

Has the process of governing through the media undermined the resilience of government communications and challenged its public purposes? The case of the UK since 1997.

Ruth Garland, PhD researcher, London School of Economics and Political Science.

Abstract

The ideal of the well-informed citizen, facilitated by the watchdog role of the media, is seen as an important safeguard of democracy, but a quickening cycle of blame and suspicion of political spin undermine trust in what governments say. Taking central government as a key democratic institution, I examine some of the mechanisms whereby the process of governing through the media has undermined its resilience and challenged its public purposes. While civil servants continue to adhere to traditions of impartiality and ministerial responsibility, the world has changed around them. More media outlets compete for stories, while politicians feel compelled, via the media, to instantly deploy rhetoric in order to survive and prevail. Using documentary evidence and in-depth interviews with UK government press officers and others, I examine the cultural and institutional changes that have taken place since the rise of 24/7 media in the 1980s. What is the impact on the ethos, delivery and propriety of government communications of increasing job insecurity, the demand for more responsiveness on the part of government communications, and the growth in the media management role of politically-appointed special advisers?

Introduction

In a world of round-the clock news and generalized transparency (...) today's politicians may appear to be affable communicators and skilled performers but (...) their accomplished performances may in fact conceal the revival of old and terrifying perversions of democratic rule". (Rosanvallon, 2011, p. 231): 98, 177, 202.

Government press officers represent a large cadre of communication power which is potentially at the disposal of the government of the day (Davis, 2002; Moloney, 2006). Working closely with ministers, they have a unique insight into many changes, from the television age of the 1960s, 24/7 media in the late 1980s, and the explosion of digital communications from the mid-1990s onwards. In this paper I examine evidence from in-depth interviews with government press officers, specialist journalists and a small number of special advisers, to argue that media and political transformations since the 1980s have led

to an intensification of the relationship between political and media elites, presenting serious challenges for the democratic purposes of government communications which are essential to good government and the good life.

The expansion and speeding up of global communication has coincided with three important social and cultural changes: a higher premium placed on persuasive forms of communication among both journalists and politicians as they battle for attention in a declining market (Kunelius & Reunanen, 2012; Landerer, 2013); the increasing use by political parties and politicians of strategic communications as a defence against “a media-driven ‘name, blame and shame’ environment”(Lindquist & Rasmussen, 2012); and the steady growth in the scale, scope and status of PR as a discipline and a professional practice (Davis, 2013; Miller, 2008). PR, in government as elsewhere, has become “a form of work that is increasingly central to economic and cultural life due to the power and influence it commands” (Edwards, 2011, p. 5).

At the same time, responsiveness to the will of ministers within state bureaucracies in liberal democracies is thought to have increased, challenging the democratic settlement by which the public bureaucracy had been a ‘countervailing institution’, capable of checking and moderating the powers of majority rule, while parliament acted as “an instrument that measures and registers the relative forces of clashing social interests” (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2010; Lee, 2011, p. 198; Manin, 1997, p. 231; Meer, 2011; E. Page, 2007). In the UK, the most visible manifestation of political responsiveness has been the rise in the number of special advisers (temporary civil servants appointed by and solely responsible to, ministers), who increasingly perform media relations tasks, leading some to claim that Whitehall now has a “dual government communication system” (Sanders, Crespo, & Holtz-Bacha, 2011). In a sister paper also presented at this conference, I argue that rather than a *dual* system, UK government communications is becoming more closely *integrated* with the news management role of special advisers, who take a strategic lead through the news grid and the briefing of journalists (Garland, 2016).

The ideal of the informed citizen is linked to the idea of *public responsiveness*, a very different and sometimes opposing concept to that of *political responsiveness*. A responsive government is one which seeks to enlighten all citizens, ideally served by an independent and pluralistic media, and resulting in an informed public that has the capacity to hold its representatives to account (Buhlmann & Kriesi, 2013). The political communication

scholars, Blumler and Coleman, proposed the following three founding principles of democratic communication (Blumler & Coleman, 2015):

1. everyone is equally entitled to be well informed and taken into account when decisions are made
2. holders of significant power must account for the way they exercise it and ensure that "a public interest is being served"
3. effective channels of exchange and dialogue between citizens and decision makers are required.

In this paper I examine the resilience of the government's information service in the face of the dual pressures of mediatization and politicisation, asking to what extent the political and media transformations which began in the 1980s affected the capacity of the service, and those working within it, to express, plan and deliver in relation to their public purposes and objectives. Mediatization is defined as: "a historical, ongoing, long-term (meta-)process in which more and more media emerge and are institutionalized", "so that media in the long run increasingly become relevant for the social construction of everyday life, society and culture as a whole" (Krotz, 2009; Lundby, 2009). In relation to public bureaucracies, mediatization is more specifically the "taken for granted values and norms for how to manage, organize and conduct media activities" and how it is "maintained, challenged and reconstructed within the realm of specific organizational settings", p2 (Pallas & Fredriksson, 2014). Politicization is applied loosely here to refer to changes over time in the balance between the independence and responsiveness of administrative agents in relation to political principals, which challenge bureaucratic restraint and increase the scope for political action (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2010).

