

# Government Communication

## Cases and Challenges

Edited by Karen Sanders & Maria Jose Canel

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Cases and challenges

**Edited by**  
**KAREN SANDERS**  
**AND**  
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# 1

## Introduction: Mapping the field of government communication

*María José Canel and Karen Sanders*

**T**he quality of government communication matters for human well-being. Governing necessarily involves constant exchanges of information and communication about policies, ideas and decisions between governors and the governed. In a context in which internet technology, with all its possibilities of information processing and targeted communication, is pushing forward what Pfetsch denominates the 'professionalization of government communication' (2008, pp. 71–2), government communication is 'a large growth industry in many countries' (Howlett, 2009, p. 23) as governments contract agencies and expand capacity.

Having written in 2010 that 'despite its key importance for twenty-first-century politics, the topic of government communication has been a neglected area of scholarly interest' (Canel & Sanders, 2012, p. 85), a few years on the situation has changed significantly. Government communication (and related concepts such as political public relations, government public relations and government political marketing) has attracted the interest of a growing number of researchers. There is a realization of the need to build bridges between cognate areas and disciplines for the study of government communication (Lee, 2008; Strömbäck, Mitrook & Kioussis, 2010; Liu, Horsley & Levenshus, 2010; Horsley, Liu & Levenshus, 2010; Jackson, 2010; Hong, Park, Lee & Park, 2012). Nevertheless, there is still work to be done

since, although there is research examining specific issues, concepts and countries, there is as yet no thorough and systematic interdisciplinary study of the subject.

In the United States, for example, authors have explored in depth presidential rhetoric and presidential communication strategies (Denton & Hahn, 1986; Smith & Smith, 1994; Denton & Holloway, 1996; Ryfe, 2005; Farnsworth, 2009; Coe & Reitzes, 2010), presidential news operations (Kurtz, 1998), presidential power and communication (Buchanan, 1978; Kernell, 1986, 1997), organizational issues (Cox, 2001; Kumar, 2001a, 2001b, 2003a, 2003b, and 2010; Kumar and Sullivan, 2003), presidential relations with the media (Hess, 2000; Spragens, 2003; Walcott & Hult, 2008), chief executive communication strategies in relation to political scandals and terrorism (Canel & Sanders, 2006, 2010), presidential public relations (Kiousis & Strömbäck, 2010; Eshbaugh-Soha, 2011) and the tensions between information and persuasion in public institutions (Maltese, 1994). Presidential communication in-between elections has been studied as a 'permanent campaign'. Some studies have focused attention on the role of communication in public institutions, particularly, in the development of governmental agencies (Garnett, 1994; Garnett & Kouzmin, 1997; Graber, 2003; Pandey & Garnett, 2006).

In Europe, Seymour-Ure has explored British prime ministers' relationship to the media (2003), Franklin has examined UK political communication and the allegations of manipulative government communication (2004) together with a number of other scholars and journalists (Andrews, 2006; Gaber, 2007; McNair, 2011). Organizational issues, including the structure and operations of media relations, have been the focus of several studies (Ingham, 2003; Moloney, 2000; Gaber, 2004). Australian scholar, Sally Young (2007) has produced perhaps the most comprehensive country-based overview of government communication.

However, no considered examination of the subject exists that provides either an account of the contemporary landscape with regard to government communication or an exploration of common and diverging themes on a cross-national basis. This volume aims to make a contribution to fill this gap. We explore how central national governments communicate today in 15 countries, and seek to identify common cross-national trends.

This introductory chapter analyses approaches and frameworks used for the study of government communication. First, we attempt to clarify the notion of government communication. Second, we attempt to situate government communication analysis at the crossroads of the research traditions of political communication and other cognate fields (such as public relations, corporate communication, political marketing and strategic communication). Third and finally, the research approach of this volume is discussed.

## Defining government communication

Public and, more specifically, government communication involves considerable complexity in terms of goals, needs, audiences, definition and resources as compared to the corporate sector (Da Silva & Batista, 2007; Liu et al., 2010; Sanders, 2011; Canel & Sanders, 2012). Government communication operates in a multilayered and organizationally diverse environment. In relation to the issue of goals, for example, government communication often has to juggle what appear to be conflicting objectives set by political masters. Communication goals related to persuasion are considered problematic by many scholars, particularly by those working in the political communication tradition (see, for example, the analysis of Jackson, 2010). In relation to publics, government communication operates on a multilayered level, taking into account a diverse group of stakeholders including other politicians, service users, minority groups, regulatory bodies, and the like. Heads of communication, for example, in government ministries, agencies and institutions may be appointed on the basis of partisan rather than professional criteria.

A review of much of the political communication literature shows that it is often used to refer solely to top-level executive communication at the presidential or prime ministerial level (Canel & Sanders, 2012). Indeed the vast majority of political communication research centred on government communication has tended to examine themes such as media management and office holders' rhetoric exclusively in relation to senior national government. But government communication can also be used to refer to communication undertaken by executive institutions at regional and local levels (Ipsos, 2008; Jenei, 2012).

The task of defining government communication can be approached at different levels, looking, at its actions (what *it does*) or looking at what *it is*. For instance, defined as a policy tool (what *it does*), Howlett sees government communication as a policy tool or instrument to give effect to policy goals; to influence and direct policy actions through the provision or withholding of information or knowledge from societal actors (2009, p. 24).

We understand that definitions of government communication from the perspective of what *it does* could be restrictive in the sense that they look at activities which are part and only part of what government communication *is*. For instance, in Pfetsch's analysis, government news management is understood as a strategic variant of public information whereby governments manage communication in order to influence public opinion by controlling the news media agenda (Pfetsch, 2008, p. 90). Lee, Grant and Stewart (2012) deal with the practice of government communication understood in terms of government public relations.

We think it is possible to go a step further examining what government communication is. Strömbäck and Kiouisis' definition of political public relations is useful in this sense. They provide the following definition of political public relations: 'Political public relations is the management process by which an organization or individual actor for political purposes, through purposeful communication and action, seeks to influence and to establish, build, and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with its key publics to help support its mission and achieve its goals' (2011, p. 8).

This definition refers to what *it is* (a management process) including its purposeful feature; the elements included to describe the purpose (namely, 'establish, build and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations') points out notions and dimensions that, as will be seen below, introduces new perspectives for the analysis of government communication.

In order to capture the full range of the possibilities of government communication, we suggest the following working definition of government communication:

*The role, practice, aims and achievements of communication as it takes place in and on behalf of public institution(s) whose primary end is executive in the service of a political rationale, and that are constituted on the basis of the people's indirect or direct consent and charged to enact their will.*

This definition includes both conceptual as well as functional aspects. The notion of 'purpose' opens up broader questions for the analysis of government communication. It includes prime ministerial or presidential communication as well as mayoral or local and regional government communication. Executive communication is contrasted with the deliberative communication legislatures use to decide public policy through determining the law, and with the judiciary, whose function is to make judgements in relation to disputes about the application of the law. In this study we will focus on central executive government communication.

## **Situating government communication research at a crossroads**

The issues raised by government communication cut across the disciplinary areas represented in communication research namely, political communication, public relations, corporate communication, organizational and strategic communication. Elsewhere we have drawn upon these fields to elucidate main issues for government communication research (Sanders, 2011; Canel & Sanders, 2012). Strömbäck, Mitrook and Kiouisis (2010) have examined

the theoretical connections between political marketing and public relations. Strömbäck and Kioussis (2011) have looked at the concept of 'political public relations' at the intersection of different research traditions such as political communication, political marketing and corporate and strategic communication. From a public relations perspective, Liu and Horsley (2007) have proposed a model for analysing the relationship between governments and publics; Gregory (2006) has provided a competencies framework for government communicators designed to improve performance and the consistency of the communications function across government; Vos (2006) has developed a model to measure efficiency of government communication; Liu et al. (2010) compare government and corporate communication practices; Kim and Liu (2012) compare crisis management in the public and private sector; Hong et al. (2012) work on public segmentation of publics for building government public relations and Lee et al. (2012) have depicted tools for the practice of government public relations. Finally, from the area of corporate communication, Da Silva and Batista (2007) discuss the concept of government reputation.

This growing production suggests that the study of government communication requires a multifaceted theoretical approach (see Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011, p. 13; Kioussis & Strömbäck, 2011, pp. 314–15). Our examination of this literature suggests three main and related implications for the study of government communication.

### ***From vote seeking to relation building***

The political communication perspective provides valuable theoretical standpoints from which to orient government communication research. Examining an early twenty-first-century review of political communication research (see Lin, 2004; also see Graber, 2005), we identify five theoretical perspectives from which political communication scholars have explored government communication issues namely, rhetorical analysis of political discourse, propaganda studies, voting studies, mass media effects and the interplay of influence between government, press and public opinion. These studies have explored four main thematic concerns in relation to government communication (sources are summarized in Table 1.1)

The first is chief executive communication, beginning with Neustadt's classic study *Presidential Power* (1960), continuing with work that includes country focused studies and also generalist literature (see Table 1.1). Second, the development of the 'permanent campaign' (Blumenthal, 1980), which implies a critical approach based on a tradition arising out of propaganda studies (see, for example, McChesney, 2008) with critical consequences for the practice of political communication; and linked to this, government advertising

**TABLE 1.1** Political communication and the study of government communication

Chief executive communication	The development of the permanent campaign	Logistical and operational issues	News media/government nexus
Neustadt, 1960 Denton & Hahn, 1986; Tulis, 1987; Smith & Smith, 1994; Denton & Holloway, 1996; Cox, 2001; Edwards, 2003; Zarefsky, 2004; Edwards, 2009; Crockett, 2009  <i>Country focused studies:</i> De Masi, 2001; Seymour-Ure, 2003; Franklin, 2004; Young, 2007	Blumenthal, 1980  <i>Analysis of critical consequences:</i> Patterson, 1994 and 2003; Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999; Ornstein & Mann, 2000; Cohen, 2008; Dulio & Towner, 2009; Hajer, 2009	Kumar, 2001a, 2001b, 2003a, 2003b and 2008; Kumar & Sullivan, 2003  <i>Government communication practices associated with the development of electronic technology:</i> Axford & Huggins, 2001; Saco, 2002; Izurieta, Perina and Arterton, 2003; Chadwick, 2006; Davis, 2010; Gibson & Ward, 2012	<i>Indexing hypothesis:</i> Bennett, 2004  <i>Primary definition:</i> Gitlin, 1980; Hall, 1982; Herman & Chomsky, 1988  <i>Agenda setting:</i> McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Weaver, McCombs & Shaw, 2004  <i>Priming:</i> Iyengar & Simon, 2000  <i>Framing news stories:</i> Reese, Gandy & Grant, 2003; Entman, 2004; Bennet & Iyengar, 2010; De Vreese & Lecheler, 2012

in general and the area of government social marketing communication in particular (health campaigns, environmental change, driving behaviour, etc.). Third, the logistical and operational issues of how governments organize their communication, as well as the examination of government communication practices associated with the development of electronic technology. Finally, the study of the news media/government nexus has generated a rich body of concepts and theories (see Table 1.1 for a selection of sources). A major area of study examines the development of the news media as a political actor in contemporary politics and how, in Cook's words, 'news media today are not merely part of politics: they are part of government' (2005, p. 3). More recent work (see, for example, Dahlgren, 2009; Brants & Voltmer, 2011) examines the

changing media environment and its implications for politicians' performance and presentation as well as citizens' interactions and civic culture.

The political communication literature provides two valuable theoretical standpoints for government communication research: first, an emphasis on the exploration of and sensitivity to institutional and social contexts; second, an attention to normative concerns about how communication 'performs its civic functions at the center of social and political life', and a concern with 'shaping communication to better serve democratic processes' (Swanson, 2000, p. 200). The political communication field has pointed research towards notions of purpose and performance but it may be the case too that it has contributed to a kind of intellectual pessimism about the possibility of creating the conditions for civic conversation in contemporary media democracies (see Sanders, 2009, pp. 229–33): government communication is seen simply as a way to gain votes.

A public relations theoretical perspective introduces into political communication the notion of 'relationship building' (Ledingham, 2011). Relational theory understands that organization–public relationships are represented by patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange and linkage between an organization and its publics (Broom, Casey & Ritchey, 1997, 2000). It maintains that relationship management is the ethical and efficient management of organization–public relationships focused, over time, on common interests and shared goals in support of mutual understanding and benefit (Ledingham, 2011, p. 247). Communication success is not, then, measured primarily or solely by communication output or influence on the opinion of various publics, but by the quality of the relationships between an organization and its publics. Thus, notions of stakeholder loyalty, the impact of time on the quality of the relationship, trust, openness, involvement, satisfaction, commitment, mutuality (mutual understanding) and symmetry become more significant (Ledingham, 2011; see also Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011; Canel & Sanders, 2012). The notion of symmetry is at the heart of the work of the influential public relations scholar, James E. Grunig (J. Grunig, 1992; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1992; J. Grunig & Hunt, 1984; J. Grunig, 2001; J. Grunig, 2008). Imported into the analysis of government communication, this relational perspective poses the question of whether the *purpose* of government communication is used as a long-term tool that seeks to engage with citizens.

### ***From tactical to managerial level***

Understanding government communication as being about building relationships with publics implies that government communication is not simply about managing public opinion for electoral gain.

As Ledingham puts it – referring to political public relations – to elevate the discipline from a craft to a strategic management function is crucial to the



successful interaction of organizations and publics (2011, p. 235). To keep the public's loyalty and trust, political actors need to seek to engage in conversation with citizen voters over a long period of time (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011, p. 166), which requires a more proactive and strategic approach rather than a reactive and merely technical one (Kiousis & Strömbäck, 2011, p. 315).

The application of this approach to the study of government communication has several implications. We here point out two: first, the scope of government communication should go beyond media relations to include other activities such as reputation and issues management; second, relationship building implies a strategic communication approach.

Dealing with the first point, it is true that the media play a central role (connecting the study of government communication to concepts such as information subsidies, agenda setting, agenda building, primary definition, indexing, government news framing, etc.) (Zoch & Molleda, 2006; Froehlich & Rudiger, 2006; Kiousis, Popescu & Mitrook, 2007; Lieber & Golan, 2011; Tedesco, 2011; Hallahan, 2011; Canel, 2012). But government communication should not be equated with news media relationships but include other functions and activities.

One of these activities is related to the notion of reputation (for a review of definitions of this concept see Gotsi & Wilson, 2001; Barnett, Jermier & Lafferty, 2006; Walker, 2010). Public relations (and related fields already mentioned here) add to the field of political communication and of political marketing 'a wider consideration of the overall reputation of politics' (Lilleker & Jackson, 2011, p. 172).

While there is some work on parties' brands and reputation (Bale, 2006; Smith, 2009; Scammell, in press; Jackson, 2010), there is, as far as we are aware, no research examining government communication from the perspective of reputation (apart from some work on the reputation of local governments – Ipsos, 2008 – and on the concept of 'government reputation' from stakeholder thinking – Da Silva & Batista, 2007). Although many studies have centred on government leaders' popularity or public perceptions of public policies, no work has been done so far on what is the meaning of public leaders' reputation; nor has work been carried out on how to build the reputation of government institutions and their leaders.

Political communication research has also centred more on issues of image so that one can find discussions such as those of Waterman, St Clair and Wright (1999) about 'the image-is-everything presidency'. In this sense, research perspectives that emphasize the significance of reputation helpfully shift the focus to the reality of political outcomes and the truth of who and what a leader and public policies are. Research being developed in the area of intangible assets in the public sector may contribute to this shift (Carmeli & Cohen, 2001; Cinca, Molinero & Queiroz, 2003; Pandey & Garnett, 2006; Luoma-aho, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008; Luoma-aho & Peltola, 2006; see also

in the area of public administration studies (Glenny, 2008; Bell, Hindmoor & Mols, 2010; Bevir 2011).

Other functions and activities that should be considered for the study and practice of government communication can be found in areas such as issue management (Heath, 2006; Heath & Waymer, 2011), public diplomacy (Signitzer & Wamser, 2006; Molleda, 2011), public affairs (Harris & Fleisher, 2005; McGrath, Moss & Harris, 2010) and its relation with government communication (Harris, 2007) and crisis communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2010; Coombs, 2011; Kim & Liu, 2012).

The second implication of a managerial approach is the strategic dimension (Steyn, 2007; see also Rodríguez & La Porte, in press). As Strömbäck and Kiousis say, 'For public relations and strategic communication to be effective, their practitioners must be involved when making decisions on both grand strategy and strategy, and not confined to the role of technicians carrying out the tactics' (2011, p. 15). The interesting point that emerges from the revision of the literature on strategic communication is that different conceptualizations of the notion of strategy result in different approaches to the practice of government communication. It is the notion of strategy upon which authors such as Kumar (2001a, 2001b, 2003a, 2003b and 2008; Kumar & Sullivan, 2003) and Cox (2001) base the analysis and description of a government communication office.

