing, reading, and analyzing the comments they receive in some rulemakings. If not managed well, the processing of these comments can contribute to rulemaking delays or can raise other practical or legal concerns for agencies to consider.

In addressing the three types of comments in a single recommendation, the Conference does not mean to suggest that agencies should treat these comments in the same way. Rather, the Conference is addressing these comments in the same Recommendation because, despite their differences, they can present similar or even overlapping management concerns during the rulemaking process. In some cases, agencies may also confront all three types of comments in the same rulemaking.

The challenges presented by these three types of comments are by no means identical. With mass comments, agencies may encounter processing or cataloging challenges simply as a result of the volume as well as the identical or substantively identical content of some comments they receive. Without the requisite tools, agencies may also find it difficult or time-consuming to digest or analyze the overall content of all comments they receive.

In contrast with mass comments, computer-generated comments and malattributed comments may mislead an agency or raise issues under the APA and other statutes. One particular problem that agencies may encounter is distinguishing computer-generated comments from comments written by humans. Computer-generated comments may also raise potential


issues for agencies as a result of the APA’s provision for the submission of comments by
“interested persons.” Malattributed comments can harm people whose identities are stolen and
may create the possibility of prosecution under state or federal criminal law. Malattribution may
also deceive agencies or diminish the informational value of a comment, especially when the
commenter claims to have situational knowledge or the identity of the commenter is otherwise
relevant. The informational value that both of these types of comments provide to agencies is
likely to be limited or at least different from comments that have been neither computer-
generated nor malattributed.

This Recommendation is limited to how agencies can better manage the processing
challenges associated with mass, computer-generated, and malattributed comments. By
addressing these processing challenges, the Recommendation is not intended to imply that
widespread participation in the rulemaking process, including via mass comments, is
problematic. Indeed, the Conference has explicitly endorsed widespread public participation on
multiple occasions, and this Recommendation should help agencies cast a wide net when
seeking input from all individuals and groups affected by a rule. The Recommendation aims to
enhance agencies’ ability to process comments they receive in the most efficient way possible
and to ensure that the rulemaking process is transparent to prospective commenters and the
public more broadly.

11 This Recommendation does not address what role particular types of comments should play in agency decision
making or what consideration, if any, agencies should give to the number of comments in support of a particular position.
12 See Recommendation 2018-7, supra note 6; Admin. Conf. of the U.S., Recommendation 2017-3, Plain Language
   in Regulatory Drafting, 82 Fed. Reg. 61728 (Dec. 29, 2017); Admin. Conf. of the U.S., Recommendation 2017-2,
   Negotiated Rulemaking and Other Options for Public Engagement, 82 Fed. Reg. 31040 (July 5, 2017); Admin.
   Recommendation 2013-5, supra note 6; Recommendation 2011-8, supra note 6; Admin. Conf. of the U.S.,
   17, 2012); Recommendation 2011-2, supra note 6.
Agencies can advance the goals of public participation by being transparent about their comment policies or practices and by providing educational information about public involvement in the rulemaking process. Agencies’ ability to process comments can also be enhanced by digital technologies. As part of its e-Rulemaking Program, for example, the General Services Administration (GSA) has implemented technologies on the Regulations.gov platform that make it easier for agencies to verify that a commenter is a human being.

GSA’s Regulations.gov platform also includes an application programming interface (API)—a feature of a computer system that enables different systems to communicate with it—to facilitate mass comment submission. This technology platform allows partner agencies to better manage comments from identifiable entities that submit large volumes of comments. Some federal agencies also use de-duplication software to identify and group identical or substantively identical comments.

New software and technologies will likely emerge in the future, and agencies will need to keep apprised of innovations in managing public comments. Agencies might also consider adopting innovations that augment the notice-and-comment process with alternative methods for encouraging public participation, particularly to the extent that doing so ameliorates some of the management challenges described above. Because technology is rapidly changing, agencies

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13 For an example of educational information on rulemaking participation, see the “Commenter’s Checklist” that the e-Rulemaking Program currently displays in a pop-up window for every rulemaking webpage that offers the public the opportunity to comment. See Commenter’s Checklist, GEN. SERVS. ADMINISTRATION, https://www.Regulations.gov (last visited May 24, 2021) (navigate to any rulemaking with an open comment period; click comment button; then click “Commenter’s Checklist”). In addition, the text of this checklist appears on the project page for this Recommendation on the ACUS website.

14 This software is distinct from identity validation technologies that force commenters to prove their identities.


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rulemaking.

Not all agencies will encounter mass, computer-generated, or malattributed comments. But some agencies have confronted all three, sometimes in the same rulemaking. In offering the best practices that follow, the Conference recognizes that agency needs and resources will vary. For this reason, agencies should tailor the best practices in this Recommendation to their particular rulemaking programs and the types of comments they receive or expect to receive.

RECOMMENDATION

Managing Mass Comments

1. The e-Rulemaking Program that the General Services Administration (GSA) administers should provide a common de-duplication tool for agencies to use, although GSA should allow agencies to modify the de-duplication tool to fit their needs or to use another tool, as appropriate. When agencies find it helpful to use other software tools to perform de-duplication or extract information from a large number of comments, they should use reliable and appropriate software. Such software should provide agencies with enhanced search options to identify the unique content of comments, such as the technologies used by commercial legal databases like Westlaw or LexisNexis.