Resilience of government communications

On the face of it, today's Government Communications Service (GCS) looks very like the structure that emerged under the stewardship of the Deputy Prime Minister, Herbert Morrison, after 1945. These elements included a centralised communications agency, the Central Office of Information (COI) to deliver and coordinate effective propaganda; the formation of a permanent cadre of in-house communications specialists distinct from the rest of the civil service but with a dual administrative and political leadership; and the differentiation between central and departmental control of information through the Number 10 press operation and the largely independent departmental press offices (Grant, 1999).

In his thorough archival analysis of the 1945-51 Labour government's approach to communication, Moore identified a further continuity; when the new government information structure was approved by Parliament on 7 March 1946, it did not build in either explicit public communications purposes or public accountability, beyond the general obligation to provide "the material on which the public could reach an informed judgment on current affairs" (National Archives: Cabinet Papers CAB 78/37: 1945).

There were no guidelines set up for how the State should and should not communicate (...) there was no way to ensure the government was giving the news media sufficient or equal access, and no way to ensure any consistent representation of information. (Moore, 2006, p. 216).

The most visible and surprisingly unremarked change in 65 years, was the sudden closure of the COI in 2011 and the transfer of its functions to the Cabinet Office. What had been a body subject to some degree of professional autonomy, albeit subject to ministerial oversight, shrank almost to the point of disappearance as it became one of many communications functions falling under the strategic management of the Minister for the Cabinet Office, who chairs the new priority-setting committee, the Communications Delivery Board¹. In her critique of structural changes in government communications since 2010, Anne Gregory² describes the new Board as having "strong political representation", which suggests that "there is clearly the potential for political pressure on civil servant communicators akin to and possibly even stronger than that exerted by special advisers" (Gregory, 2012, p. 374). She predicts that the government communications service will become more focused on helping to drive the government's "political agenda forward by heavily directed communication activity". For the political communications theorist, John Corner, the embedding of the 'permanent campaign' within government makes deception more likely and threatens public trust:

One dimension of the problem of deception in many countries has been the extension of this competitive, interparty framework for discourse to a much wider range of government-public

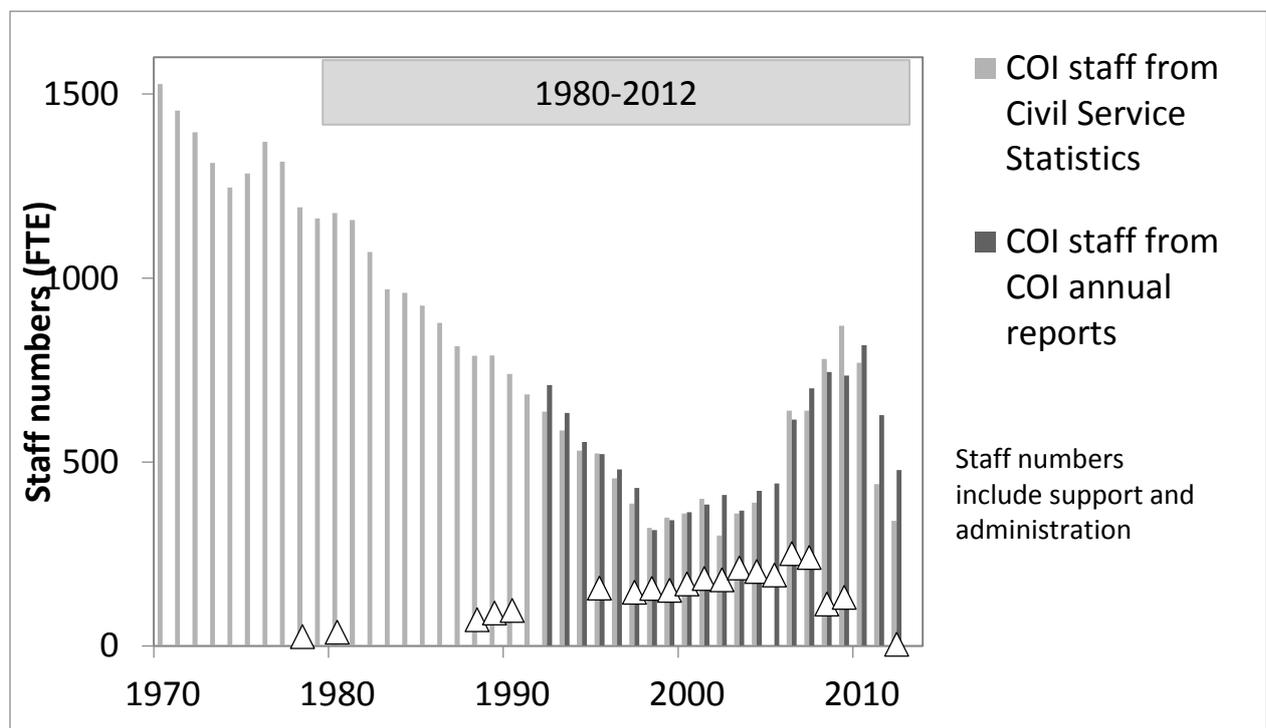
¹ Renamed the Government Communications Service (GCS) Board. For a further explanation of the new governance structure for government communications after 2011, see <https://communication.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/government-comms-plan/how-we-work/governance-and-leadership/>

