We Are All Actors
Act 2, Scene 2
"Who Are Those Guys?"

by
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INT. A GOVERNMENT BUILDING

RALPH and EDWARD, staffers at a government agency, sit at a
table examining a large stack of printouts.

                    RALPH
          How many did we get?

                    EDWARD
          350 individual comments and 61
          organizational comments.

                    RALPH
          Wow. The NPRM was only twelve
          pages. Is this typical?

                    EDWARD
          Actually it's a light load.

                    RALPH
          Good, I guess. I've never done
          this before. What's the game plan?

                    EDWARD
          Well, first we need to go through
          all the comments and identify
          duplicates. We only need to
          respond to each distinct issue
          once. Then we go through and check
          out authority.

                    RALPH
          What do you mean?

                    EDWARD
          Well, a lot of the comments make
          claims about facts. If the facts
          are wrong, or disputed, we need to
          say that in our response.

                    RALPH
          OK, but what do you mean by
          authority?

                    EDWARD
          Some organizations are better at
          research than others.

EDWARD picks a printout out of the pile.

                    EDWARD
          This one's from the National User's
          League.
                    (MORE)

              EDWARD (cont'd)
They're a big organization with a
well-funded, professional research
staff. It will be easy to check
their research sources and see what
the basis for their claims is.
Odds are they've supported their
arguments with published academic
studies from reputable researchers,
or they've done well-documented
field research themselves.

              RALPH

Oh, OK...

RALPH picks a printout out of the pile.

              RALPH
Who are the "Antarctica Liberation
Front"?

EDWARD smiles.

              EDWARD
Probably not deep experts on this
issue. I'm guessing we'll look a
little more closely into their
claims.

              RALPH
And what about individuals?

              EDWARD
First there are recognized experts.
You can usually tell who they are
because they'll cite their
affiliations and their relevant
experience in their comments.
Second, there are concerned members
of the public. Usually it's not
too hard to respond to their
comments because they don't make
claims that are hard to check.
They'll cite anecdotes from their
own experience, make more or less
logical arguments, and state
opinions. Their points will be
good or bad, but they won't usually
be complicated or obscure. Third,
there are interest-group form-
letter writers. You can spot these
because there tend to be lots of
similar letters. Fourth, there are
cranks. These are the really hard
ones.
              (MORE)

                    EDWARD (cont'd)
Some of them are clearly
disconnected from reality, but
others try very hard to seem to be
experts, and they can be pretty
good at it.

                    RALPH
How do we tell them apart?

                    EDWARD
Partly it's experience. We know
who most of the experts are on
these topics because they work with
us, go to the same conferences, or
correspond regularly. But it's not
foolproof. For really hard cases,
if we don't recognize someone and
we've got a claim we need to
respond to which seems out of the
mainstream, we might call up a few
academics and ask their opinion of
the author and the work.

                    RALPH
So there's no list of experts we
can go to to find out who's who?

                    EDWARD
No. It would be really hard to
keep something like that up to date
for all the issues we deal with.
Plus it would be really political -
everyone who wasn't on the list
would complain and there'd have to
be some kind of process for getting
on to the list, and so on.

                    RALPH
I can see that. But couldn't we
just send the questionable comments
out to other commentors or known
authorities for review?

                    EDWARD
That would be a nightmare too. It
would slow the process down, and
we'd still have to have a list of
experts who we could use as
reviewers.

                    RALPH
I guess so. Still, it seems like
we could get better information if
we could have comments on the
comments, and not just on our text.

                    EDWARD
I think that's probably true –
especially since sometimes we get
really important comments from
areas that are outside our direct
expertise (and outside our experts'
fields too).

                    RALPH
Like what?

                    EDWARD
Well, we sometimes get comments
about chemistry or statistics. We
use chemistry and statistics, and
we rely on experts to help us with
those topics, but it's not really
our core mission, and we could
easily make some kind of subtle
mistake and then not understand the
comments we get trying to correct
us.

                    RALPH
Oh, and we don't have the
experience to know whether the
commenter is a real expert on
statistics or chemistry, right?

                    EDWARD
Exactly. In cases like that we
usually have to send the text and
the comment out to an outside
expert for review before we can
respond.

                    RALPH
So how did we get started on that
subject? Oh, yeah, I remember – we
were talking about letting people
comment on the comments.

                    EDWARD
Right. If we could do that, then
we could sort of let the
statisticians talk among themselves
and come to a consensus. That
might save us a lot of work.

                    RALPH
The more I think about that the
more I wish we could do it. I bet
if we did it there would be a lot
of things we wouldn't need to
respond to at all.

                    EDWARD
Why do you think that?

                    RALPH
Well, if we could just let the
commenters discuss things, and
experts participated in the
discussion and the other
participants could see who they
were and what their credentials
were, there would probably be a lot
of times where everyone would
eventually agree that our original
text was just fine. And then we
could just point people at the
discussion instead of wasting time
arguing with people.

                    EDWARD
I never thought of that, but you're
probably right.

                    RALPH
In fact this whole process we use
is really inefficient, isn't it? I
mean...

                    EDWARD
It sure is inefficient.

                    RALPH
I mean, if the comments went up
online and everyone could see them
and reply to them, we wouldn't have
to do your step 1, because there
wouldn't be any duplicates - there
would just be discussion of the
issue after the first commenter
posted it.

                    EDWARD
          Yeah, that's a good point too.

                    RALPH
          And we probably wouldn't have to
          worry so much about authority,
          either, because people with a lot
          of authority would come to be
          recognized over time, and cranks
          would get recognized too and people
          wouldn't object strongly if their
          weirder ideas were rejected without
          a lot of discussion.

                    EDWARD
          That's true, though you'd have to
          be careful about things like trolls
          and flame wars.

                    RALPH
          Yeah, you'd need some rules and
          some kind of moderation to keep the
          conversation civil and on-topic.

                    EDWARD
          But I like your basic point. We do
          a lot of reasoning, fact-finding,
          and justification which could be
          done better by other people, and a
          lot of those other people are eager
          to do that work and share it with
          us. They just don't have a way to
          do it that lets us use their work
          without redoing a lot of it.

                    RALPH
          So basically we're doing a lot of
          useless work over and over again
          every time we publish a regulation.

                    EDWARD
          That's kind of harsh, but
          basically, yeah, we are.

                    RALPH
          Wouldn't it be smarter to invest
          some of that effort in building
          better tools so we could start
          bringing other people - especially
          experts - into the process?

                    EDWARD
It would be smarter, but it might
not be easier.

                    RALPH
OK, I know what you mean. I've
fought the bureaucracy before too,
and it's not my favorite thing to
do either. But I don't just want
to give up on the idea. Is anyone
else doing anything like this?