The strategic approach sets the parameters for the analysis of a government communication office: the organizational chart (is the responsibility for formulating communication strategy at the functional or middle management level?); specific communication tasks (to see to what extent communication officers strategically plan or merely implement political strategy decided by others); analyses of public perceptions (to see to what extent communication officers scan the environment for issues, people's concerns and government's reputation risks). In sum, an analysis of government communication using a strategic approach implies the exploration of to what extent communication is not simply an enabling function for politicians but a contribution to the strategic-decision-making process shared with the people.

### ***From democratic concern to democracy building***

As we mentioned above, one of the concerns of political communication research is a normative focus on how communication serves democratic processes. A review of concepts, theories and themes of cognate fields leads us to conclude that a multifaceted approach can enrich thinking about government communication in relation to the challenge of building democracy.

In focusing on relationships and on advancing mutual understanding, the conceptualization of both the people and the government as communicator

are fundamentally altered. First, the people: if government communication is to be conceived of as the cultivation of long-term relationships oriented to mutual understanding rather than being modelled on short-term, vote-winning approaches, the public is not seen as a passive spectator at the end of the communication process but as an involved, interactive actor. This is in keeping with an approach to thinking about the public sector which, according to Luoma-aho's analysis implies a change in the legitimacy of public organizations: the idea is that individuals and groups around the organization are taken into consideration and involved in the processes instead of merely being monitored and controlled. Thus, support and dialogue becomes more important than control (Luoma-aho, 2008, p. 447).

Second, the conceptualization of government as communicator is also altered. It is understood that governments and public officials have the task of developing tools and strategies to aid citizens in fulfilling their democratic responsibility. To keep the public informed and to be informed by their publics is seen as an obligation of a public servant. Democratic accountability is enhanced where managers are provided with insight relating to how publics think and react to government decisions (for discussions about the public administration's duty to communicate, see Lee, 2008; Garnett, 1997; Garnett & Kouzmin, 1997).

All this stresses the importance of certain values in the relationships that are established between governments and citizens such as transparency, trust, accessibility and responsiveness (see Pandey & Garnett, 2006; Roosbroek, 2006; Spencer & McGrath, 2006; Cloete, 2007; Fairbanks, Plowman & Raulins, 2007; Gaber, 2007; Zmerli & Newton, 2008; Greiling & Spraul, 2010; Kim, 2010; Salminen & Ikola-Norrbäck, 2010). Finally, looking at government communication from a multifaceted perspective poses the question of whether and how the *purpose* of governments when they communicate with citizens is directed towards democracy building.

## Looking at government communication cross-nationally

Comparative research in political communication has looked at issues such as media effects, media content, political advertising and, of course, election campaigns. There is some comparative work examining relations between government spokespeople and the media, spin doctoring and government news (Esser, Reinemann & Fan, 2001; Pfetsch, 2001, 2008; Van Dalen, 2011). However, there are, as far as we are aware, no general comparative studies of government communication.

We agree with scholars (Swanson, 2004; see also sources quoted in the coedited book by Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012a) on the advantages and contribution

of comparative studies. Comparative studies can provide helpful insights into the role of culture, structure and agency in political communication as well as providing baseline empirical data for theoretical development and hypothesis building.

Comparative work is difficult (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995). It is an expanding field, which has gone from its infancy to its 'late adolescence' (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995), 'poised to maturity' (Gurevitch & Blumler, 2004, p. 326), developed 'with a considered substance and solidity' (Blumler, 2012, p. xi) but still with uneven results (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012b, p. 3) which need substantial improvements in research designs (Norris, 2009). Conducting comparative research implies risks and problems, as well as important theoretical and methodological challenges (Pfetsch & Esser, 2004; Stevenson, 2004; Esser & Pfetsch, 2004; Norris, 2009; Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012a).

Esser and Hanitzsch identify three theoretical approaches for comparative communication research. The actor/behaviour-centred approach, that focuses on individuals and groups as actors who make strategic choices in their communication behaviour; the structuralist or institutionalist approach, that focuses on the broader framework conditions of macrolevel communication arrangements that constrain or facilitate the communication behaviours of actors; and finally, the culturalist or interpretative approach, that focuses on the ideas, interpretations and mental construction of collectivities and individuals as placed in the context of shared meanings within communities (2012, 11–12).

In this volume we provide deep descriptions and analysis of how government communication operates in a number of specific contexts, elucidating trends which can be identified as common to different countries. The comparativeness of the book lies in the common research questions explored for each country through the case-study methodology.

We are very much aware of the difficulties of this attempt: it requires deep knowledge of the worlds being examined as well as sensitivities to differences in language and meanings. We are aware too of the limitations of this approach but believe the effort is worth making.

## **The case-study methodology**

Government communication is examined in fifteen countries using the case-study methodology. Case studies enjoy a natural advantage in research of an exploratory nature. They are 'understood to comprise the first line of evidence' (Gerring, 2007, p. 99). Case studies are a useful starting point for generating basic data, as seen, for example, in Semetko's (2009) four country study (Kenya, Mexico, the Russian Federation and Turkey) of election campaigns and news media partisan balance. Her work highlights differences and similarities within the distinct components and characteristics of these

countries' media and political systems that point to shared challenges and possible strategies for improving governance capacity in them.

For the selection of countries we have used the Freedom House indices, democracy indicators or political and press freedom (Freedom House, 2012). We selected 15 countries according to these indices (see Table 1.2 for selection of countries).

**TABLE 1.2** Freedom House indices, 2012

Countries	Political freedom rating <sup>a</sup>	Press freedom rating <sup>b</sup>	Group
Sweden	1 (F)	10 (F)	1
Germany	1 (F)	17 (F)	
United States	1 (F)	18 (F)	
United Kingdom	1 (F)	21 (F)	
Australia	1 (F)	21 (F)	
France	1 (F)	24 (F)	
Spain	1 (F)	24 (F)	
Poland	1 (F)	25 (F)	
Chile	1 (F)	31 (PF)	2
South Africa	2 (F)	34 (PF)	
India	2.5 (F)	37 (PF)	
Mexico	3 (PF)	62 (NF)	3
Singapore	4 (PF)	67 (NF)	
China	6.5 (NF)	85 (NF)	
Zimbabwe	6.5 (NF)	80 (NF)	

Source: Freedom House (2012). *Freedom in the World*. Washington, DC: Freedom House. Freedom House (2012). *Freedom of the Press*. Washington, DC: Freedom House.

<sup>a</sup> Countries are assessed on the average of the political rights and civil liberties ratings known as the political freedom rating: Free (F) (1.0 to 2.5), Partly Free (PF) (3.0 to 5.0) or Not Free (NF) (5.5 to 7.0).

<sup>b</sup> Each country receives a numerical rating from 0 (the most free) to 100 (the least free). Countries considered Free (F) are rated from 0–30; Partly Free (PF) 31–60 and Not Free (NF) 61–97.

Full details of methodology can be found at [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org)

Countries were selected, as Wirth and Kolb's (2004) discussion on comparative research suggests for some international comparisons, applying an initial criterion that there were local researchers able to access data and key informants, allowing us draw on material for nine countries. We added six more countries to have a full range of cases from the Freedom House Index. As Wirth and Kolb suggest, this kind of sample avoids problems (such as having access to interviewees and empirical observations) but at the same time it does not constitute a representative sample.

The temporal unit of analysis is the recent situation of government communication: how it works and functions at the time of writing. This does not exclude references to the recent past. For instance, the chapter on Spain draws on its transition to democracy to account for the current context of government communication. The chapters on Australia, Sweden and the United Kingdom examine how changes approximately over the past ten years have resulted in the establishment of mechanisms for increasing government's accountability.

Case-study research can be usefully complemented by large scale data sets that help provide quantitative evidence for broader patterns and relationships. Norris' critical review of comparative political communication studies (2009) points to the need for such mixed methods research designs and the overall requirement for the use of more rigorously defined concepts in order to generate meaningfully comparative data. These are challenging tasks but, we suggest, necessary ones for the development of government communication research.

Our analysis includes the use of data bases and information from research which relies on secondary evaluation of material (documents and academic literature) such as constitutions and legal texts, government reports, scientific studies and evaluation of statistical data, audience ratings and readership figures, published opinion polls and expert interviews (mainly with government communicators).

The intention is that the case studies will generate hypotheses for future research and, as Wirth and Kolb put it, we adopt a 'pretheoretical research strategy with context factors' (2004, p. 93), focusing on descriptive and exploratory research questions. We are aware of the risk of implicitly sliding into an a-theoretical description (as these authors alert, 2004, p. 93); but we consider the achievement of systematizing dispersed and fragmented data on government communication from different countries as a useful one – not provided by the literature so far – and a necessary first step for future theoretical and conceptual development. We also think that, in placing side by side different countries, apart from elucidating common trends, we will be able to test the limits of some of the more general claims made about government communication.

## Putting empirical data in context

We will analyse empirical data within each country context and then elucidate from the comparative observation common cross-national trends.

We are aware we are tackling here one of the most critical issues of comparative research, how to relate micro-, meso- and macrolevels (Esser & Pfetsch, 2004; Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012a).

In establishing dimensions for a cross-country observation, Gurevitch & Blumler (2004, pp. 338–9) mention the relationship between the media and political systems (the political system), norms that define the roles and functions of the media for society (the media system), and finally, relationship between citizens and their political systems (citizenry). Following these dimensions, Pfetsch (2004) has proposed a theoretical approach to comparative analysis including institutional conditions of the political system and the media system at the macro- and the mesolevel. In comparative research (looking at the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany) on government communication (termed 'government news management'), Pfetsch (2008) assumes that government news management styles and outcomes across different political systems depend on a series of contextual factors, originated in the political system, the media system and the political communication culture. Pfetsch together with Esser (2012) has further developed this approach to what they call the 'political communication system', a framework in which different levels of analysis must be discerned and social interaction thought of as a constellation of micro- and macrolinks.

In this book, we have taken aggregate data and system level data for the macrolevel (see below). For the mesolevel of analysis, we rely on a framework of analysis we elaborated in previous work, where we comparatively analysed government communication from the perspective of professionalization in the United Kingdom, Germany and Spain (Sanders, Canel & Holtz-Bacha, 2011). Our framework drew on the strategic planning and quality management literature (see Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000; Gregory, 2006; Vos, 2006). It allowed us to capture both what we called structural elements as well as ongoing processes (see Table 1.3). Structural elements are those related to two administrative organizational dimensions: the first covers formal rules (see Vogel, 2010) and the second relates to financial resources. Formal rules include all relevant legislation, policies and guidance as well as organizational charts detailing communication roles. Financial resources include budgets and reward systems. Human resources are regarded as a separate structural element and include the skills, knowledge and values of the communication workforce as detailed in professional profiles, training and recruitment programs together with the number of those employed in communication. The framework also profiles communication processes related to information

**TABLE 1.3** Framework for the analysis of government communication

<b>STRUCTURE</b>	Administration	Formal rules	Organizational charts Legislation Policies and guidance
		Financial resources	Budgets Reward systems
	Human resources	Skills Knowledge Values	Professional profiles Training Recruitment
<b>PROCESS</b>	Communication	Information gathering and analysis	Research work (commissioned or internally undertaken) Coordination and planning mechanisms and routines
		Information dissemination	Briefings, meetings, press conferences Digital media Campaigns and advertising
		Information evaluation	Feedback mechanisms Media analysis Communication metrics (ROI measures)

gathering, analysis and dissemination and processes related to information evaluation.

More specifically, our analysis of government communication takes, first, scores from the Freedom House indices. These indices are computed using both analytical reports and numerical ratings. The Political Freedom index measures political rights (electoral process, political pluralism and participation, and functioning of government) and civil liberties (evaluation of freedom of expression and belief, associational and organizational rights, rule of law, and personal autonomy and individual rights). The Freedom of the Press index assesses the degree of print, broadcast and internet freedom in every country, examining the legal environment for the media, political pressures that influence reporting and economic factors that affect access to information (see Freedom House, 2012 for more details about methodology). These indices summarize systemic features we consider relevant to government structures and processes: we understand that the way government communication operates is associated with the degree of



freedom (participation, pluralism, etc.) as well as with the presence/absence of government control of the media and of people's access to information. We assume that governments from countries with higher scores for both political and media freedom will behave differently in their communication from countries with lower scores.

Each individual chapter gives information on the systemic features that illustrate aspects of the indices. More specifically, each chapter provides information on (1) characteristics of each political system – constitutional relationships between different powers, sources of prime ministerial/presidential power, electoral system, political party system; (2) specificities of the media landscape and culture – the broadcasting system, the newspaper market, media use habits, development of digital media, journalists' roles and values.

We have also looked at structural elements such as the (1) relevant legal and regulatory context including mechanisms to enhance accountability; (2) government communication financial resources; (3) human resources – professional profiles, training and recruitment of government communicators; the role of civil servants and political appointees; (4) organizational structure. This includes the organizational chart, the formal representation of the place communication occupies in the decision-making processes, showing how power and responsibilities are allocated in an organization and whether communication is considered of strategic importance; (5) communication activities – press conferences, events, campaigns, websites, Twitter, You Tube, and so on; (6) functions and tasks of government communicators; (7) finally, examining whether and how government seeks public feedback (polls, focus groups, media monitoring, etc.) is key to analyse purposes of government communication.

## **Plan of the book**

The book consists of sixteen chapters each of which, with the exception of Chapter 11 (which covers two Southern African countries, Zimbabwe and South Africa), provides a country case study. The countries are grouped according to their position on the Freedom House indices (see Table 1.2). Part one refers to countries which score highly in the rankings of political freedom and press freedom: Sweden, Germany, United States, United Kingdom, Australia, France, Spain and Poland. Part two refers to those countries located in the middle of any of these indexes: Chile, South Africa and India. Finally, in part three we deal with countries at the end of both indexes: Singapore and China (although Zimbabwe is at the end, it has been analysed

comparatively with South Africa in Chapter 11). The concluding chapter draws together the results from the fifteen countries. We use concepts from public relations and corporate communication literature to elaborate elements to assess the data from country chapters and their relation with professional government communication. Finally we elucidate common emerging themes and challenges.

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# 2

## Structures, strategies and spin: Government communication in Sweden

*Kajsa Falasca and Lars Nord*

**A**fter the national elections in September 2010, a State Secretary for Communication was appointed in Sweden for the first time ever. The first person to hold this position, Per Schlingmann, was recruited from the election-winning Moderate Party (*Moderaterna*), where he had successfully designed the campaigns that brought his party to victory in the two previous election campaigns. Schlingmann had great influence on the strategic transformation of the Party, helping it to shift from the right to the centre of the left-right continuum and he was widely perceived as the outstanding communication strategist or 'spin doctor' in Sweden at this time.

His appointment to the government was of symbolic importance as it confirmed two trends in government communication in Sweden. First, it was a natural step in the continuous upgrade of communication capacity within the government in recent years. The improvement of communication skills in the prime minister's office and in the ministries had been going on for a long time, but the increased need for strategic coordination and implementation of government communication activities required a new high-ranking communication position close to the prime minister him- or herself.

Secondly, the recruitment of a famous political party strategist and communicator showed that government communication was not only neutral information on government decisions affecting citizens' daily lives, but could also be perceived as communication in the interest of the ruling political party

or parties, as a continuation of the past election campaign and, perhaps most importantly, as long-term preparation for the next election campaign. Thus, the appointment of the new State Secretary for Communication confirmed the intertwined connections between party politics and government actions.

This chapter analyses the general principles and practices of government communication in Sweden, highlighting both organizational structures and the behaviour of the most significant actors in government communication processes. The data in this chapter concerning the structures and strategies of government communication is mainly based on interviews with press secretaries, heads of information departments and information officers in the government offices (see Annex 2.1 for list of interviewees). In the next section, we will offer a brief overview of politics and media in Sweden as well as some remarks on recent trends and the legal context.

## Political and media contexts in Sweden

Swedish democracy is based on a multiparty parliamentary system, where the political parties traditionally have been more important than individual candidates in national elections. General elections are held every four years with national, regional and local elections on the same day. Voter participation is comparatively high with around 80 per cent in the national elections in 2010. Public opinion polls show that about 70 per cent of all Swedes have confidence in politicians (Holmberg, Näsman & Wänström, 2010). At the same time, electoral volatility is high and party identification is declining (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2008).