² Anne Gregory, Professor of Corporate Communications, Strategy, Marketing and Economics at the University of Huddersfield, has worked on and off as an adviser to government communications since the mid-1990s.

communications outside of electoral periods and its increasing naturalization across this range (Corner, 2010, p. 59).

In their detailed analysis of changes in the management and resourcing of Whitehall since the 1980s, Hood and Dixon argue that an increase of 30% in “the number of full time salaried politicians in the UK (...) between 1979 and 2010” (p25), coinciding with a fall of one third in the total number of civil servants “certainly changed the level of political surveillance, pressure and intervention to which the executive machinery of government and public services was subject”. Specifically in relation to government communications, they demonstrate that, even before the closure of the COI, resources were steadily moving away from campaigning and paid-for publicity, towards “a pattern of ‘spinners’ clustered in central agencies and around ministers in departments”(p174) (Hood, 2015). After 2010, the dramatic cuts in resources devoted to paid-for publicity which helped to justify the closure of the COI, intensified this process, further entrenching the dependence of governments on cheaper, but more heavily-mediated forms of communication (see figure 3.1 below).

Figure 3.1 Central Office of Information staff (1980-2012)



Taken from Figure 8.8. Central Office of Information Staff Numbers 1970-2013. Sources: Civil Service Statistics, IPO Directories and COI Annual Reports. (Hood, 2015), p174.

Using evidence from in-depth interviews with government communicators, specialist journalists, and special advisers, I examine the resilience of government communications in the light of (a) the impact of new governments in 1997 and 2010; (b) the isolation of government press officers as specialists within the civil service; and (c) the public purposes of government communications.

The impact of new governments in 1997 and 2010

Turnover of staff, or 'churn' within the government information service increased significantly after both the 1997 and 2010 elections. During the first year of the Blair Government, 25 heads and deputy heads of information were replaced – 50% of the total. By August 1999, all but two Heads of Information had been replaced in what was described by one commentator as “a completely unprecedented turnover”(Osborne, 1999). By 2002, none of the Heads was still in post (Franklin, 2004). In its report of July 29th the Public Administration Committee described the level of turnover in government communications as “unusual”(para 33), and stated that “we have no doubt that there are serious problems of morale”(para 13) within government communications, noting that some departures were related to a lack of “personal chemistry with their Minister” (paragraph 33) (Public Administration Select Committee, 1998). The impact of the incoming 2010 Coalition Government has been less clear. There is now less interest among political commentators, and academics, in the issue of “churn” within what has been re-named, the Government Communication Service (GCS), suggesting, perhaps, that this process is no longer seen as surprising. Major changes in the size and structure of the service is a compounding factor to consider. Many posts in the GCS have been lost as a result of austerity cuts: within two years of the election, there have been budget cuts of 55% and headcount reductions of 44% since 2010/11 (*Civil Service Reform Plan Progress Report, 2014*), and the service has been significantly restructured. My own analysis of churn since 2010 within the small group of Directors of Government Communications in ministerial departments suggests that, of the 20 Directors in post in 2010, just two remained in post by March 2014.

It appears that a significant level of churn amounting to an almost complete clear-out following both the 1997 and 2010 elections took place at senior levels of the Government Communications Service. This suggests at least some degree of party politicisation, but this may not be the full story. In both 1997 and 2010, some of the turnover could be due to a

“weeding out” of less effective operators, job mobility due to external promotion, sideways moves and internal promotion, or routine job rotation within the civil service.

The impact of a change of government on the job security of civil servants working within Westminster style systems has been identified by public administration scholars as a shift in the balance of power towards politicians and away from bureaucrats over the past 30 years (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2010; Meer, 2011; J. Page, Pearson, Jurgeit, & Kidson, 2012). Since the immediate post-war period, the UK civil service, like others in established European democracies, is thought to have experienced a significant decline in its power and prestige (E. Page, 2007; E. C. Page, 2010). The increasing political control over public bureaucracies, which occurred in part at least to manage risks associated with a more volatile and unforgiving political and media environment, has especially been felt by those performing “communications functions” (Eichbaum & Shaw 2010: p205).