2. To enable easier public navigation through online rulemaking dockets, agencies may welcome any person or entity organizing mass comments to submit comments with multiple signatures rather than separate identical or substantively identical comments. Alternatively, agencies may wish to consider approaches to managing the display of comments online, such as by posting only a single representative example of identical comments in the online rulemaking docket or by breaking out and posting only non-identical content in the docket, taking into consideration the importance to members of the public to be able to verify that their comments were received and placed in the agency record. When agencies decide not to display all identical comments online, they should
be transparent about their actions and the existence of any process for verifying the 
receipt of individual comments or locating identical comments in the docket.

3. When an agency decides not to include all identical or substantively identical comments
in its online rulemaking docket to improve the navigability of the docket, it should ensure
that any reported total number of comments (such as in Regulations.gov or in the
preambles to final rules) accounts for the number of identical or substantively identical
comments. If resources permit, agencies should also consider providing an opportunity
for interested members of the public to obtain or access all comments received.

Managing Computer-Generated Comments

4. If an agency identifies a comment as computer-generated, it may disregard the comment
unless the agency identifies it as having informational value.

5. To the extent feasible, agencies should flag any comments they have identified as
computer-generated or display or store them separately from other comments. If an
agency flags a comment as computer-generated, or displays or stores it separately from
the online rulemaking docket, the agency should note its action in the docket. The agency
may also choose to notify the submitter directly if doing so does not violate any relevant
policy prohibiting direct contact with senders of “spam” or similar communications.

6. Agencies that operate their own commenting platforms should consider using technology
that verifies that a commenter is a human being, such as reCAPTCHA or another similar
identity proofing tool. The e-Rulemaking Program should continue to retain this
functionality.

7. If an agency relies on a comment the agency knows to be computer-generated, it should
include that comment in its online rulemaking docket. When publishing a final rule,
agencies should note any comments on which they rely that are computer-generated and
state whether they removed from the docket any comments they identified as computer-
Managing Malattributed Comments

8. Agencies should provide opportunities (including after the comment deadline) for individuals whose names or identifying information have been attached to comments they did not submit to identify such comments and to request that the comment be anonymized or removed from the online rulemaking docket.

9. If an agency flags a comment as malattributed or removes such a comment from the online rulemaking docket, it should note its action in the docket. Agencies may also choose to notify the purported submitter directly if doing so does not violate any agency policy.

10. If an agency relies on a comment it knows is malattributed, it should include an anonymized version of that comment in its online rulemaking docket. When publishing a final rule, agencies should note any comments on which they rely that are malattributed and state whether they removed from the docket any malattributed comments.

Enhancing Agency Transparency in the Comment Process

11. Agencies should inform the public about their policies concerning the posting and use of mass, computer-generated, and malattributed comments. These policies should take into account the meaningfulness of the public’s opportunity to participate in the rulemaking process and should balance goals such as user-friendliness, transparency, and informational completeness. In their policies, agencies may provide for exceptions in appropriate circumstances.

12. Agencies and relevant coordinating bodies (such as GSA’s e-Rulemaking Program, the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, and any other governmental bodies or informal working groups that address common rulemaking issues) should consider providing publicly available materials that explain to prospective commenters what types of responses they anticipate would be most useful, while also welcoming any other
comments that members of the public wish to submit and remaining open to learning from them. These materials could be presented in various formats—such as videos or FAQs—to reach different audiences. These materials may also include statements within the notice of proposed rulemaking for a given agency rule or on agencies’ websites to explain the purpose of the comment process and explain that agencies seriously consider any relevant public comment from a person or organization.

13. To encourage the most relevant submissions, agencies that have specific questions or are aware of specific information that may be useful should identify those questions or such information in their notices of proposed rulemaking.

**Additional Opportunities for Public Participation**

14. Agencies and relevant coordinating bodies should stay abreast of new technologies for facilitating informative public participation in rulemakings. These technologies may help agencies to process mass comments or identify and process computer-generated and malattributed comments. In addition, new technologies may offer new opportunities to engage the public, both as part of or as a supplement to the notice-and-comment process. Such opportunities may help ensure that agencies receive input from communities that may not otherwise have an opportunity to participate in the conventional comment process.

**Coordination and Training**

15. Agencies should work closely with relevant coordinating bodies to improve existing technologies and develop new technologies to address issues associated with mass, computer-generated, and malattributed comments. Agencies and relevant coordinating bodies should share best practices and relevant innovations for addressing challenges related to these comments.

16. Agencies should develop and offer opportunities for ongoing training and staff development to respond to the rapidly evolving nature of technologies related to mass.
computer-generated, and malattributed comments and to public participation more generally.

17. As authorized by 5 U.S.C. § 594(2), the Conference’s Office of the Chairman should provide for the “interchange among administrative agencies of information potentially useful in improving” agency comment processing systems. The subjects of interchange might include technological and procedural innovations, common management challenges, and legal concerns under the APA and other relevant statutes.