Historically, one single party has dominated the political party system. The Social Democrats have been in power for 65 of the past 80 years, and the party has been positively associated with the principles of the welfare state, economic growth and outstanding political leadership. However, the two most recent national elections in 2006 and 2010 resulted in centre-right alliance governments, dominated by the Moderate Party, and breaking the previous Social Democratic hegemony. Since September 2010, there have been eight political parties in the Swedish Parliament.<sup>1</sup>

The electoral system is strictly proportional, which encourages coalition building and cooperation between political parties. Generally, minority governments have been more frequent than majority governments in the postwar era (Hadenius, 1995). Constitutionally, the elected members of the new parliament, *Riksdagen*, appoint the prime minister, but he or she has complete freedom in the selection of ministers and the future organization of government work. The government is held to account by the parliament in different ways: a parliamentary constitutional committee,

*Konstitutionsutskottet*, scrutinizes government activities on a regular basis and may also arrange public hearings on current events. As a final step, the parliament can hold a vote of no confidence which, if passed, requires the government to resign immediately (RF, 1974).

Constitutionally, Sweden is a monarchy but, since a consensual agreement in 1971 between the most important political parties, the monarch has no formal influence on political processes, and plays only a symbolic role representing the State. The Swedish Constitution may only be changed after two different parliamentary decisions with elections in-between. One part of the Constitution, the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), which was proclaimed in 1766 and is the oldest such legislation in the world still in force, has particularly strong protection in Sweden. According to the Constitution, the government rules only by collective decisions. Consequently, single members of the government and single ministries have no legal right to make government decisions on their own (RF, 1974). However, public administration outside of the government structure, such as public authorities or state companies, are independent, and members of the government are constitutionally prohibited from interfering with public administration activities.

Some of the most important and distinctive features of the FOIA of the Swedish Constitution are its solid defence of public access to official documents and its strong protection of sources of information. According to the Act, every Swedish citizen who asks for a public document should have access to it as soon as possible. There are few clearly defined exceptions to this rule (TF, 1949), and the general principle is complete openness. The Act also prohibits searches for sources of information used by journalists. As a result, public officials receive legal protection if they leak information to the media as it may be a criminal act to investigate who has leaked public information to the media.

The Swedish media system can generally be described as reflecting a mixture of classical liberal ideas of the press as an independent and monitoring 'fourth estate', together with state interventions in the broadcast markets, in order to maintain diversity and independent reporting in public service media (Nord, 2008). The newspaper market historically developed as a party press but today it is independent from political parties and highly professional and market oriented. Newspaper reading is gradually declining, but readership rates are still among the highest in the world and 77 per cent of the population read at least one daily newspaper (Carlsson & Facht, 2010, p. 172). Broadcasting markets have been transformed from public service monopolies to dualistic competition between public and private media companies. Public service media are still popular, but are gradually losing importance as the number of available commercial stations and channels grow. The audience market share

for public radio was 64 per cent in 2008 and 34 per cent for public television (Carlsson & Harrie, 2010, pp. 52 and 71).

Media habits are gradually changing in Sweden with the exception of the rapid development of digital media. Internet penetration figures in Sweden are among the highest in the world, and most households today have broadband access. In 2009, internet was regularly used by 79 per cent of the population (Carlsson & Facht, 2010, p. 151). Media development is characterized by the convergence of media platforms and the commercialization of media content. However, it is an oversimplification to state that new media replaces old media. The most interesting development is probably new ways of interaction and interplay between different media and the success for mixed media platforms such as web-TV, pod-radio and newspapers' online versions. In 2009, 50 per cent of the population used the internet for listening to radio or viewing television (Carlsson & Facht, 2010, p. 153).

For a long time, political journalism in Sweden has been guided by professional principles of objectivity and impartiality as well as strong general support for the watchdog function of the media (Asp, 2007). Due to increased news media competition and 24-hours news production, political commentary, such as news analysis and journalists interviewing journalists in broadcast media, have become more important (Nord & Stúr, 2009). Sources representing influential groups in society have a substantial influence over the media agenda and journalists rely heavily on trustworthy and powerful sources in the newsgathering processes (von Krogh & Nord, 2011, p. 271). Nevertheless, journalists tend to have the final say regarding the framing and presentation of news and therefore play a crucial role as editorial gatekeepers and maintain a strong position in the battle for the political agenda (Strömbäck & Nord, 2006).

To conclude, Swedish legislative processes provide strong protection for freedom of information. Journalists and citizens are granted access to public documents and the parliamentary system holds the government to account. However, the communicative power of the government is growing due to professionalization and centralization processes. In the following section, these issues will be examined in more detail.

## **Structure of Swedish government communication**

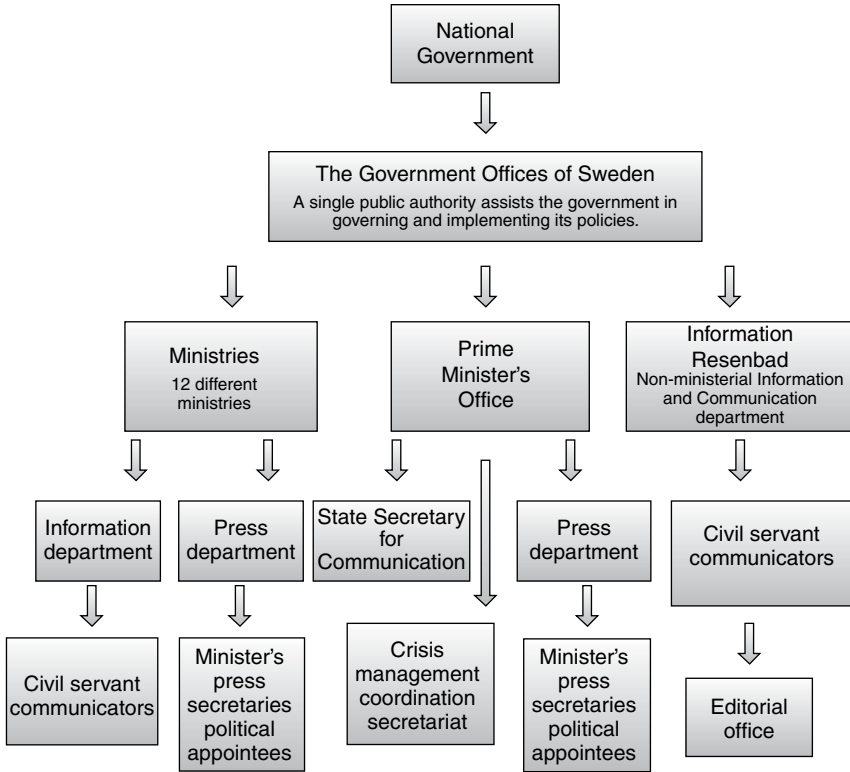
Despite the above-mentioned appointment of a brand new State Secretary for Communication, Swedish government communication has not totally altered the tradition of independent ministers who communicate their issues

personally. Thus, the national government does not engage or appoint a principal government spokesperson, as is common in many other countries. The prime minister presides over the government and, as the government's political leader, he or she is the spokesperson for the government as a whole on important matters. However, different cabinet ministers' press departments usually handle communication concerning their own political areas and issues.

Traditionally, government communication in Sweden was something each minister of the government managed as a part of their political work, and the different ministers communicated personally in press conferences, interviews and speeches. However, the expansion of the government communication organization has resulted in each minister having their own press department with press advisers and press secretaries, and each ministry having their own information department in order to manage the increasing communication demands (Erlandsson, 2008). Swedish politicians have thus responded to their complex communication environment by focusing on multifaceted communication operations rather than just parliamentary performances. This way, government communication in Sweden has moved from a point where political actions and decisions were simply announced by political leaders towards the notion that political leadership requires effective communication, a development that has also been observed in Britain, especially during New Labour's and Blair's years in office (Seymour-Ure, 2003).

Since 1997, the Swedish government has been assisted in governing practices by the government offices, which forms a single integrated public authority that consists of the prime minister's office, the 12 government ministries and the office for administrative affairs ([www.regeringen.se](http://www.regeringen.se)). The prime minister leads and coordinates the work of the government offices and the 12 ministries handle government business in their respective fields. The structure of the communication organization is linked to the structure of the political organization in the government offices, and the structure is thus based on the different ministries communicating within their fields and the prime minister's office communicating on a central level when requested. In addition, a non-ministerial information and communication department, Information Rosenbad, was created in 2001. This department is responsible for internal and external communication on a central level in the government offices and can also assist the different ministries in their communication and information activities. Furthermore, the government communication structure is divided into three different systems: political appointees in the different ministries' press departments, civil servants in the different ministries' information departments and civil servants in the Information Rosenbad (see Figure 2.1).





**FIGURE 2.1** *Government communication structure in Sweden, 2010*

The organization of government communication is flat and decentralized but may also be described as fragmented; there are 13 different information departments and 13 different press departments within the ministries, plus the non-ministerial information and communication department of the Information Rosenbad. The press departments deal with the political communication and promotion of the government, whereas the information departments deal with politically impartial informative communication. On a central level, the Information Rosenbad manages external communication with a special focus on the central government website. In addition, the civil servants in the information departments and in the Information Rosenbad deal with internal communication as the internal part of the websites of the government offices. Coordination of communication between all these different departments has up until now been ad hoc and dependent on the current situation and the persons working with different issues or events. This fragmentation may explain why government communication is sometimes perceived as fragmented and uncoordinated since, most of the time, real world events are not organized according to the divisions in-between the different ministries.

The Swedish government has been criticized, both internally and externally, for lack of coordination of communication activities and for not considering the demands of the receivers in a complex contemporary communication environment. Thus, it is difficult for the government offices to establish coherent communication practices and strategies due to the fact that the different ministries with their press and information departments work within their respective areas of responsibility. Failures to communicate effectively and in a trustworthy way as during the tsunami crisis in 2004 (Nord & Strömbäck, 2009) have forced the government to rethink and reorganize the communication organization and their communication strategies.

During 2010, three new sections were introduced within the communication structure (see Figure 2.1). Firstly, the crisis management coordination secretariat that coordinates government communication with ministries in the event of a crisis. Secondly, the editorial office that is part of Information Rosenbad, and deals with the coordination of internal and external information and communication for the central government web. This section is managed by an editor and a weekly rotating staff from the different ministries' information departments in an attempt to attain input from the whole government and thus coordinate communication in a proactive way. Thirdly, the previously noted appointment of a State Secretary for Communication with the responsibility of developing the prime minister's and the government's collective communication strategy. So far, the State Secretary for Communication has worked on the government's communication strategy and not operated as a spokesperson or been visible in the media. These new posts, units and strategies indicate an increased importance attributed to the role of communication and an intended development towards strategic and coordinated government communication. It is, however, too early to draw any conclusions from these newly established features of government communication in Sweden.

An important part of the development of the communication organization in the governmental offices is the division between politically appointed and civil servant communicators as mentioned earlier. Ministers of government employed the first communicators during the 1970s as information secretaries, and they were all politically appointed. Gradually, the information secretaries became press secretaries, responsible for media contacts and media management, still politically appointed by and working with the different ministers, and funded by the public (Erlandsson, 2008). Presently, politically appointed communicators work in the press departments, and consequently deal with media management and political agenda setting. In contrast, civil servant communicators deal with internal and external information and communication within the information departments. As civil servants, the communicators working with government communication have an ethos of

political neutrality and serve the entire government, independently of the government's political orientation.

The main task of the civil servant communicators is to support the government in its work. The civil servant communicators at the different departments in the governmental offices describe their role as assisting the government with communication and information regarding the work and the policies of the government. This way, professional considerations guide their communication work rather than political ones. There are no official rules or mechanisms that guarantee the balance between legitimate government publicity and party promotion, but the neutrality of the civil servants is an unwritten work ethos in Sweden. The civil servants' neutrality can thus constitute a counterweight to the politically appointed staffs' will to persuade, as research in Britain has revealed (Sanders, 2009). This division between politically and non-politically employed communicators is important in order for the government to maintain trust among the public. Political neutrality is considered a key value with regards to information about the work of the government in order to avoid accusations of party political intentions or political propaganda.

Nevertheless, the division between politically appointed and civil servant communicators can contribute to complexity and diversity in the organization when it comes to the goals and the role of communication as discussed by Graber (2003). While the politically appointed staff is dependent on election results, the civil servants are expected to serve government independently of their political ideas. This can generate conflicts, as political power is confronted with civil servants' principles, especially in an organization that deals with information and communication. Government is both a public and a political organization and actor as expressed by Horsley and Liu (2010) and the goal of communication can thus be complex. On the one hand, the goal is to communicate to inform publics and execute effective governance, and on the other hand the goal is also to communicate the political intentions, objectives and aims of the government in order to remain in power.

Government communicators in Sweden confirm this complexity and how it can result in conflicts over communication content. Furthermore, government communication often becomes uncoordinated due to the fact that the press departments work separately from the information departments and in a substantially different way (Ullström, 2011). Because civil servant communicators in the information departments focus on public relations, generation and dissemination of information, while press secretaries in the press departments focus on dealing with media and keeping up with their need for news. Consequently, the goals and the roles of communication often clash.

Thus, government communication in Sweden is faced with an organization with complex internal structures and processes and with in-built challenges for communication. The new position of State Secretary for Communication, with the responsibility of developing the prime minister's and the government's communication strategy, is symptomatic of these challenges. This new post in the government offices focuses on the development from a point where political leaders simply announced their actions and decisions towards effective strategic communication and the changing role of government communication. As members of the government can no longer exclusively rely on their own abilities to speak to the public through the media, new practices of interacting with the media and the public are required.

The gradual construction of a communication apparatus in the governmental offices has thus changed how politicians in government communicate with the public. The number of communication professionals – both political appointees and civil servants – and the quantity of information disseminated suggest that government communication is transparent and accessible (Erlandsson, 2008). And the government has multiple communication channels for contacts with citizens, media and other important publics which facilitate access to government information. At the same time, communication professionals and impersonal information dissemination can be experienced as an impenetrable wall damaging for open political debates and discussions. Deliberation, which has constituted an important part in Swedish political culture (Lindvall & Rothstein, 2006), is substantially different from easy accessible information.

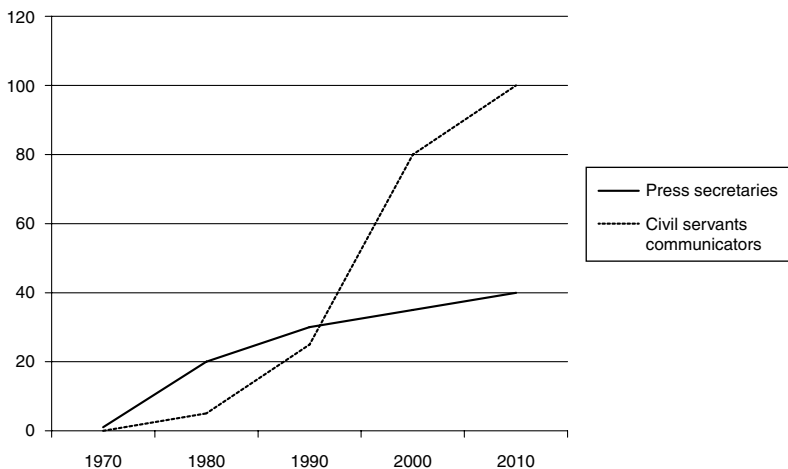
Furthermore, the increasing importance attributed to managing strategic government communication in order to speak with one voice can also have implications for public trust in the government (Sanders, 2011). If the core role of communication becomes that of maintaining a permanent campaign, image making by strategic communication in order to sustain a government's popularity (Blumenthal, 1980), then government communication can be viewed as political spin – the systematic coordination of communication activities to produce clear-cut messages favourable to the government or party – where the public is no more than a target for professional spin doctors (Negrine, 2008; Brown 2011). But an information rich environment can be hard to navigate. Consequently, strategically planned government communication can provide better information and communication of important political policies and initiatives. Still, communication is not only about structures and strategies, but also to a large extent about the resources available for communication. The following sections focus on personal and economic resources devoted to government communication in Sweden and central tasks and functions in these communication activities.

## Government communication resources

In order to handle the expanding demands for information and communication in contemporary society, Swedish governments have expanded their communication organization. More people and resources have been directed into dealing with communication during the past four decades. The numbers of politically appointed communicators have grown from one single information secretary at the beginning of the 1970s (Erlandsson, 2008) to forty press secretaries currently working within the government offices.<sup>2</sup>

The expansion of the communication organization is most visible among the numbers of civil servant communicators in the government offices, expanding from none to approximately 100 persons employed today (Erlandsson, 2008). This means that at the time of writing, there are approximately 140 civil servant communicators, press secretaries and press assistants officially employed in the government offices out of a total of 4,800 employees.<sup>3</sup> The number of personnel dedicated to government communication might not seem so large, but the increase in personnel over such a short time from 1 to 140 places the expansion into a different light (see Figure 2.2).