1997

A senior civil servant who left Number 10 a year after the arrival of New Labour, describes the change as “quite a climacteric really, a watershed”. The changes were profound, he says, because: firstly, “departmental ministers and their special advisers were very much less satisfied with the operations of their departmental press offices”; secondly, “it was politicized in the sense that special advisers (...) were very much more active in dealing with press relations than their predecessors had been”; and thirdly, “they had a very sophisticated media operation. Very rapid response geared to being 24/7” (C02).

Another senior communications executive, who moved from Number 10 to a Director of Communication position in a department after the 1997 election, observed the departures of his former colleagues as an example of “the political sensitivity of the comms function”, given that, for ministers “the Permanent Secretary, the Personal Private Secretary and the Comms director are the three people that the minister has most to do with personally and directly (C07). To illustrate the brutality of the immediate post-1997 environment, Steve Reardon, who lost his job as Director of Information at the Department of Social Security, was referred to as ‘dead meat’ by the special adviser to Harriet Harman, a comment which found its way into the Daily Mirror and Daily Mail (Public Administration Select Committee, 1998).

The atmosphere of rivalry, suspicion and job losses caused widespread disquiet within the informal government communications network which lasted for years and is still recalled

today. One survivor from the Thatcher era who was one of the few to stay on in a senior direct communications role well into the Blair premiership, says that although she didn't feel threatened herself because she wasn't on the media management side, "I knew every one of the Heads of Information that lost their jobs, so it's not pleasant" (C10). A departmental press officer (1999-2004) refers sorrowfully to the departure of her own head of news:

Slowly they were shuffled out and certainly, in my department, there was a head of news that had been there for quite a while, a lovely woman, but somehow she was shuffled out against her will and they brought in a journalist who'd worked for a left wing newspaper to replace her (C05).

The six journalists interviewed for this study were also well aware of the vulnerability of government press officers after 1997, but placed far more emphasis than civil servants on the role of special advisers in news management. A former specialist correspondent for the Times, Independent and FT (1981-2012) described the change as "a takeover by special advisers (that) happened in most departments" (J19). Another specialist journalist on broadsheet newspapers (1991-date) sensed that resistance would have been futile, since: "if you weren't quite New Labour enough then you probably didn't last very long" (J18). A BBC news correspondent for 27 years described the departure of most Directors of Information as "a complete clear-out" (J22).

The significance of the 1997 "cull" was not just that it replaced almost the entire leadership of the service, but that it brought about a sudden and permanent change in the way government news was managed. One long-serving broadsheet policy journalist (1988-date) remembers the change taking place "almost immediately (...) suddenly you had this new tier of semi-political operators working with chosen journalists, using the lobby, not specialists, to place stories, to influence the way a running story was being reported"(J21).

2010

One highly experienced departmental Director of Communication (1991-2010), who was in post during the elections of 1997 and 2010, identified two similarities applying to both changes of government: first, a "year zero approach to understanding where they are coming from"; secondly, the fact that "they will be suspicious of us because they beat us and we worked for the other people"; and thirdly, negative briefing about civil servants both in person and through the media. Overall, though, he felt that, in 2010, the level of hostility was much higher":

People were completely taken aback by the level of hostility to public servants in general (...) The clear-out has been at least as big, and I think a bit bigger, than it was in 1997. The problem was austerity so the first thing they wanted to do was produce the austerity package and that included communications being affected, so you were dealing with lots of fearful and weeping colleagues (C11).

The 1997 the attitude was 'you're all a bit rubbish and you're going to have to improve and modernise quickly because we know how to do things', not entirely welcome but not completely unrealistic. In 2010, it's 'civil servants are useless otherwise you'd have a proper job, and the public sector has almost bankrupted the country and now it's payback time (C11).

As in 1997, he believes that some senior vacancies were filled by those who were more politically and personally sympathetic to ministers, for example, the appointment of James Frayne, from the Taxpayers Alliance, as Director of Communication at the Department for Education (2011-12). He later joined the right-leaning think tank, Policy Exchange.

A Deputy Director of Communication and Head of News (2001-2014), felt that the communications team suffered more from cuts than other parts of her department, describing the scene after the 2010 election as "a bloodbath":

The general impression given by ministers was 'we don't like you; we don't trust you' (...) 'we don't think you're very good at your job and there's too many of you' (C14).

A Director of Communication (2001-2014) who developed good working relationships with her Secretary of State and special advisers thinks that the recurring theme of civil servants as 'blockers' is fundamentally mistaken:

...the sense that the civil service is this unwieldy bureaucracy, they're blockers, they're not there to enable, to facilitate, to provide fresh thinking, they're there to just say no and are a barrier to good government and to actually getting things done, because ministers are there to get things done. And I just really deeply disagree with that because I think there needs to be an appropriate check to what ministers want to do (C16).