The establishment of information departments in the ministries was initiated by the government in the late 1990s and lasted until the beginning of the 2000s. Consequently, the expansion of civil servant communicators is most noticeable during this time and indicates the continuous upgrade of communication capacity within the government in recent years. In addition, public relation companies are hired, and communication professionals are



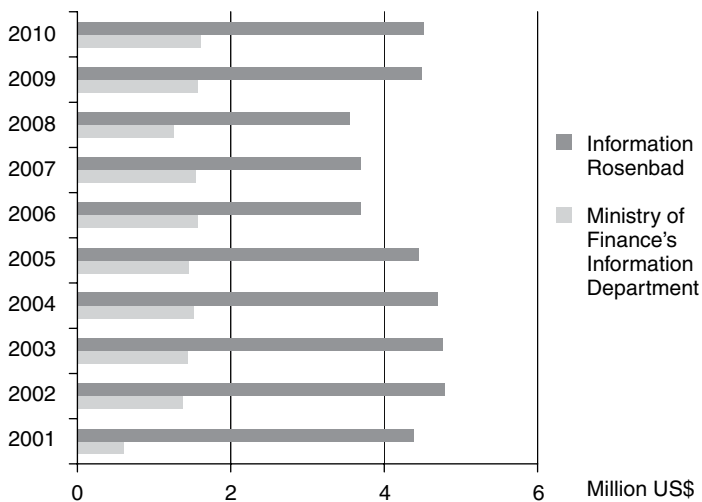
**FIGURE 2.2** Personnel in the government offices in Sweden, 1970–2010

Source: Interviews (see Annex 2.1).

employed as consultants in the different departments in order to build and guide communication strategies and operations. The number of these additional communication professionals does not show in official personnel statistics as they work as temporary consultants. However, a 2011 media investigation revealed that the practice of hiring public relation companies for temporary communication commissions is quite common within departments (Kärrman, 2011). Consequently, it is difficult to establish the exact number of people working with communication operations within the government offices at present. However, the government has clearly expanded the communication organization and the amount of personnel dedicated to communication in recent years.

It is difficult to obtain a complete account of the financial resources dedicated to government communication in Sweden. Costs for press departments, politically appointed communicators and external consultants are not available, as they do not have separate budgets from the total budgets of the ministries. However, budget figures from Information Rosenbad and the Ministry of Finance’s information department indicate the upgrade of the government communication capacity in recent years (see Figure 2.3).

By expanding the personnel and finances dedicated to communication in the government offices, an apparatus has been built in a relatively short time to handle internal and external communication and information demands. There is constant pressure and demand for information from media. There is also pressure and demand for information from the public, especially



**FIGURE 2.3** *Budgets, 2001–10*

Source: Elaborated with information from official documents retrieved from Information Rosenbad.

during any type of crisis. And there is pressure and demand for information from departments and sections within the government offices. Thus, strategically planned communication is important: on the one hand to be able to handle increasing media pressure and on the other to generate, produce and disseminate information successfully. The government in Sweden presently disposes of communication resources resembling those of a large international news agency and produces an impressive amount of information (Erlandsson, 2008). Government communication resources are deployed in order to influence media, their coverage and their agenda as well as public perceptions of and trust in government.

## **Communication activities, functions and tasks**

Deliberation and dialogue, through different community organizations, media and political parties, have been an integral part of Swedish society in order to keep an informed public opinion concerning public policies. The history of Sweden's political culture has been that of stability and consensus, characterized by open and free dialogue. Traditionally, great importance has been attributed to transparent communication and public debates as part of the Swedish political 'model' of public openness (Lindvall & Rothstein, 2006). Thus, one expected function of government communication has been to facilitate interaction, as dialogue and deliberation, between the government and the public.

The main objective for the central information and communication department Information Rosenbad is to facilitate such communication between the government and the public. Consequently, the Information Rosenbad has developed a communication strategy during the past decade that all communication should be transparent, clear and objective. Furthermore, information should be easily accessible when requested; the language should be uncomplicated and adjusted to the receiver of the information. In addition, information and communication activities should contribute to efficiency within the organization, and enhance the public's knowledge of the work of the government and the operations of the government offices (Information Rosenbad, 2008). This communication strategy supports transparency, but not necessarily deliberation, in government communication.

There are also some interactive communication channels available to ensure that the public can pose questions and make comments to public officials and politicians. By using the government website-based questionnaires, or phoning the different ministries, it is possible to contact the government and receive an answer to questions asked. Still, there are no other official public

feedback mechanisms other than the written questions and answers that become official documents.

Legislative structures also support transparency in the public sector. The previously mentioned FOIA remains a cornerstone of Swedish democracy and guarantees the public and the media an unimpeded view of activities pursued by the government and local authorities (RF, 1974). In principle, all official documents received or drawn up by an authority, except those classified on security grounds, can be requested and read or published. There are at least one or two employees in every ministry working with demands for official documents such as receipts for travel and other expenses of politicians, as well as lists of received gifts, and so on (Erlandsson, 2008). Information must be provided as quickly as possible and at a low cost for the receiver.

Another expectation of government communication in Sweden is the availability of ministers for media and public. Ministers are expected to participate regularly in the media by commenting on current issues and events, as well as presenting statements concerning political policies (Ullström, 2011). Political actors such as the government and its ministers need to adapt to media logic in order to have access to the important communication channel that media constitute (Strömbäck & Nord, 2008). To acquire publicity, news management has become more or less indispensable for political actors. So, on the one hand, media demands access to ministers and, on the other hand, ministers need access to media. Thus, there is a symbiotic relation between media and politics, where information is provided in exchange for publicity (Strömbäck & Nord, 2006).

Consequently, the communication organization does not only deal with demands for information and communication, but also wants to practice strategic and effective communication. Thus, the functions of the government communicators include media management, news management, agenda setting and coordination of messages. Media management and coordination of messages are substantially becoming a more integrated practice as exemplified by the implementation of the new section in the communication organization of the government offices, the editorial office in the central information and communication department (the Information Rosenbad). The editorial office deals with the content presented on the government's central web and internal web. In addition, the editorial office has access to the press centre where they can organize their own press conferences as well as produce webcasts with ministers' pronouncements or comments on different issues. The aim is to develop a section that focuses on coordination of information in order to create news for internal and external audiences. The editorial office is not only intended to act as an actor in media management but also as an arena for managing salient issues and create news from the government and thus combine proactive news making while adapting to media logic.



The internet is perceived as one of the most important channels for communication, given the high internet penetration of Swedish society. The government offices have invested considerable resources in the development of the government website. The web is also easily accessible for journalists and other political and social actors who can act as transmitters of information and communication. The web is used to publish documents, to promote information and activities, to publish press releases as well as to send webcasts from press conferences and ministers' speeches. It is thus employed as a communication medium that the government can manage and command in contrast to independent news media (Strömbäck & Nord, 2008).

The government website is a joint communication channel for the press departments and the information departments of the different ministries. The website is thus managed by both civil servants and politically appointed communicators. This model fuels power struggles over priorities of content and the flow of information on the website and there are constant discussions concerning what can be published and by whom (Ullström, 2011). On the one hand, the press departments prioritize media management and want to keep up with the speed and demands of the media. On the other hand, the information departments prioritize information dissemination in order to maintain the public well informed of the work of the government. These power struggles highlight the conflicts concerning the functions of government communication within the organization.

The prime minister and the government head the government communication organization, its functions and activities but in practice different information and press departments work rather independently from the prime minister, establishing their own priorities. However, the appointment of a State Secretary for Communication implies that government communication in Sweden is evolving and adapting to an environment that requires strategic coordination and implementation of government communication.

## Conclusion

To conclude, government communication in Sweden has become professionalized to a considerable extent due to the expansion of the communication organization and the number of communication professionals as well as to the new emphasis on communication practices and strategies. The term 'professionalization' is multifaceted and contested but we think that Negrine's general definition can be useful for government communication. He describes it as: 'A process of change in the field of politics and communication that, either explicitly or implicitly, brings about a better and more efficient – and

a more reflective – organization of resources and skills in order to achieve desired objectives, whatever they might be' (2007, p. 29). This definition describes professionalization as a process over time with no definite start or ending. Furthermore, it is a process that involves an interaction between structures and strategies. In principle, professionalization may either improve democracy, if communication is more efficiently conducted, or damage democratic functions if some interests and intentions are more efficiently expressed than others.

This examination of contemporary government communication in Sweden confirms a continued professionalization process in terms of staff, costs, tasks and functions. Since the 1990s, there has been a rapid development of communication capacities in all parts of government organization. This development can be seen from different perspectives: either as a natural reflection of the increased information demands from the media and the public, or as an independent expansion of capacities in order to maintain influence in the public debate and keep the initiative in the political agenda-setting process. Perhaps, the most accurate way to explain this development is as arising out of a combination of both external and internal driving forces.

As the Swedish media and political systems develop, moving from stability to volatility in terms of audiences and voters since the 1990s, the government is faced with new structural conditions. As a political actor, the government has had to find new ways of interacting with the media and other important publics. The development in the government offices of press secretaries and press departments, civil servant communicators and information departments in all ministries as well as newer sections indicate new strategies for communication. A more professional communication organization also means new practices. The communication organization does not only deal with demands for information and communication, but it also wants to practice strategic and effective communication. Functions of government communicators thus include media management, news management, agenda setting and coordination of messages. Strategically planned communication is important both to be able to handle the increased media pressure, and to generate, produce and disseminate information successfully.

In the Swedish case, the organization of government communication and its strategies is still rather fragmented. It is difficult to coordinate a unified communication strategy for the different ministries and departments as well as between politically employed and civil servant communicators. However, this study reveals that difficulties of coordination is not solely an organizational issue but also due to the fact that the different groups conducting government communication have diverse goals and audiences for communication. There are internal or external audiences of importance for some, and there are informational or political goals of importance for others. Government is both a

political and a public organization and actor and consequently there is diversity and complexity in relation to objectives of government communication. So even though the aim of conducting coordinated and strategic communication might be shared, different objectives are not isomorphic and thus create fragmented communication.

Some of the early twenty-first-century changes in government communication practices in Sweden have been implemented in order to deal with these problems. New functions, such as the State Secretary for Communication, and new departments, such as the editorial office, have been introduced to improve coordination and efficiency of communication activities. Nevertheless, these developments will require further research in order to be able to confirm that government communication in Sweden is in fact gaining strategic coordination.

However, recent changes suggest that government communication is becoming more politicized in that it is being used in part to promote political parties in government to facilitate their success in forthcoming elections. Obviously there exists an in-built conflict between persuasion and information in the way government communication is structured and conducted. The traditional political neutrality of civil servants may in different respects be perceived as a contrast to recent changes in order to control and centralize government communication in line with political objectives of the ruling parties. However, this politicization process is still taking place in a constitutional context where basic democratic values such as transparency and public access to information are distinctive features. There might be a place for more 'spinning' elements in government communication in the future but, at the same time, it is possible that traditional openness and accountability procedures will limit the effects of such a development.

All modern democracies face a crucial conflict between the benefits and the problems of more professional government communication. Persuasive elements may be important parts of such communication. Strategically planned communication can ensure effective government communication that is beneficial for the public as long as government is also faced with scrutiny. As an information-rich environment can be difficult to navigate, strategically planned government communication may assist better information and communication of important political policies and initiatives. Due to the parallel development of an independent and influential media sector, government-controlled communication through manipulation of the media seems implausible in Sweden. The long tradition of professional journalism in news media and its outstanding ability to frame public issues still balance the increased professionalism in government communication and the growing tendency to 'spin'.

## Annex 2.1

### *List of interviewees*

- Anna Olofsson, Head of the section for regional growth at the Ministry of Enterprise, Energy and Communications (7 June 2010).
- Christine von Sydow, Head of Information at the Ministry of Finance (15 June 2010).
- Helena Lombrink, Public Information Officer at the Crisis Management Coordination Secretariat – SPKH (3 June 2010).
- Jonna Danlund, Editor at Information Rosenbad (1 June 2010).
- Jörgen Eklund, Head of Political Planning at the Ministry of Finance (24 May 2010).
- Malin Modh, Press Information Officer at Information Rosenbad (31 May 2010).
- Marcus Sjöqvist, Press Secretary at the Ministry of Finance (29 April 2011).
- Mari Ternbo, Head of Information at Information Rosenbad and Head of Information at the Government Offices (17 May 2010).

## Notes

- 1 The Alliance Parties (the Moderate Party, the Liberal Party, the Centre Party and Christian Democrats), the Social Democrats, the Left Party (the former Communist Party), the Green Party and the rightwing-populist Sweden Democrats.
- 2 Information from the Government Offices website, [www.regeringen.se](http://www.regeringen.se). Retrieved on 16 November 2010.
- 3 Information from the Government Offices website, [www.regeringen.se](http://www.regeringen.se). Retrieved on 25 November 2010.

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# 3

## Government communication in Germany: Maintaining the fine line between information and advertising

*Christina Holtz-Bacha*

**A**lthough there are overarching trends that pose challenges for modern government communication, it can only be understood against the background of the specific features of the political and the media system of a certain country. Their structures and processes provide for a specific systemic environment and thus influential factors that help to explain similarities and differences of government communication among countries.

### **The political and the electoral systems**

Germany has a parliamentary system. On the national level, only the parliament (*Bundestag*) is elected by the people. The president is the head of state but has mainly a ceremonial function and is not elected directly by the people. The most influential figure in the German political system is the chancellor who is the head of the government. The chancellor is elected by the parliament and has always been of the party that received the highest percentage of votes in the election.

The political system is dominated by parties which are mentioned in the German Constitution where they are assigned an important role in

the formation of the popular political will. In fact, the selection of electoral candidates lies almost completely in the hands of the parties. The party landscape had traditionally been dominated by the Christian Democratic Union (CDU/CSU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) which together garnered 80 to 90 per cent of the votes in parliamentary elections until the end of the 1980s. One of them usually formed a coalition government with the Free Democrats Party (FDP). The advent of the Greens in the early 1980s and the Left (*Die Linke*) during the 1990s reduced the power of the former big players. A grand coalition between the CDU/CSU and the SPD existed only in two terms since 1949 (1966–9 and 2005–9). With the diminishing power of the former big parties, coalitions of three parties may become the model of the future. The election of 1990 initiated the gradual decline of the big parties. For the first time, the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats did not accumulate more than 80 per cent of the votes. Presently, the national parliament is composed of representatives from five parties.<sup>1</sup> Since the election in 2009, Germany has been governed by a coalition of the Christian Democrats and the Free Democrats under Chancellor Angela Merkel who has been in office since 2005.

Another distinctive feature of the German political system is federalism which provides for a decentralization of power. Some political fields (e.g. education, culture) lie completely in the legislative competence of the 16 states (*Länder*) that make up the Federal Republic. At the national level, they are represented in the Federal Council (*Bundesrat*) which participates in the federal legislation.

Germany's electoral system is a mixed-member proportional system giving each voter two votes: with the first vote, a party candidate in the constituency is elected, and the second vote is given to a party list. The number of seats a party gets in the *Bundestag* depends on the amount of second votes. During election campaigns, all parties therefore primarily try to solicit second votes while campaigning in the constituencies is mostly left to the individual candidates. Because only the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and the Social Democrats (SPD) usually have a chance to win the constituency and a first vote cast for a small party therefore risks being a 'lost vote', an increasing number of voters have split their vote and given their first vote to a candidate of one of the 'big' parties and their second vote to a smaller party.

Germany's media landscape is characterized by the private press on the one side and a dual broadcasting system of public and commercial broadcasting on the other. Daily newspapers reach an overall circulation of 19.4 million issues (2010) providing for 279 issues per resident over the age of 14 (*Zeitungsichte*, 2010). A daily circulation of about 3 million issues makes the tabloid *Bild-Zeitung* the most popular newspaper in the country. About a handful of nationally distributed newspapers, among them the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and the liberal *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, are

regarded as quality newspapers and together with the political magazines *Der Spiegel* play the role of agenda setters for other media and for the political elite. The majority of the newspapers, however, have a regional or local reach. The television market is divided almost equally between the traditional public service channels and their commercial competitors. More than a hundred channels are on offer but the market is nevertheless dominated by a small number of channels. The wide choice has led to a fragmented market leaving the most popular channel with an average reach of only 12.5 per cent (in 2009, RTL and ZDF) (Zuschaueranteile, 2010). Overall, concentration is a characteristic of the newspaper and the broadcasting market, barely constrained by regulation. In almost 60 per cent of the districts, newspapers have a local monopoly (Schütz, 2009). Two conglomerates, the RTL group and the ProSiebenSat.1 Media AG, both offering several channels, dominate the commercial television market.

In general, German media enjoy a high degree of freedom, guaranteed by the Constitution and upheld by the Constitutional Court. In recent years, media freedom was occasionally compromised by attempts of the authorities to identify leaks and by disputes over privacy. According to the classification of Hallin and Mancini (2004), the German media system tends to the 'North/Central European or Democratic Corporatist Model' featuring three characteristics which 'include the simultaneous development of strong mass-circulation commercial media and media tied to political and civil groups; the coexistence of political parallelism and journalistic professionalism; and the coexistence of liberal traditions of press freedom and a tradition of strong state intervention in the media, which are seen as a social institution and not as purely private enterprises' (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp. 195–6). German journalists mostly adhere to a non-partisan role model that puts neutral and precise information first (Weischenberg, Malik & Scholl, 2006, p. 102).

The development of media use over the past years reflects the changes that have taken place with the introduction of digital media and the internet in particular. While the use of television has been pretty stable with an average of 220 minutes per day, radio and newspaper use have gone down to 187 and 23 minutes. Since about the mid-1990s, the use of the internet has risen steeply and reached 83 minutes in 2010 (All figures: Engel & Ridder, 2010).

## **The development of government communication and its legal background**

The central institution for government communication in Germany is the Federal Press and Information Office (FPIO). It was established in September 1949 directly after the first parliamentary election in the newly founded



Federal Republic of Germany. At that time, barely five years after the end of the Second World War, the experience of 12 years of state-controlled media and propaganda was still fresh and overshadowed the new office for government information policy. The structures of the democratic, but unstable Weimar Republic (1918/19–1933) only partially provided a model for the organization of government communication (see Walker, 1982, pp. 79–80). During its first years, the Press and Information Office was part of the chancellery but soon developed into a separate institution. In September 1958, its director received the status of state secretary, one level below a minister, and the Press and Information Office became directly subordinate to the chancellor (see Hofsähs & Pollmann, 1981, pp. 24–5). It has the status of a supreme federal authority.

However, Germany's first chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, was dissatisfied with what appeared to him as the press' negative attitude towards the work of the government and sought better ways to organize public support for his policy. Therefore, a parallel structure was built up that was supposed to develop public relations for democracy in the wider political sphere, addressing constituencies beyond the media (Weiss, 2006, p. 100). Visible expression of the concept was the founding of the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Demokratischer Kreise* [Consortium of Democratic Circles] (ADK) in 1951, a joint venture of political interest groups successfully engaging in public relation activities in favour of the government and also of Adenauer's Christian Democrats. The ADK was only dissolved in 1968 under pressure from the SPD when the party became a partner of the CDU/CSU in a grand coalition (Kunczik, 1999; Weiss, 2006).

From the early years of the Federal Republic, German governments, independent of their 'colour', again and again used the resources of the FPIO without keeping the government's and their parties' interests separate. That applied, for example, to opinion research for which the office concluded contracts with polling institutes at the beginning of Adenauer's chancellorship (1949–63; Kruke, 2007, pp. 74–9). Conflicts also arose over adverts in the print media and brochures that came close to or could definitely be regarded as electoral advertising. The government, however, was and continues to be forbidden from supporting party campaigns. Therefore, whenever elections were coming up and governments started campaigns pointing to their achievements during the last term, the opposition parties complained about these activities and claimed equal opportunities. The matter finally went to the Federal Constitutional Court. In its decision in 1977 (for documentation with and additional material see, *Das Urteil*, no year), the court not only acknowledged the right of the government to active public relations but also stated that government public relations is a necessity. The court argued that responsible participation of the individual citizen in the formation of the

political will should be based on the knowledge of the decisions and measures taken by the state bodies. However, the government was ordered to abstain from advertising in favour of any of the competing parties and of giving any impression of influencing public opinion to the advantage of any particular party. Government communication, it was argued, reaches its limits where electoral advertising begins.

Therefore, the court made a distinction between, on the one hand, what it called permitted communication activities of the government and on the other, inadmissible activities. At the same time, the court presented indicators which could be used to determine whether communication activities of the government take on the character of electoral advertising and are thus not permitted. These criteria included a temporal factor, the design and the frequency of these activities. If they appear close to an election, that is to say after the date of the election has been announced officially, or if the informational content is overshadowed by its advertising character, or if the activities increase closer to election day, then these factors seem to suggest the potential for electoral advertising and are therefore not permitted (Schürmann, 1992, pp. 37–8; Schütz, 2006).

In its 1977 decision, the Constitutional Court referred to the principle of democracy and particularly the equal opportunities principle established in the German Constitution (Basic Law). By using the resources of the FPIO, the government had seemingly supported the governing parties during an election campaign and thus violated the equal opportunities of the parties. In addition to the principles set forth by the Constitutional Court in the 1977 decision and again in 1983, government communication is further based upon the by-laws of the federal government and the common by-laws of the federal ministries. The first simply determines that the head of the Press and Information Office attends the meetings of the government; the latter regulate the cooperation between the government and individual ministries.

In three other decisions upon complaints against a census (1983) and in connection with a scandal concerning adulterated wine, the Constitutional Court criticized the government for its inadequate information policy and underlined the importance of governmental public relations (Vogel, 2009, pp. 114–15).

According to the laws regulating public service broadcasting, the government has only very limited rights for direct access to programming. The laws for the nine ARD corporations contain different provisions that give governments broadcast time for official statements. Some, as does the ZDF state treaty, restrict access to events such as disasters or other serious hazards for public order and safety. No similar regulations exist for commercial television. Thus, access of members of government to radio and television remains at the discretion of the media and is subject to the same selection

criteria as for other politicians, although the chancellor and the ministers enjoy an incumbent bonus because of the overall relevance of their decisions.

Political advertising is forbidden on television and radio. Television channels broadcast political advertising in the form of short spots only during election campaigns and in the last four weeks before election day. The right to obtain free airtime on the public channels or purchase advertising time on commercial television only applies to parties. Therefore, government information campaigns usually run in the print media or by way of posters, leaflets and the internet.

Against this regulatory background, government communication in Germany must be regarded as primarily serving a public relations function for the government in order to inform about and explain its decisions and thus garner legitimacy for its actions.

## Today's structure of government communication

Officially, the presentation of government decisions to the public is the task of the government's spokesperson. S/he is appointed by the chancellor, holds the position of a state secretary and is also the head of the FPIO. The main tasks of the office are:

- to inform the government and the president about worldwide news
- to monitor public opinion as a basis for government decisions
- to inform the public and the media about the political activities and objectives of the government
- to provide information about Germany to other countries in cooperation with the foreign ministry
- to coordinate public relations activities of the office and of the ministries concerning activities of general political relevance
- to support German news services in Germany and in other countries.

Thus, the FPIO has three functions: a receptive function (monitoring of news and public opinion), an operative function (information of the media and the wider public at home and abroad) and a coordination function (see Müller, 2001, p. 61). Its present organization was the outcome of a restructuring process under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder during his first term (1998–2002). Among the visible innovations under Schröder was the introduction of a corporate identity for all information and public relation activities of the government and the individual ministries. It was also under Schröder that

the FPIO established an internet editorial office and launched an online information platform. The structure of the office had not been changed when Schröder's successor Angela Merkel took office in 2005. Her most important innovation was a weekly video-podcast posted on the chancellor's website and used to comment on topical issues, thus marking another step towards the modernization of government communication.

With a total of 470 employees in 2012 (370 in Berlin and 90 in Bonn), the FPIO is divided into 4 departments: Department I has administrative functions and is in charge of the technical realization of public relations activities. Department II is in charge of media monitoring and analyses German as well as foreign media. Department III takes care of the press and public relations activities and is subdivided according to political areas. Department IV has various tasks among which are interministerial coordination, opinion research and internet and (audio)visual services. In earlier years, public relations for Germany in other countries was also carried out by the office but was transferred to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the red-green coalition (1998–2005).

In addition to the FPIO which represents the government as a whole, the individual ministries have their own press and public relations departments. These are in charge of dealing with the more specific topics that fall within the scope of the respective ministry. To make sure that the government nevertheless speaks with one voice, the head of the FPIO is in regular contact with the spokespersons of the 14 ministries.

In 2010, the FPIO had a budget of 16 million euros for its public relations activities (Schriftliche Fragen, 2010, p. 2) (these figures include the cost of public relations and advertising activities but not salaries). The ministries have additional budgets available, with the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs disposing of the highest amount (13 million euros) and the Ministry of Justice the lowest (91,000 euros).

In most cases, the government spokespersons and thus, the head of the FPIO, have been former journalists. In August 2010, Chancellor Merkel's spokesman Ulrich Wilhelm left his post to become the Director General of the Bavarian Broadcasting Corporation which is one of the nine public service broadcasters that make up ARD.<sup>2</sup> The position was taken over by Steffen Seibert who until then had been a news anchor for ZDF.<sup>3</sup> Usually, the spokesperson belongs to the inner circle of the chancellor and takes part in the daily briefings in the chancellery.

The government spokesperson answers to the national press corps three times a week. Since 1949, the Bonn and Berlin<sup>4</sup> correspondents are registered as an association which is called the Federal Press Conference (*Bundespressekonferenz*, BPK). Any parliamentary journalist can be a member. At present, the Federal Press Conference has more than 900 members (cf. Der Verein, 2010). The press conferences are organized by the association

and take place in its own building. Thus, the government spokesperson and the colleagues from the individual ministries as well as all politicians including the chancellor, appear before the press corps as guests of the association. This exceptional organization of the relation between the media and politicians has its roots in the Weimar Republic but was suspended as soon as the Nazi Party came into government in 1933.

The organization of press conferences by the journalists themselves has the advantage that it is not left to the discretion of the government if, when and how which media are informed. All German and foreign correspondents receive the same information. Fixed dates for the government spokesperson and the spokespersons of the ministries make sure that there is a constant flow of information from the government to the media.

According to the statutes of the Federal Press Conference, information given by politicians 'under 1' can be used by journalists as they like. Information given 'under 2' means it can be used without identification of the exact source. Finally, information given 'under 3' is confidential (Krimke, 2003). In addition to the Federal Press Conference there is an association of the foreign correspondents in Germany (VAP) that also organizes talks with politicians and other prominent guests (cf. Verein der, 2009). More than 400 VAP members have the right to participate in the press conferences organized by the Federal Press Conference.

In addition to the Federal Press Conference there are the so-called background circles. These are clubs of journalists who invite politicians or their speakers for a more informal exchange of information. The information offered in these circles is unofficial and not meant for direct publication but rather is to provide background for issues and strategies. These circles are organized according to political affiliation or type of media and can therefore also be used for strategic news management (see Pfetsch, 1998, p. 84).

The task of the FPIO is restricted to supplying information on the work of the government to the public. Political instruction and education is left to a separate institution called the Federal Agency for Civic Education (*Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung/bpb*). It was founded in 1952 and is supposed to promote awareness for democracy and participation in politics. For this objective, the Agency publishes print and online material, organizes different kinds of events on political and social issues and makes specific offers for journalists (see the Federal Agency, 2010).

## Challenges for government communication

Germany's political system leads to particular challenges for government communication. Since coalition governments are the rule, communication

management always has to take into account the interests of the coalition partners. These may be diverging because, with the next election in mind, each party in a coalition tries to work on its own profile and to emphasize its specific achievements. These calculations not only pertain to national elections which are held every four years but in a federal state like Germany there is always an election close at the level of the 16 states.

In addition, the ministries have their own press and public relation departments. The regulations expressed in the common by-laws of the Federal Ministries that allow them to inform the public about their projects and at the same time oblige the FPIO to coordinate its activities with the press departments of the ministries, demonstrate the sensitivity of the relationship. Since the ministers come from the different coalition parties and are constantly in the public eye and subject to popularity polls, the public relation activities of the ministries mix with the ministers' own public relation efforts to burnish their personal image as well.

Even though the FPIO and the government spokesperson work for the whole government, their role and relevance are very much influenced by the chancellor. The spokesperson, who is the head of the office, answers directly to the chancellor, and it is the chancellor who determines who the spokesperson is and the extent of their influence. Thus, each chancellor has the chance to shape government communication in their own way. Helmut Kohl (CDU, 1982–98), for instance, marginalized the FPIO during his chancellorship due to a deep-rooted distrust of journalists and the media. The government spokesmen during his four terms were mostly kept out of the information loop. Instead Kohl let close confidants handle his media relations from the chancellery. Kohl's contempt for the FPIO and the role of the government spokesperson became evident once again when he dismissed spokesman, Peter Hausmann, who had been in office for four years, and appointed Otto Hauser four months before the 1998 parliamentary election. Because Hauser was and remained a member of parliament at the same time as being government spokesman, he encountered a credibility problem and himself became the subject of media reporting (see Lünenborg, 1999).

When Kohl's successor Gerhard Schröder took office in 1998 he made the former journalist Uwe-Karsten Heye, who had already been his spokesman as prime minister of Lower Saxony, the new head of the FPIO and thus seemed to restore its former relevance. The new government was committed to a new communication concept of dialogue with the citizens and set out to modernize government communication (see Ruhenstroth-Bauer, 2003). To ensure a common look across government, a corporate design was developed that is now used by the government, the chancellery, the ministries and the Press and Information Office for their offline and online public relations activities. The Press and Information Office was restructured and the number

of departments reduced from five to four which also went hand in hand with a decrease in personnel.

However, when the government spokesman Heye was replaced by Béla Anda in 2002, he did not achieve the same position as his predecessor who had been one of the FROGS (= Friends of Gerhard Schröder) as Schröder's close advisors were called. Rosumek (2007, p. 226) therefore pointed to a further decline in the importance of the government spokesperson that had begun under Kohl's chancellorship. Under Schröder, however, this development was also caused by his particular media skills which earned him the moniker 'media chancellor'. Klaus Bölling who had been the government spokesperson for Chancellor Helmut Schmidt (1974–82), therefore described Schröder as his own and best spokesman (cited in Rosumek, 2007, p. 223).

When Merkel's first spokesperson, Ulrich Wilhelm, was about to leave his position of government spokesperson, it became clear that he had managed to give the position back some of its earlier relevance. In addition to speaking for the government, he was part of Merkel's inner circle and also had an office in the chancellery. At the same time, he had earned the trust of the Berlin journalists. It will have to be seen whether the restored relevance of the government spokesperson and with him, the Press and Information Office was just a consequence of a special relationship or heralded a continuing trend.

During Schröder's first term the federal government moved from Bonn to Berlin. The new seat confronted all political actors with a new situation vis-à-vis the media. In the small city of Bonn, the seat of the government when the country was divided, the government quarter was in one part of the city and almost isolated, providing for a close and almost idyllic relation between journalists and politicians. The situation of the media is different in Berlin. Not only are the government buildings and those of the media more scattered across the city but, in addition to several local radio stations as well as local, regional and national television, the capital has an extremely competitive newspaper market, beyond that of any other city in Germany. The number of journalists accredited at the Bundestag has increased fourfold compared to Bonn.

These specific changes in Germany are accompanied by overall developments that require increased efforts on the part of governments to reach their citizens. Commercialization, in the sense of economic reasoning taking over in the media, has made it more difficult for politics to find room in the media and to gain attention. The trend towards individualization on the one side and the plethora of communication channels on the other leads to audience fragmentation and provides additional challenges for political communication management. These developments altogether make it even more difficult for governments to speak to citizens, particularly because they are mostly restricted to pull media.

As a consequence, the government and those responsible for its information and public relation activities will be compelled to professionalize their communication management in order to adapt to the changing environment (see Holtz-Bacha, 2007a, 2007b). Professionalization will be required at all levels and by all those involved in government communication, a development already well under way in the organization of election campaigns where professionals and strategic thinking have long been in place. However, because of the line drawn by the Federal Constitutional Court demanding a clear distinction between the information function and party advertising, the strategic possibilities of government communication in Germany remain restricted.

The temptation to constantly push the envelope and use government communication in the interests of parties and for individual politicians to increase their popularity remains high even after legal clarification. In particular, the timing of campaigns casts doubts on their purely informational character. In November 2010, Chancellor Merkel came under criticism for spending 2.8 million euros on an ad campaign with her photo, praising the work of the government and launched at the same time as her party held its 2010 convention (see, for example, Merkels PR-Kampagne, 2010).