A press officer from another department (2010-2013) noticed that more traditional civil servants, who were very 'straight bat', suffered most under the 2010 government. "They were disliked by ministers and special advisers and would be cut out of the loop on occasions to try and circumvent them" (C13).

Government press officers – isolated within the civil service

In line with the growth in promotional culture, and mediatised politics, one would expect the status, reputation and resources of the government PR function and its operatives to have increased markedly from the 1980s onwards (Davis, 2013; Wernick, 1991). In fact, until 1997, it was a struggle to resource the service adequately, so that, by 1997, it was left to incoming politicians rather than the civil service leadership to champion a better resourced, more proactive and more coordinated approach to communication. Government communicators were caught between the sensitivities and sometimes unrealistic demands of ministers for more positive media coverage, and suspicion of PR on the part of their mainstream civil service colleagues.

Most government communicators interviewed for this study describe close, if sometimes fraught, and even frenzied, working relationships with ministerial teams, even as junior press officers. Yet many also reveal a steady narrative of disdain from fellow civil servants, who consider them to be 'ministers narks', or 'toys for the ministers', as being 'below the salt' and to be 'treated with a certain amount of contempt'. Their role is seen by some as 'a soft option', and yet there is envy at their privileged access to ministers. Government PR was "inherently dishonest (...) something that you use to sell dog food", while those who practiced it were "not proper civil servants", to be "looked down on", "not exactly as a necessary evil but certainly not to be taken quite as seriously".

The isolated position of the government information service after the departure in 1990 of one of its most successful champions, Bernard Ingham, and before the arrival of New Labour in 1997, led to stagnation and a failure to recognise and adapt to changes in the media. John Major has admitted that his suspicion of 'political spin' prevented him from prioritising government media relations sufficiently (Bale & Sanders, 2001; Hogg, 1995; Leveson, 2012). A senior communicator at Number 10 at the time refers to this as 'hair shirtism'; a reluctance to spend money on services for journalists. He remembers, for example, the struggle to provide toilets for female lobby members, like Elinor Goodman (Channel 4 1988-2005), and to update provision for broadcasters so they didn't have to trail cables through windows at Number 10.

The media was growing like topsy in front of us. We were running like fury to try and keep up (...) It was a tiny office. It was absolutely ridiculous when you think about it (C07).

Even after the massive increase in resourcing for government communications after 1997, the sense of 'them and us' within the civil service extended to the most senior levels and persisted when, as a result of the recommendations of the Phillis Review, the head of service was elevated to Permanent Secretary level. An experienced Director of Communications (1994-2005) who spent the early part of her career at Number 10, recalls how the first incumbent, Howell James, was viewed by fellow Permanent Secretaries:

He was in name the Permanent Secretary but I think they made it pretty clear that he wasn't a proper Permanent Secretary. It's a ludicrous thing but that's the way the civil service operates. Every other Permanent Secretary becomes de facto knight, dame or whatever, and Howell was appointed CBE when he left. You'd have to be in the know to know that that's really cutting but that is how they do it (CO3).

This apparently dismissive attitude on the part of Permanent Secretaries suggests that little had changed in the 20 years since Peter Hennessy of the Times wrote of them that "on one issue they stand united: the inadequacy of the Government Information Service" (Hennessy, 1980). The reputation of the GIS was so bad, he claimed, that the government's "specialist press officers came within sight of disbandment as long ago as the late 1940s" and "as some of its members believe, its days may be numbered". The article admitted, however, that such a change would meet "the resistance of ministers," a point which links back to the politically-inspired origins of the service back in 1945.

Several respondents in this study felt that press officers were more attuned to the needs of ministers and journalists than other civil servants. Illustrating this point, Nadine Smith, a former Chief Press Officer at the Cabinet Office with experience as a departmental press secretary (1998-2009) explained how, in meetings, she would cause discomfort among policy civil servants by making common cause with her minister, in effect becoming a 'troubleshooter' on her behalf:

I used to watch the civil servants in a way that I didn't think that I was one of them (...) I would watch them worming their way out of things and I was astonished by how they wouldn't give the information that I knew was out there or they'd try and put a gloss on it (...) I was shocked and I thought 'my god, these ministers have got nowhere to turn'. I did try and make it my job to get her the information and the right people round the table for her to talk about press linkages and media handling lines and defensive lines and her plans for her visits that week, and who's she seeing and why she's seeing them and not somebody else, and youyou feel like you're their troubleshooter.CO9

This Head of News (until 2014) noticed resentment from policy officials because the communications team was often asked to sign off proposals before they went to the minister for final clearance, or because the claims of policy officials were challenged in meetings with ministers:

I'd be in the same room as them and they're telling you about how great the policy is and you are going 'hang on a second, that doesn't make any sense', and you get evil eyes from everyone, and the Secretary of State would be 'yeah, she's right. What's the answer?' Lots of times I'd be told to shut up. C14