## Conclusion

Government communication is a strategic instrument at the disposal of those who are in power. In interpreting the Basic Law, the Federal Constitutional Court has declared active public relations of the government and the legislative bodies as being in the interest of citizens to allow for informed participation in the political process. While this legitimizes the information function of government communication, the Court has disapproved of any exploitation for party advertising, particularly when an election is close. Due to the German federal system with 16 states holding elections at different times, there is always an election in sight which requires government communication to show constant restraint.

However, the continuous disputes between opposition and government over the use of the FPIO and the funds allocated for government communication demonstrate the fine line between the public relations function on the one hand and advertising in favour of the governing parties on the other. In addition, in a political system where coalition governments are the rule, communication in the name of the government always risks becoming the subject of conflict among the coalition parties, the ministries and the ministers. In the interest of their own profile the ministries do much of their public relations themselves leaving the Press and Information Office



with limited influence. On the other hand, being directly subordinate to the chancellor and due to the fact that it is the head of the government who chooses the spokesperson seems to make the Office and the spokesperson a primary strategic instrument of the chancellor. However, as the cases of Helmut Kohl and Gerhard Schröder in his second term have shown, chancellors do not necessarily use them this way and thus may contribute to a further loss of relevance of the official institution for government communication. Finally, there is a tendency for 'functional PR communicators' (Rosumek, 2007, p. 226), such as the individual ministers or the chancellor, to eclipse the government spokesperson altogether, as they prefer to speak directly to the media themselves and take on the work of fashioning their image into their own hands.

## Notes

- 1 The CDU/CSU is counted as one party here which is not completely correct. The CSU (Christian Social Union) only runs in the state of Bavaria while the CDU only runs in the other 15 states. In the national parliament, CDU and CSU form a single parliamentary group.
- 2 ARD stands for *Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* which is a decentrally organized consortium (literally translated: working group) of presently nine regional public service corporations offering radio and television.
- 3 ZDF stands for *Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen* and is the second German public service broadcasting corporation. It is centrally organized and only offers television.
- 4 Bonn was the seat of the parliament and the government until 1999. After the unification in 1990, the parliament decided to move back to Berlin. The move took place in 1999. Most of the ministries moved to Berlin but some stayed in Bonn.

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# 4

## Opportunities, challenges and trends in US federal government communication

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**U**S federal communicators can facilitate the information needs of a democracy, helping citizens and public servants make informed decisions. This direct and mediated communication may provide an accountability mechanism for public sector policies, programmes and workers. However, despite the recognized importance of federal government communication, little research has focused specifically on government communication or government public relations (Lee, 2008a; Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011a). In the related political communication field, scholars have focused attention mostly on messages constructed, sent and received to directly or indirectly influence politics (Graber & Smith, 2005). Sanders (2011) found that political communication research has provided important, but limited, insights regarding government communication, mostly addressing themes of chief executive communication, the role of news media and normative expectations of communication within constitutional democracies. These limitations, and others, have led to significant gaps in the understanding of government communication in relation particularly to its definition and conceptualization (Sanders, 2011).

This chapter provides an overview of the context and development of US federal government communication, including definitions, structures and

processes of government communication, concluding with an examination of emerging trends and promising areas for future research.

## Government communication defined

US government communication goes by many names, including public affairs, public information, public agency communication and public sector communication (Lee, 2008a). This chapter draws from Sanders (2011) and Lee (2008a) to more broadly conceptualize government communication beyond political communication and political public relations. Political public relations is defined as:

[T]he management process by which an organization or individual actor for political purposes, through purposeful communication and action, seeks to influence and to establish, build, and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with its key publics to help support its mission and achieve its goals. (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011b, p. 8)

This definition could encompass government communication and government communication management but, in order to capture the peculiarity of *government* communication, Sanders (2011) suggested the term 'political' should be clarified so as to be understood to include civic purposes in addition to electoral or campaign ones. This understanding of government communication can be specified in Lee's (2008a) account of the objectives of government public relations as working with the media, reporting and responding to the public, reaching out to the public to achieve objectives of increasing use of public services, gaining voluntary compliance with laws and regulations, conducting public education campaigns, using public outreach and input to monitor the external operating environment, and finally, increasing public support for government services and policies.

## US government communicators

Before focusing on US federal government communicators, it is useful to provide the broader context for government communication within the United States. Government communicators are employees or professional consultants at the city, county, state or federal level whose primary responsibilities are communicating internally or externally to various publics regarding government policies, decisions or actions and/or guiding communication strategy. They

share a common set of obstacles and opportunities, though differences emerge according to government level.

The National Association of Government Communicators (NAGC) describes the functions of its members as editors, writers, graphic artists, video professionals, broadcasters, photographers, information specialists and agency spokespersons (NAGC, 2011). These communicators operate at all levels of government and hail from diverse educational and professional backgrounds. Public affairs officers can play critical roles in strategic issues management, crisis management and conflict management.

While comprehensive figures are not available for all government communication in the United States, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics includes a 'Local Government' occupational employment category and reported numbers for several categories of employment that would fall under public relations and communication. For example, in 2010 it recorded 3,160 public relations and fundraising managers, 10,020 public relations specialists, 1,110 media and communication workers, 790 marketing managers, 360 advertising and promotions managers and several other potentially relevant categories (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). The US Office of Personnel Management described the responsibilities of federal public information officers as advising 'agency management on policy formulation and the potential public reaction to proposed policy, and identify and carry out the public communication requirements inherent in disseminating policy decisions' (2008, p. 65). This work 'involves identifying communication needs and developing informational materials that inform appropriate publics of the agency's policies, programs, services and activities, and planning, executing, and evaluating the effectiveness of information and communication programs in furthering agency goals' (US Office of Personnel Management, 2008, p. 65).

## **Presidential and federal communication**

US government communication and how it has developed are, of course, shaped by the political and electoral systems and structures in which it takes place. The US government is a complex federalist democracy, a union of 50 sovereign states, in which institutions at multiple levels share power. The strong central, national government and state and local sovereign governments mostly consist of legislative, executive and judiciary branches. There are also numerous executive agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Transportation that, together with the state and federal level bodies, generate a complex, multilayered system and create a challenging communication context.

## ***Presidential communication***

The country's president is the nation's most powerful government communicator.

The White House has three primary offices tasked with presidential public relations: The office of communications (OOC), the press office and the office of public engagement (OPE) (White House, 2009b; Eshbaugh-Soha, 2011). Since its 1969 beginnings in the Nixon White House, the OOC has evolved into a critical component of presidential communication (Kumar, 2007). The OOC expanded White House communication functions beyond a singular focus on providing reporters with official information and added the function of advocating for the president (Kumar, 2007). The OOC contains the communication staff and operations tasked with crafting and communicating the president's overarching messages (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2011). The OOC includes the office of the press secretary as well as media affairs, research and speech-writing functions (White House, n.d.). The office of the press secretary, and the press secretary who manages the office, serves as the president's spokesperson and conduit of the president's agenda to the press corps. For example, the press office coordinates the daily gaggles and press briefings. Gaggles are less formal than the press briefings, are not televised, and can serve as an early warning sign for the press secretary in terms of what is on reporters' minds and what may be raised at the daily press briefing (Kumar, 2007). White House communication structures have become institutionalized but each president's management approach influences overall operations including communication (Kumar, 2003). For example, President Obama shifted the mission of the office of public liaison and renamed it the OPE.

The office of public liaison's goal had been to 'maintain relationships with key external groups while in office and use institutional resources to mobilize external supporters for both policy and electoral ends' (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2011, p. 101). This office's efforts correlated with the larger OOC and press office's efforts to influence the press, public and policy makers. In May 2009, the White House issued a press release announcing that the OPE would work along with the office of intergovernmental affairs to serve as the 'front door to the White House through which ordinary Americans can participate and inform the work of the President' (White House, 2009a, para. 1). The OPE has a strong online presence and seeks to broaden engagement between Americans and the federal government through town halls, forums and online discussions surrounding topics like health care and the economy (White House, 2009a).

## Other federal communication related to government communication

The US Congress also influences federal government communication given that the executive power does not solely rest with the president. The federal legislature, Congress, is bicameral with two houses. The US Senate was designed to represent states' interests and is made up of 100 Senators, 2 from each state, who serve six-year terms without term limits. The House of Representatives, designed to represent the people and public opinion, has 435 members who serve two-year terms without term limits. The congressional press secretaries or communication directors who manage communication for federal legislators have received little research interest (Downes, 2008) despite that they contribute to the success or failure of policies and programmes through their direct and mediated communication.

At the federal congressional level, Downes (2008) found that press secretaries build relationships with the news media that are based on 'guarded honesty' (p. 132) and that while these relationships may not be friendly, communicators understand that they need the media in order to be successful. In qualitative interviews with congressional press secretaries, Downes (2008) further found that press secretaries described efforts to spin the media but did not like the negative implications of the term. Instead, they viewed truth as a 'spin toward the best and most positive angle of a story' (p. 129). The quantitative data reinforced this, suggesting that 'spin is a statement to the press that, although it is not based on half truths, is one that is based on selective angles to the truth' (Downes, 2008, p. 129).

Even though government communicators have sought to use less one-way messaging and more two-way communication, involving relationship building with publics that seeks to take their needs and interests more into account (Levenshus, 2010), government public relations have been generally viewed with hostility and suspicion by Congress. Significant efforts have been made to restrict the use of public relations as a professional activity in the public sector (e.g. Lee, 2003, 2006, 2008b, 2009). For example, an investigation by a Senate subcommittee of the US General Service Administration's use of public relations firms and one 2010 contract in particular prompted the Public Relations Society of America Chair and CEO, Rosanna Fiske to write to the committee urging it to consider the public interest served by government public relations and public affairs (2011). In her letter she suggested the following benefits of her members' work:

- Public relations advance the free flow of accurate and truthful information; open and transparent communication fosters credibility and trust in global institutions.



- Public relations serve the public interest by providing the context, clarity and information necessary to aid informed debate and decision-making in a democratic society.
- Public relations help to build mutual understanding among a wide array of global institutions and audiences.
- Public relations serve the public good by changing attitudes and behaviors toward some of the world's most pressing social issues, from breast cancer awareness to drinking and driving to smoking and obesity. The public relations industry also has prevented consumer injury and illness, raised awareness of products that have improved our quality of life, advanced worthwhile causes and provided pro-bono services for institutions that needed public relations assistance but could not afford it. (Fiske, 2011, p. 2)

Fiske also objected to what she considered to be the unfairly negative characterizations of government public relations: 'Pejorative statements, such as spending money to minimize bad publicity and hiring someone to help [the government] "spin", are speculative misnomers that debase the important work being performed by approved federal contractors working on GSA-authorized contracts, whose main goal is to help inform the public of relevant issues' (2011, p. 2). Such negative, unfair characterizations of government public relations are not limited to Congress. For example, a 2011 report on risk communication from the US Food and Drug Administration stated: '*Risk communication* is the term of art used for situations when people need good information to make sound choices. It is distinguished from public affairs (or public relations) communication by its commitment to accuracy and its avoidance of spin' (Fischhoff, Brewer & Downs, 2011, p. 1).

## Legal framework for government communication

In addition to potential misconceptions and misnomers, government communicators are also subject to a number of legal restrictions that may affect their communication strategies and tactics. At the federal level, government communicators and officials are required to protect classified information in their possession (Kaiser, 2008). Laws such as the Hatch Act limit federal communicators' ability to engage in partisan or campaign-related activity during business hours (Maskell, 1996, 1998). For example, federal communicators cannot fundraise during business hours or use a government vehicle for political activities. While the Hatch Act exempts communicators

working for the Congress and the military, each of these groups has its own parallel standards of conduct (Maskell, 1998). For example, the Department of Defense Directive 1344.10 restricts political activities by members of the armed forces in the same manner as the Hatch Act.

Federal communicators must often follow access-to-information laws such as the federal Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and the Government Sunshine Act of 1976, designed to increase transparency and access to government deliberations and records (Relyea, 2008; Relyea & Ginsberg, 2008). While the president's office and Congress are exempt from FOIA, communicators at federal departments and agencies are not. However, the law does not cover interjurisdictional sharing between branches, meaning they mostly rely on professional courtesy or courts to get information from one another (Relyea & Ginsberg, 2008).

Government communicators working for Congress and federal agencies are also impacted by lobbying restrictions (Maskell, 2009). In addition to the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995 aimed at Congress, other government communicators are covered by federal criminal law that generally prohibits using congressionally appropriated funds to lobby Congress, state or local legislatures about pending legislation (Maskell, 2009). This includes publicity campaigns directed at those legislatures.

In a survey of 976 US government communicators at the federal, state and local levels, communicators working for US elected officials reported a higher impact of legal frameworks than did those working for non-elected officials (Horsley, Liu & Levenshus, 2010; Liu, Levenshus & Horsley, in press). These findings could mean that communicators working for elected officials have to tread more carefully in terms of regulations overseeing their campaign and official communication activities than do communicators who are not affected by such laws.

## **Communication in a permanent campaign mindset**

Elections have been described as the 'single most important event in American democratic life' because elections allow Americans to 'both give their consent to be governed and to hold their representatives accountable for past performance' (Thurber, 2000, p. 1). Thus, election studies have received the most attention in government and political communication research (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). US government communication research has focused on relationships between elected officials (rather than non-elected officials or agencies) and the media (rather than publics or other entities) (Lee, 1999; Fairbanks, Plowman & Rawlins, 2007).

Politically or non-competitively appointed federal communicators working for elected officials may be more affected by campaigns and elections than career service communicators who were competitively selected as part of a merit staffing process (US Office of Personnel Management, n.d.). Federal political appointees, including appointed communicators, are often nominated by the president and confirmed by the US Senate (US Office of Personnel Management, n.d.). In 2011, the Senate passed legislation to reduce the number of politically appointed positions it would be required to approve, including many public affairs positions (Friedman, 2011). Politically appointed employees serve limited terms and are often affected by elections when the other party comes into power as they are likely to lose their positions (Vedantam, 2008). In times of increased political partisanship, it can be more important for presidents to 'stock departments with people who understand politics and the increased importance of interaction with Congress, lobbyists, and the media' (Vedantam, 2008, para. 12). This emphasis on the *political* importance of ongoing communication with key publics supports the argument that permanent campaigning has largely become the mindset of governments (e.g. Blumenthal, 1982; Klein, 2005). Kumar (2007) argued:

The president's need to communicate derives from the nature of our representative political system and from the reality that he must continually seek support for everything he does. . . . An emphasis on presidential communications can also be traced to the reality that chief executives are guaranteed no victories by dint of their election. Election provides them with the opportunity to persuade those whose support they need, but they must be able to exploit the resources and opportunities available to them. (p. xiii)

According to Klein (2005), the permanent campaign mindset took shape in the television age and has dramatically shifted the nature of the presidency and of presidential communication. From a communication perspective, permanent campaigning involves a combination of image making and strategic communication that turns governing into a perpetual campaign and government into a tool used to sustain public support for elected officials (Blumenthal, 1982). Besides the campaigning candidate or elected official, there are two important pieces in the permanent, professionalized campaign that affect how US government communicators operate on a daily basis: the paid professional consultant and the political party.

Paid professional political consultants have redefined the role of major political parties, decentering parties' strategic role and have transformed candidate communication with voters and voter assessment of candidates (Thurber & Nelson, 2000). The increasing professionalization of US

electioneering has shifted from a largely locally focused, amateur or part-time effort organized by political party loyalists to the more permanent campaign mindset and infrastructure in which paid campaign consultants are often responsible for the strategies and techniques utilized to market campaign images and issues (Farrell, Kolodny & Medvic, 2001).

The permanent campaign mindset may also be due to the fact that campaigns are increasingly expensive and can require significantly more fundraising than in past years. The 2008 election was the most expensive in US history with candidates raising over US\$1 billion and Obama raising US\$500 million in online donations alone (Hardy, Adasiewicz, Kenski & Jamieson, 2010).

The development of election campaigning as a long-term, hugely expensive activity, commencing precisely when the previous campaign has ended, can produce problems for the conduct of government communication. For example, in 2011, President Barack Obama faced logistical and other challenges in running a White House communication operation, political staff operating out of the Democratic National Committee, and a working 2012 election campaign staff headquartered in Chicago (Kornblut, 2011). Such logistical challenges can strain internal communication, yet US government communication has generally focused more on external audiences and external affairs (Lee, 2008a).

Internal communication systems have been identified as important foundations for strong external communication programmes (Lee, 2008a). External functions include building relations with different audiences including consumers, communities, interest groups and citizens (Lee, 2008a). Other audiences include senior government officials and other government agencies and entities (Lee, 2008a). Media relations are also a significant component of government public relations (Lee, 2008a). As Kumar (2007) stated, 'The public is where a president's political strength lies, but the president's chief vehicle to reach them is the major news organizations' (p. xiv). The First Amendment's protection of a free press laid the groundwork for the mass media to emerge as influential, central characters in government and political communication. The media represent a political institution that influences the government's daily activities (Cook, 2005). Understanding the mass media context is critical then to understanding government communication in the United States (Benoit, 2007).

## **Media relations and a shifting media landscape**

Media relations tend to 'dominate the common view' of government public relations (Lee, 2008a, p. 85). The US media have historically played a

gatekeeper role that has decided what government or political news would be published and what would be ignored, but government communicators also influence media coverage (Entman, 2003; Liu, 2007), particularly during crises. For example, Entman (2003) found that after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, President Bush's war frame for the attacks overwhelmingly dominated the news.

The US media culture and landscape are undergoing tremendous change. While the American news media were once limited to three national television networks and a diet of daily newspapers, and radio news services, the massive expansion of cable news networks and online news options, including citizen journalism (Lee, 2008a), has transformed the American news landscape. At the same time, the mass media have become increasingly fragmented and Americans' confidence in the media has continued to decline (e.g. Cook, 2005; Cohen, 2008). The Pew Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism also reported further declines in daily newspaper circulation and commercial news sector revenues with the exception of cable news (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2010). While newspapers provide the most news reporting of all US media, newspapers have continued to lose both reporting and editing capacity (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2010). Significant staff cuts have also been made within news magazines and national and local television operations. These market-driven cuts and changes in news coverage have led researchers to express concern about the current changing landscape of government and political news (McQuail, Graber & Norris, 2008).

One specific concern has centred on whether the increasing commercialization of the media and the development of market-driven journalism has either increased or decreased the flow of political information and influenced political knowledge in the United States and in other countries (Aalberg, van Aelst & Curran, 2010). Nearly half of Americans report getting their news on a typical day from four to six media platforms (Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel & Olmstead, 2010). Sixty per cent get their news from a combination of online and offline news sources with the internet now the third most popular news platform (behind local and national television news) (Purcell et al., 2010). Cohen (2008) documented how the tone of presidential news has grown increasingly negative. While negative coverage was associated with lower presidential approval ratings from the late 1940s until the mid-1970s, negative news has since lost some of its power to shape public attitudes towards the presidency (Cohen, 2008). Some scholars (e.g. Cook, 2005; Cohen, 2008; Eshbaugh-Soha, 2011) attribute this development to the fragmented, changing media landscape of a new media age.

Paradoxically it seems that, while increasing numbers of cable television channels and digital news resources have made political and government news more widely available now than at any time in history, this increase

in availability and choice has not necessarily resulted in an increased flow of information (Aalberg et al., 2010). The American media system pays relatively little attention to public and foreign affairs, and rising soft news has increasingly displaced hard news (Aalberg et al., 2010). In a comparative study of six countries, the US media system was both the most commercialized and lowest provider of political news and current affairs (Aalberg et al., 2010) and Americans have generally demonstrated a lack of political knowledge including such issues as the causes of the second Iraq War (Castells, 2009).

Perhaps the most profound influence on government communication is the internet (West, 2004; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). Two-way, interactive, social or digital-based communication may assist in decreasing public cynicism and increasing engagement in government-sponsored efforts such as community counterterrorism campaigns (Liu & Briones, in press). Public administration researchers have heralded the potential of the internet to improve government service, communication and citizen trust, yet little empirical research has provided guidance for how to realize this potential (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). The public sector has been generally slow to adopt web-based communication tools with citizens (West, 2004, 2008). However, political groups and representatives can use their websites or video-sharing platforms like YouTube to bypass television and traditional media and extend the reach and longevity of their issue advertisements regarding policies (Kaid & Postelnicu, 2007).

Despite these opportunities, many challenges face government leaders and their communicators who seek to employ digital or social media communication to reach key publics. These challenges include legal and regulatory restrictions, rigid organizational structures, limited budgets, group conflict, hierarchical organizational cultures and employee beliefs and behaviours (West, 2004). Nevertheless, US government agencies have begun to shift resources and emphases from more traditional offline communication activities to online ones, a trend that began with campaign communication. In the first month of his presidency, Obama's team reconstructed and launched a new whitehouse.gov website featuring a blog and replaced the traditional weekly radio address with video messages posted on the YouTube video-sharing platform and on the whitehouse.gov site (Williams, 2009). On 21 January 2009, Obama sent a memorandum to all federal agencies urging them to incorporate new technologies and expand their online communications (White House, 2009b). Many agencies have answered that call.

For example, in 2011 the US State Department abandoned a static website approach it had used since 2008 with America.gov in order to shift resources towards a proactive engagement strategy via social media communication platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube (Cohn, 2011). State Department official, Duncan MacInnes, was quoted as saying: 'The new

paradigm, particularly for reaching youth, is you have to go to where people already are on the Web. People don't visit you, you have to go to them. . . . The material we produced for the America.gov centralized site is now pushed out to the embassy sites' (Cohn, 2011, para. 5). Federal Reserve Chairman, Ben Bernanke, also acknowledged this shifting paradigm and need for transparency and engagement. In April 2011, the chairman held the Federal Reserve's first-ever press conference in which he took media questions and streamed the exchange live on the organization's website (Trumbull, 2011). President Obama has hosted jobs-focused town hall meetings via Facebook, Twitter and the LinkedIn professional social network (Associated Press, 2011). The first social media town hall that was broadcast live from the White House via Twitter on 6 July 2011 garnered 170,000 comments and questions (Associated Press, 2011).

## **Next steps in US government communication research**

As the oldest, continuous constitutional democracy in the world it is surprising how many gaps there are in our knowledge of effective US government communication. We conclude this chapter with outlining three especially fruitful areas for future US government communication research.

### ***Theory development***

First, there is a need for more theoretical development in government communication (Sanders, 2011). To address this gap, Liu and Horsley (2007) proposed the government communication decision wheel (GCDW) as the first comprehensive framework for understanding how communication in the US public sector is distinct from communication in the corporate sector. Based on the limited extant research on government communication, the model explains how two categories of attributes affect government communication decision making: (1) influences on daily activities (federalism, media scrutiny, relationships with primary publics, legal frameworks and politics) and (2) influences on professional advancement (professional development opportunities, management support for communication and management team membership).

In addition, recognizing that the public sector is not a monolithic environment, the GCDW proposes that these opportunities and challenges play out differently in four public sector microenvironments: intragovernmental, intergovernmental, multilevel and external. Further, the GCDW illustrates

the decision making that communicators must consider in all four microenvironments, indicating that at any given moment communicators may be operating in multiple microenvironments. In the intragovernmental microenvironment, one single government unit communicates alone. In the intergovernmental microenvironment, two or more units from the same level of government communicate together. In the multilevel microenvironment, communicators from two or more levels collaborate. Finally, in the external microenvironment, at least one government unit collaborates with at least one private sector, non-profit, or international organization to communicate.

Figure 4.1 summarizes the findings from GCDW survey and interview research (Horsley et al., 2010; Liu, Horsley & Levenshus, 2010; Liu & Levenshus, 2010; Liu et al., in press). A primary contribution of the GCDW is a better understanding of how communicators from various levels of government and working for elected versus non-elected officials communicate. Given that the minimal existing US government communication research has focused on relationships between elected officials (rather than non-elected officials or agencies) and the media (rather than publics or other entities) (Lee, 1999; Fairbanks et al., 2007), the GCDW provides an important first step in broadening our understanding of US government communication. Future GCDW research should test and expand the model in additional contexts including examining whether political appointees and consultants who serve as government communicators face unique (or similar) challenges compared to the communicators currently examined in the GCDW. Further, research could test the extent to which the model applies outside of the United States and what revisions need to be made.

### ***Rise of e-government***

A second fruitful area for future research is to provide guidance on how US government communicators can most effectively harness the rise of electronic, or e-government, to counter the public's distrust of government. For example, Eshbaugh-Soha (2011) argued that the changing media landscape and introduction of social media technology may require presidents to cede substantial control over their messages or expand the role of the public liaison in the White House to help cultivate relationships with key publics. Yet, as the government becomes increasingly open to embracing new media, research is needed to evaluate to what extent these tools can improve government-citizen relationships (Sweetser, 2011).



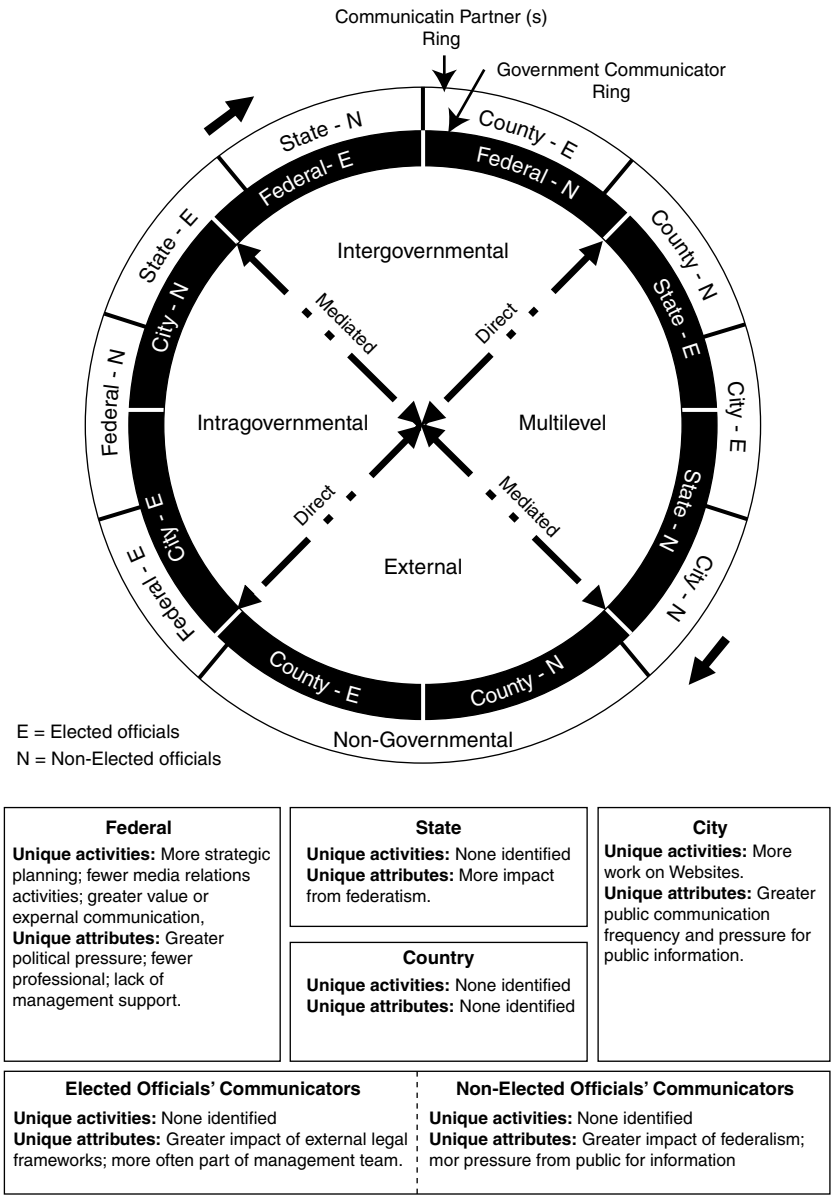


FIGURE 4.1 *The expanded government communication decision wheel*

## ***New communication challenges***

The US government faces new communication challenges as new threats arise. Currently, one of the primary threats facing the United States is how to best communicate about terrorism. One of the most effective methods for countering terrorism is strengthening publics' resilience to terrorism (Weimann, 2009). As such, the government needs to develop effective communication tools to help publics prepare for, respond to and recover from terrorism. One of the first such communication tools developed by the US government in the wake of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks was a colour system that indicated the relative threat of a terrorist attack from low danger to severe threat. However, since the system indicated that the nation was never below a significant risk of a terrorist attack, experts ultimately concluded that the system taught the public to be scared rather than prepared (Homeland Security Newswire, 2011). Consequently, in 2011 the US government launched a simpler two-level threat advisory system featuring messages selectively disseminated via Facebook and Twitter (Sullivan, 2011). At the same time, however, the US government must balance the need to prepare the public for potential terrorist attacks without divulging information that could empower those who would do harm.

In addition, US government communicators would continue to benefit from additional professional development opportunities, especially in light of the emergence of new communication technologies previously discussed. Professional development is key to improving negative media coverage and public opinion of government communication as well as elevating communicators to management roles (Seib & Fitzpatrick, 1995; Liu & Horsley, 2007). The Public Relations Society of America (2007) defined professional development as acquired knowledge or experience that gives a practitioner more insight and ability to be more effective, improves the practitioner's capabilities, or grows his or her professionalism. Survey research in particular finds that US government communicators only moderately evaluate their professional development opportunities (Liu et al., 2010). According to the same survey, government communicators reported on average being members of two professional associations and attending two annual training seminars. Subsequent interviews with 49 US government communicators revealed that communicators working for elected officials at the federal level may have few to no professional development opportunities (Liu & Levenshus, 2010), and a survey of 781 US government communicators revealed that federal government communicators have fewer professional development opportunities than their city and county counterparts (Horsley et al., 2010). Findings from all of these studies draw attention to the need for additional

professional development for US government communicators, especially at the federal level.

Finally, government communicators continue to recognize a need for increased visibility of communication as a management and leadership function. For example, a survey of 976 revealed that only half of US government communicators reported being part of the management team (Liu et al., 2010). Also, interviews with 49 US government communicators found that communicators had limited opportunities for leadership roles. These communicators distinguished leadership from management, the former being a role they could play regardless of their job title and the latter being related to their job title and designated responsibilities (Liu & Levenshus, 2010). Finally, a survey of 781 communicators working for US elected officials versus non-elected officials found that those working for non-elected officials were significantly less likely to be part of the management team (52% compared to 71%) (Liu et al., in press). Therefore, research reveals that US government communicators continue to face challenges in elevating the communication function to a management function and leadership role.

## Conclusion

Given declining citizen trust in the US government, scholars have suggested that more frequent, improved public communication can improve relationships with both the citizens they serve and the media they rely on to convey their information to the public (e.g. Berman 1997; Fairbanks et al., 2007). This chapter lays the foundation for understanding the current landscape of the US federal government and US government communication research, thereby facilitating an understanding of how to improve public communication efforts.

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# 5

## The strategic shift of UK government communication

*Karen Sanders*

In June 2011, the British coalition government announced that the Central Office of Information (COI), the 64-year-old organization responsible for commissioning and coordinating public information campaigns on behalf of the government, would close by May 2012.

A month later News International, part of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp group, announced the closure of the *News of the World*, a best-selling Sunday newspaper, in response to allegations about illegal phone hacking activities. Shortly afterwards, the Conservative British Prime Minister David Cameron declared that an inquiry would be held to investigate the culture, practices and ethics of the press led by the judge, Brian Leveson.

The announcement of the closure of the COI and the establishment of the Leveson Inquiry marked the apparent endpoints to two lines of development that had marked UK government communication since the victory of New Labour, led by Tony Blair in the 1997 general elections until the Party's defeat in 2010 under the leadership of Gordon Brown. The first trend was the steady upward curve in resources invested in communication by successive governments. The second was related to senior politicians' eagerness to cultivate relations with the owners and editors of national newspapers (see Campbell & Stott, 2007, pp. 349, 363, 369, 477, 603; Powell, 2011, p. 190) and avoid interference in their regulatory or self-regulatory arrangements.

This chapter examines the lessons to be learnt for government communication from the Blair years (1997–2007) and their four-year postscript during which the Labour government was replaced by the coalition government



of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties. It sets out the changing approaches adopted by British governments with regards to the establishment of communication structures and strategies directed towards external audiences in the context of a dynamic political and news environment.

The communication reforms introduced by Blair and his governments' emphasis on presentational politics (see Blair, 2007, 2010) precipitated unprecedented public, media and parliamentary scrutiny of the structure and functions of government communication (see Table 5.1).

Published reports and memoirs together with interviews conducted with 40 politicians, political journalists and government communicators from 1997 until 2011 provide the material for this study of the changes and challenges for government communication laid down in the Blair era.