Policy officials were also resentful because they felt that "the complexity of their area was never properly represented", and that "press offices (...) would be so close to ministers and sometimes give advice without policy people being there because of the nature of the fast moving working towards the next days' headlines", according to a rare survivor of the 1997 'cull', who had experienced life under four governments. A long-serving Director of Communications (1991-2011) agreed that communications staff were often more aware of the perceptions of the public and the concerns of ministers because as a whole, most civil servants:

tend to have quite a narrow social demographic, so there were lots of presumptions about the wider public (...) and quite often therefore it was your job to be Cassandra, and say to them 'actually our problem is not that people understand and are doing nothing, the problem is people don't care because they're trying to get the kids to school, pay their mortgages, keep their jobs' (C10).

In response to the pressures of media transformation from the 1980s onwards, and the response to it on the part of politicians, the civil service as a whole failed to prioritise the resourcing and management of government communications, or to respond to ministers' increasing desire to manage the risks and possibilities of what they saw as an increasingly influential power resource. This widened the gulf between communications specialists and the rest of the civil service. Without a strong and well-connected professional leadership, this left the field relatively open to a determined group of politicians to devote their considerable political capital to instigating radical change – a modernisation of the information service *which suited them*. This is precisely what happened after 1997, as we saw in the previous section.

This sense of the government communicator as an 'outsider' was picked up by the various reviews and enquiries that took place between 1997 and 2004. The 1997 Mountfield Report noted "something approaching disdain for media and communications matters", while the 2004 Phillis Report was critical of a 'them and us' mentality within the civil service:

Compared with other specialist professional groups in the Civil Service such as lawyers, statisticians and economists, those working within the GICS often feel like the poor relations with little recognition given to the skills, competencies and professional standards they uphold.

We found a culture in which communication is not seen as a core function of the mainstream Civil Service. In theory, communications staff are a part of the Civil Service like any other. But we too often found a 'them and us' attitude between policy civil servants and communications staff.

As a whole, the Civil Service has not grasped the potential of modern communications as a service provided for citizens (...).

The public purposes of government communications

From its inception, there was no explicit statement of the purposes and remit of the government's official information function, beyond the commitment to inform the public and to operate as good civil servants. In the absence of this, some government and parliamentary reviews attempted to articulate this, but only in the briefest of terms. For example, while examining the controversy over the Jo Moore affair, the Public Administration Committee stated that government communicators "have a vital role in serving the public interest" (2002, p3). In 2008, the House of Lords Communication Committee stated that "one of the most important tasks of government is to provide clear, truthful and factual information to citizens" (House of Lords, 2008).

The fullest exposition of the ethics and public purposes of government communications came with the Independent Review of Government Communications (Phillis Review, 2004), a key document which proposed seven founding principles: openness, not secrecy; more direct, unmediated communications to the public; genuine engagement with the public; positive presentation of government policies and achievements, not misleading spin; the use of all relevant channels of communication, not excessive emphasis on national press and

broadcasters; coordinated communication of issues that cut across departments; and political neutrality, rather than a blurring of government and party communications.

These straightforward principles were widely accepted at the time, and formed the basis of the House of Lords review in 2009. They are informed by public values and represent minimum standards for open and democratic communication in the public interest which acknowledge the need to rebuild public trust by offsetting some of the communication biases caused by excessive concern on the part of ministers and their aides with national media coverage. It is therefore puzzling that the government communications plans issued after 2012 make no reference to the Review or the founding principles. In fact, there is now no official way to access the Review itself. It appears to be a victim of what Hood and Dixon refer to as “data breaks”. They point out that since the launch of the website www.gov.uk, many online documents such as past annual reports, have disappeared and “could only be found with difficulty if at all” (Hood, 2015, p. 195). A ‘year zero’ approach to government communications, as referred to by one of the respondents earlier in this paper, together with a consistent failure to articulate in any detail the remit of government communications, have provided successive governments with the opportunity to build a communications function which is politically rather than publicly responsive.

Conclusion

The structure of government communications has shown remarkable resilience in the face of not only the challenge of media transformation, but the political imperatives arising from it, which led to the ‘cull’ of 1997. The balance of power between the centre and the departments remains and the service operates as part of a specialist hierarchy, retaining a civil service head of profession, albeit now based at the Cabinet Office as opposed to the COI. Directors of Communication in the departments run professional teams that work closely with ministers and special advisers to contribute towards a coherent government narrative. In the sense that the service has shown elasticity in response to change, and the toughness to resist challenges, it can be said to be structurally resilient. A major exception is the decision to close the COI and to disperse its functions into the Cabinet Office that took place suddenly in 2011, on the advice of the outgoing Permanent Secretary, Government Communications, but without external consultation, and with little apparent criticism, either

from the media, civil servants, the public or parliamentarians (Horton & Gay, 2011)³. The closure represents an intensification of a process which had already been taking place over time: the tendency for government presentation to move “from a common service agency”, to a “pattern of ‘spinners’ clustered in central agencies and around ministers in departments”(Hood, 2015, p. 174). In 1945, politicians expressed the need for “a body of technically expert staff which knew how to conduct publicity without incurring the charge of propaganda”(National Archives: Cabinet Papers CAB 78/37, dated 18/9/1945). Is it still possible to claim that, as in 1945, the body of communications professionals currently known as the Government Communications Service, has a degree of autonomy under a civil service director?

The structure of the service may be resilient, but what about its culture and everyday practices? The evidence presented in this paper suggests that significant changes have taken place since the 1980s, accelerating after 1997, which have called into question the capacity of government communications to deliver an impartial, trusted and credible public information service. Above all, the obvious vulnerability of the head of profession and the directors of communication in response to electoral change threatens the autonomy of the leadership and hence of the members of the network itself, but the vulnerability was present before 1997. The subtle rules of engagement and proprieties that had ensured that the service functioned without being seen to be unduly propagandist before 1997 were placed under huge threat after 1997, when the need to feed the increasingly hungry media beast combined forces with the demand from New Labour to use any means possible to turn their media deficit into an electoral asset (Campbell & Stott, 2007; Rhodes, 2011). The mainstream civil service could do little to resist the attack on a part of the service that it undervalued, distrusted and barely understood.

The one effort to shore up the service by introducing explicit public values, the Phillis Report, has been put into reverse and the report abandoned in a ‘year zero’ approach to history which solely serves the needs of the government of the day. Without widely-understood and shared public values, there can be no public accountability, because to what ends can the public, parliament and the media hold the service accountable? The service was founded in 1945 at the behest of politicians and with no built-in public accountability

³ It is puzzling that a House of Commons Standard Note (SN/PC/06050) *Abolition of the COI* (2011), which is mildly critical of some of the processes (or possibly the lack of them) behind the closure, has been removed from circulation and is no longer available – with no reason given.

mechanism. Changes that have taken place since then such as the abolition of the COI, the role of special advisers in managing the news media, and the *de facto* introduction of politicized leadership within government communications have served to strengthen the 'political grip' over government communications (Gregory, 2012).

And yet, the commitment to political neutrality is regularly re-stated by politicians and in propriety guidance, and is depicted as a vital ingredient in maintaining impartiality and hence public trust. Policing the line between party political propaganda and public information is a bureaucratic function which involves resistance to media and political pressures and is at odds with politicians' desperation for the right kind of attention. To resist these demands, bureaucrats must draw on "the institutionalized capability for acting appropriately". Far from being negative and constraining, "some of the major capabilities of modern institutions come from their effectiveness in substituting rule-bound behavior for individually autonomous behavior"(March & Olsen, 2009, p. 10). The Phillis Report, was the first attempt to make explicit a set of generally accepted and applicable rules by which a genuinely citizen-focused government communications service could be evaluated.

Impartiality is more than a value; it is a form of practice. According to the Phillis Report, there are three minimum requirements if impartiality is to be realised:

1. "Directors of Communication must feel able to stand back and object if Ministers' personal agendas ever lead them to press for communications that would be politically biased or misleading."
2. "We would not expect to see senior communications staff changing simply as a consequence of a ministerial change".
3. "The interests of the general public should be paramount in any programme to modernise government communications".

The evidence presented here suggests that the capacity of government communicators to behave appropriately in relation to their own codes of propriety have been significantly depleted in a process which accelerated after 1997 and is continuing. In this sense, despite appearances, there are serious concerns about the *resilience* of government communications, and its ability to deliver a service which is responsive to the public.

References

- Bale, T., & Sanders, K. (2001). Playing by the Book: Success and Failure in John Major's Approach to Prime Ministerial Media Management. *Contemporary British History*, 15(4), 93-110.
- Blumler, J. G., & Coleman, S. (2015). Democracy and the Media— Revisited. *Javnost - The Public*, 22(2), 111-128.
- Buhlmann, M., & Kriesi, H. (2013). Models for Democracy. In H. e. a. Kriesi (Ed.), *Democracy in the Age of Globalization and Mediatization*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Campbell, A., & Stott, R. (2007). *The Blair years : extracts from the Alastair Campbell diaries*. London: London : Hutchinson.
- Civil Service Reform Plan Progress Report*. (2014). London: Civil Service.
- Corner, J. (2010). Promotion as Institutionalised Deception: Some Coordinates of Political Publicity. In M. Aronczyk & D. Powers (Eds.), *Blowing Up the Brand: Critical Perspectives on Promotional Culture*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Davis, A. (2002). *Public relations democracy: public relations, politics, and the mass media in Britain*. New York: Manchester University Press.
- Davis, A. (2013). *Promotional cultures : the rise and spread of advertising, public relations, marketing and branding*: Cambridge, UK : Polity.
- Edwards, L. (2011). Public relations and society: a Bourdieuvian perspective. In L. Edwards & C. E. M. Hodges (Eds.), *Public relations, society and culture: theoretical and empirical explorations*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Eichbaum, C., & Shaw, R. (2010). *Partisan appointees and public servants : an international analysis of the role of the political adviser*. Cheltenham ; Northampton, MA: Cheltenham ; Northampton, MA : Edward Elgar.
- Franklin, B. (2004). *Packaging politics: political communications in Britian's media democracy*. London: Arnold.
- Garland, R. (2016). *Government special advisers as media players: to what extent to they contribute to the ideal of good government and the informed citizen?* Paper presented at the PSA 66th Annual International Conference: Politics and the Good Life, Brighton.
- Grant, M. (1999). Towards a Central Office of Information: Continuity and Change in British Government Information Policy, 1939-51. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 34(1), 49-67.
- Gregory, A. (2012). UK Government communications: Full circle in the 21st century? *Public Relations Review*, 38(3), 367-375.
- Hennessy, P. (1980, Tuesday, September 30, 1980). Government information service finds staunch defender. *The Times*.
- Hogg, S. (1995). *Too close to call : power and politics - John Major in No. 10*. London: London : Little, Brown and Company.
- Hood, C. (2015). *A government that worked better and cost less? : evaluating three decades of reform and change in UK central government*: Oxford : Oxford University Press.
- Horton, L., & Gay, O. (2011). *Abolition of the COI*. Retrieved from London:
- Krotz, F. (2009). Mediatization: a concept with which to grasp media and societal change.
- Kunelius, R., & Reunanen, E. (2012). The Medium of the Media: journalism, politics and the theory of 'mediatisation'. *JAVNOST-THE PUBLIC*, 19(4), 5-24.
- Landerer, N. (2013). Rethinking the Logics: A Conceptual Framework for the Mediatization of Politics. *Communication Theory*, 23(3), 239-258.
- Lee, M. (2011). *Congress vs. the bureaucracy : muzzling agency public relations*. Norman: Norman : University of Oklahoma Press.

- Leveson, B. (2012). *An Inquiry into the Culture, Practices and Ethics of the Press (Leveson Report)*. (ISBN 9780102981063). London: The Stationary Office (TSO).
- Lindquist, E., & Rasmussen, K. (2012). Deputy ministers and New Public Governance: from neutral competence to promiscuous partisans to a new balance? In H. Bakvis & M. Jarvis (Eds.), *From new public management to new political governance*. Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Lundby, K. (2009). *Mediatization: concept, changes, consequences*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Manin, B. (1997). *The Principles of Representative Government*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- March, J. G., & Olsen, J. P. (2009). *The logic of appropriateness*. ARENA Working Papers. Oslo.
- Meer, F. M. v. d. (2011). *Civil service systems in Western Europe*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Miller, D. (2008). *A century of spin : how public relations became the cutting edge of corporate power*. London ; Ann Arbor, MI: London ; Ann Arbor, MI : Pluto Press.
- Moloney, K. (2006). *Rethinking public relations: PR propaganda and democracy*. London: Routledge.
- Moore, M. (2006). *The origins of modern spin: democratic government and the media in Britain, 1945-51*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Osborne, P. (1999). *Alastair Campbell: New Labour and the rise of the media class*. London: Aurum.
- Page, E. (2007). *Where have all the powers gone? The UK top civil service in comparative perspective*. Paper presented at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Chicago, USA.
- Page, E. C. (2010). Accountability as a bureaucratic minefield: Lessons from a comparative study. *West European Politics*, 33(5), 1010-1029.
- Page, J., Pearson, J., Jurgeit, B., & Kidson, M. (2012). *Transforming Whitehall: Leading major change in Whitehall Departments*. Retrieved from London:
- Pallas, J., & Fredriksson, M. (2014). *Mediability and organizational responses to institutional plurality: a case of a Swedish governmental agency*. . Paper presented at the 30th European Group of Organizational Studies Colloquium - Reimagining, Rethinking, Reshaping: Organizational Scholarship in Unsettled Times Rotterdam.
- Public Administration Select Committee. (1998). *Sixth Report, Session 1997-98*. London: House of Commons.
- Rhodes, R. A. W. (2011). *Everyday life in British government*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rosanvallon, P. (2011). *Democratic legitimacy : impartiality, reflexivity, proximity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press.
- Sanders, K., Crespo, M. J. C., & Holtz-Bacha, C. (2011). Communicating Governments. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 16(4), 523-547.
- Wernick, A. (1991). *Promotional culture : advertising, ideology and symbolic expression*. London: London : Sage Publications.

Ruth Garland, PhD researcher
Media & Communications
London School of Economics and Political Science
r.garland@lse.ac.uk 07764 391239