## The political and news environment

Media relations have been one of the growing concerns of British governments since the appointment of the first prime ministerial principal press secretary in 1932 (Seymour-Ure, 2003). Press secretaries became a permanent fixture of UK administrations after Churchill's unsuccessful attempt to do without one in 1951 (see Kavanagh & Seldon, 1999, p. 57). The importance of media relations for government communication is, of course, not just a British phenomenon. The media's prominent role in shaping public perception, their ability to build and destroy the symbolic capital of image and reputation are well-attested features of liberal democracies (see Stanyer, 2012). Democratic governments have sought to swing the balance of power to their advantage through, among other things, an emphasis on image strategies, on carefully crafted messaging and on what has been pejoratively termed 'spin' – media manipulation – or news management. This drive for positive coverage does not sit easily with the media's role as, at best, watchdog of the political class and both sides find themselves in a relationship in which each has different and often opposing priorities (see Sanders, 2009, pp. 31–4).

These tensions became particularly acute during Blair's first prime ministership (1997–2001) when New Labour's communication style fed fears that public opinion was being manipulated through aggressive media management (see Barnett & Gaber, 2001). As Blair himself put it (2007): 'We paid inordinate attention in the early days of New Labour to courting, assuaging, and persuading the media.' His justification was that 'after 18 years of Opposition and the, at times, ferocious hostility of parts of the media, it was hard to see any alternative.'

Blair's comment highlights the importance of situating a government's approach to media relations in both its historical and structural context.

**TABLE 5.1** Reports related to UK government communication, 1997–2011

Report title	Publication year	Report team	Subject
Mountfield report on the Government Information Service	1997	Top civil servant	Government communication structure and processes
The Government Information and Communication Service	August 1998	Members of Parliament (MPs)	Government communication structure and processes
Special advisers: boon or bane?	March 2001	MPs	The role of special advisers
‘These unfortunate events’: lessons of the recent events at the former DTLR	July 2002	MPs	Lessons from dispute between special adviser and civil servant in relation to communication issues
Defining the boundaries within the executive: ministers, special advisers and the permanent Civil Service	April 2003	Independent Committee on Standards in Public Life	Review of progress made since recommendations in first and sixth reports and examine ‘current concerns’ regarding roles of members of the executive
An independent review of government communications (The Phillis Report)	January 2004	Independent review established by government chaired by media executive, Bob Phillis	Review of government communications including examination of different models for organizing and managing the government’s communication effort

TABLE 5.1 Continued

Report title	Publication year	Report team	Subject
Report of the inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the death of Dr David Kelly CMG (The Hutton Report)	January 2004	Independent inquiry established by government chaired by Judge, Lord Hutton	As part of inquiry examined government communication in relation to the production of the Iraq dossiers and relations to the BBC
McArthur COI future of media buying project	2008	Independent inquiry established by COI chaired by media industry expert, Douglas McArthur	Review of multiplatform media buying strategy
Government communications	2009	Members of the House of Lords	Review of progress in government communication since Phillis Report and recommendations for future
DirectGov 2010 and beyond: revolution not evolution	October 2010	Review of DirectGov (official UK government website) carried out by UK Digital Champion, Martha Lane Fox	Examine how the government can use the internet both to communicate and interact better with citizens
Review of government direct communication and the role of COI	March 2011	Review carried out by permanent secretary for government communication, Matt Tee	Review of all direct communication activities (marketing and advertising) and future of COI

Labour, for example, had suffered from a hostile press in the period from 1979 until 1997 and, measured by circulation, Britain's national newspapers had tended in this period to support Labour's main rival, the Conservative Party (see Tunstall, 1996). Winning over the media, and especially the Murdoch press, became a high priority for the architects of New Labour and they took this concern, together with the news management techniques perfected in opposition, into government in 1997 (see Gould, 1997/2011).

UK governments' development of news media relations should also be set in the context of the peculiar features of the British news industry. The UK news industry has three structural characteristics that distinguish its news culture from that of other liberal democracies and pose particular challenges for government–media relations (see Sanders & Hanna, 2012). First, except in some anti-monopoly law, the newspaper industry is not subject to industry-specific statutory regulation. The broadcast industry, however, is legally bound to be accurate and impartial in its news provision. It must comply with ethical codes and fulfil a number of other public service commitments including provision of news as a contribution to democratic debate, in accord with the country's 700-years-old parliamentary system within the framework of a constitutional monarchy. Public service broadcasting (PSB) commitments apply not only to the publicly funded British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) but also to the United Kingdom's commercial broadcasting sector including its principal terrestrial and satellite television and 340 radio stations.

The press is highly partisan in its reporting of politics. Its strongly adversarial style has tended to reflect the competition between the two major political parties that have dominated the UK political landscape from the 1920s onwards. Britain's first-past-the-post electoral system has ensured that, since 1922, the Conservative and Labour parties have provided every one of the country's subsequent 17 prime ministers and the majority of the members elected to the House of Commons, the main legislative chamber. Coalition government, and the more consensual style of politics it can encourage, has been a rarity in Britain, although the Liberal Democrats' emergence as the government kingmaker in the 2010 parliamentary elections may be the harbinger of a more fluid electoral landscape. Britain's press ranges in political views from the left-liberal *Guardian*, owned by the independent Scott Trust, to the highly populist and, at the time of writing, Conservative-supporting *Sun*, part of the News International group. At their best, British newspapers produce challenging, rigorous reporting; at their worst, their reporting is scurrilous and newsgathering techniques have fallen into illegality.

A second key structural characteristic is the British press' high 'national' reach and readership. The ten daily and nine Sunday newspapers cater to the whole UK media market, distributed in the four main constituent nations of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland that comprise the United

Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland with a combined population of 61.8 million (Office for National Statistics, 2010). The total average daily circulation of these national daily newspapers in 2009 was around 11 million, a decrease of 2 million since 1995 (Currah, 2009, p. 24). British newspaper websites have done better: those produced by the *Daily Mail* (over 4.3 million average daily browsers) and the *Guardian* (2.8 million average daily browsers) are among the world's most consulted English language newspaper sites (Deans & Halliday, 2011). There is also a significant regional and local newspaper market of 1,100 newspapers that, according to its trade body, on a weekly basis are read in print by more than 33 million adults (just over 50% per of Britain's population) and are accessed online by more than 42 million users (Newspaper Society, 2012). Compared to other large European countries and the United States, the UK press is more competitive in terms of breaking news 'exclusives' and readership figures as a media sector. The country's newspapers constitute a significant cultural and political force and often set the national political agenda with high-profile investigations.

A third major structural characteristic of Britain's news culture is the dominant position of the BBC. The BBC has built a reputation for accuracy and its news output is a benchmark for high standards in British journalism. It draws on huge resources, compared to those of its competitors, generated by a form of annual tax levied on every British household which owns a television set (in 2012 it was approximately US\$214.75). Its dominant position is facilitated by its eight national television channels, ten national radio stations, forty local radio stations and BBC Online. It also runs the international BBC World News television and the BBC World Service.

By early 2010, the economic future of journalism in Britain appeared difficult. There were significant journalism job losses as a result of the economic downturn and the longer-term effect of structural changes on media organizations including the migration of advertising to the internet, continuing decline in national newspaper readership and audience fragmentation (see Sanders & Hanna, 2012). Aggregated news sites and news distribution through social networks such as Twitter also began to impact on the way news is consumed in Britain.

The changed and more fragmented news environment also suggested new challenges both for politicians and government communicators. However, the abiding features of the UK news environment – a fiercely competitive, partisan and largely unregulated press battling for hard-hitting news stories, high national newspaper consumption and a dominant and trusted BBC committed to impartial news coverage – have remained present from Blair's premiership up until the time of writing. It remains to be seen whether challenging economic conditions and the outcome of the Leveson Inquiry into media ethics will bring about a sea change in the Britain's news environment.

## **Millbankization and the shift to strategic communication**

During Tony Blair's time as prime minister from 1997 until 2007, nine reviews were initiated to examine directly government communication or aspects of it (see Table 5.1). This unprecedented scrutiny arose in part from the need for modernization and from the controversies that resulted from the changes implemented by Labour. In general terms, there was a shift to a more strategic, proactive approach to communication that raised important questions about the fine line between professional communication and spin, the pejorative term used for manipulative communication.

### ***The civil service machine***

When the Labour Party assumed government in 1997, it inherited communication machinery that had developed since the end of the Second World War in 1945 with three essential structural features. First, the COI responsible for government communication and marketing services, established in 1946 as the heir to the propagandist Ministry of Information, worked with government departments and other public sector bodies as well as with marketing and advertising companies to develop government communication campaigns. A second structural feature of the communication machinery was a cadre of information officers created in 1949 known as the Government Information Service (GIS) and responsible mainly for media relations. Finally, the prime minister's press secretary occupied a central role at the heart of government communication and typically had one of two profiles: the first, most common during Conservative governments, consisted of those recruited directly from the civil service; the second profile, more favoured by the Labour Party, was someone with a Party connection and a journalistic background (see Seymour-Ure, 2003).

An additional structural feature, the politically neutral character of government communicators including the prime minister's press secretary, flowed from the peculiarity of Britain's administrative system according to which government departments (ministries) are staffed at the highest level by civil servants who are expected to respect the civil service's ethos of political neutrality. This is almost unique in liberal democracies. Apart from Canada, in every other country, governments make political appointments to the top and often second and third tier jobs in their administrations (Mountfield, 2002). In Britain, civil servants are expected to serve governments of all political stripes, providing impartial advice and analysis on how best to achieve their policy goals and this public service ethos is expected of those working in government public relations.

## ***The Millbank model***

During their time in opposition based at Millbank Tower on the River Thames, Labour looked to Bill Clinton and the Democrat Party to learn the lessons of effective political communication in an often hostile, 24-hours news environment (Gould, 1997/2011). They learnt three important lessons about how to organize media relations:

- There had to be strong control and coordination from the centre.
- Communication should not be just reactive but also proactively set the media agenda.
- Reactive communication should be rapid and not shy away from robust response to media reporting (summarized by the term 'rebuttal' and later 'prebuttal' where responses would be made before the expected criticism).

On assuming office in 1997, New Labour inherited a communication service which they considered unsuited for the demands of the modern media (see Powell, 2011, p. 193). There was, for example, no 24-hour media monitoring (Campbell & Stott, 2007, p. 231). The newly appointed Chief Press Secretary, former Labour-supporting journalist and Blair's press chief in opposition Alastair Campbell, instructed department heads of information to 'raise their game', as stated in a letter leaked to *The Times* and published on 2 October 1997.

That year, the government established an internal review of government communication published as the Mountfield report.<sup>1</sup> It recommended a number of changes to government communication in order to improve the coordination and consistency of communications across government and enhance its capacity to operate in a 24-hour world. The GIS was renamed the Government Information and Communication Service (GICS) to reflect the new proactive communication approach. The Chief Press Secretary became the Prime Minister's Official Spokesperson (and PM's Director of Communications from 2000) to whom the twice daily press briefings of the officially accredited group of parliamentary journalists known as the Lobby, previously carried out in an unattributed fashion, were now sourced. In time, the briefings were issued in summarized form on the internet and lobby briefings were opened to specialist and foreign correspondents.

A Strategic Communications Unit was established to monitor the media and collect data and intelligence, devise and advise on government communication strategies and coordinate communication across government. Media agenda setting became a key goal of government communication. Setting the agenda involved techniques such as repetition and 'trailing' – pre-announcing policy initiatives – to the media, building coverage before, during and after the actual

initiative (see Barnett & Gaber, 2001, pp. 102–25). From 2002, Blair instituted a monthly prime ministerial press conference.

Rapid response was one of the main changes noted by a government communication director with the arrival of Campbell (Smith, 2002). In the past, rebuttals were just not done and ‘no comment’ was an acceptable response (Smith, 2002).

One of the most significant changes introduced by Labour was the substantial increase in political appointees, special advisers, in government, rising from 38 to 70 in the first year of Blair’s tenure (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2003, p. 50). Special advisers, like civil servants, are funded by the public purse but, unlike them, may take a party political line on matters of policy and communication. In particular, considerable unease was caused by the appointment of the Chief Press Secretary Alastair Campbell and Chief of Staff Jonathan Powell as special advisers with exceptional powers to instruct civil servants (Blair, 2010, p. 17).

### ***Communication controversies and the politicization debate***

The ‘Millbankization’ of government communication was, as even critics acknowledged (see Barnett & Gaber, 2001, pp. 117–23), a necessary effort to modernize an antiquated communication machine. However, it also affected, according to its critics, government integrity and therefore, undermined public trust, spreading scepticism about politics. The most trenchant critics (Jones, 2001; Ingham, 2003) alleged that, in giving unelected officials such power, parliamentary and public accountability had been undermined and civil servants’ political neutrality contaminated by partisan politics (Jones, 2001, p. 242). On this account, legitimate government communication had become spin doctoring, where presenting policy to achieve favourable media coverage, whatever the facts of the case, had become more important to Blair’s government than policy itself.

A number of incidents fanned the flames of media attacks on Labour spin (see Powell, 2011, pp. 202–3, 218) but the most controversial involved Blair’s alleged attempts to persuade the British public of the case for the 2003 Iraq War (see Laurie, 2010). The government’s actions (see Sanders, 2009, pp. 34–6) provided the ammunition for charges that government communication had crossed an ethical line. The controversy ‘reinforced an already a growing public distrust of government communication’ (Stanyer, 2004, p. 433). In its aftermath, Campbell resigned (29 August 2003) and an independent review chaired by media executive, Bob Phillis, was established with a remit to ‘conduct a radical review of government communications’ (Phillis, 2004).<sup>2</sup>



British government communication stood charged of having undergone a process of politicization due in part to three developments. The first concerned the novel position of Alastair Campbell, who accumulated considerable power given his unelected and non-civil servant status. By 2003, as director of communications and strategy, he also headed the GICS, three 10 Downing Street departments (the press office, the strategic communications unit and the research and information unit) and the COI. Even he admitted that 'the GICS had withered a bit under my weight' (Campbell & Stott, 2007, p. 608). The second development was related to the influx and role of special advisers together with the departure of senior career civil servants, usually replaced by staff with a media background. Of the 19 departmental heads of information, 17 had resigned or been replaced as at July 1999 (HOLSCC, 2009, p. 8). Third, the Blair governments had placed a particular emphasis on promoting coordinated, positive government policy messages which sometimes, it was alleged, crossed the line of acceptable civil service practice by straying in to party promotion or public opinion manipulation rather than legitimate government publicity. This was leading, in the words of a senior government official (Mountfield, 2002) to 'a situation where "spinning" has so far over-reached itself that it has become almost counter-productive, and . . . a self-correcting mechanism is therefore at work'.

The strategic and structural innovations of the Blair years and also, perhaps, journalists' sense that these changes were contributing to the erosion of their power, inflamed media and parliamentary concerns about the integrity of government communication and, related to this, the maintenance of public trust in politicians. These debates were at the heart of the Phillis Inquiry, established by Blair in 2003 to review government communication.

## **Government communication post-Phillis, 2004–10**

Published in 2004, the Phillis Report recommended that communication be based on the following seven principles (2004, p. 2):

- Openness, not secrecy.
- More direct, unmediated communications to the public.
- Genuine engagement with the public as part of policy formation and delivery, not communication as an afterthought.
- Positive presentation of government policies and achievements, not misleading spin.

- Use of all relevant channels of communication, not excessive emphasis on national press and broadcasters.
- Coordinated communication of issues that cut across departments, not conflicting or duplicated departmental messages.
- Reinforcement of the Civil Service's political neutrality, rather than a blurring of government and party communications.

This last recommendation was premised on the view that maintaining the political neutrality of government communicators is an effective approach, although not the only one, to building trust in government communication since it provides a counterweight to a political party's tendency in government to see itself as having principally a mission to persuade rather than a duty to explain. The Phillis recommendations, accepted by government, also included the creation of the Government Communication Network (GCN), bringing together not only press officers as in the Government Information and Communication Service (GICS) but all communication professionals, headed by a permanent civil servant responsible for establishing standards of excellence and training for the civil service corps. To this end, professional skills' programmes, *Engage* and *Evolve*, were launched in 2006 and 2007 respectively and ministerial departments looked to recruit staff with appropriate professional backgrounds.

Following Phillis' recommendations, Gordon Brown appointed a civil servant as his director of communications and official spokesman on becoming prime minister in June 2007 after Tony Blair's resignation. A political press adviser was also appointed and, in 2008, a non-civil servant director of strategy and principal adviser, responsible for advising on communication. A UK Statistics Authority was established in 2007 'as a non-ministerial department in order to depoliticize the release of official statistics' (HOLSCC, 2009, p. 16).

Ethical codes and principles of good practice were buttressed. The Civil Service Code, introduced in 1996 to govern the work of civil servants was revised in 2006. It was supplemented by *Propriety Guidance* which sets out the expected standards of behaviour for those working in government communication.

However, it may be naïve to imagine that government communication can ever be truly politically neutral and that the public's trust can ever really be won. In his memoirs, reflecting on the public's relationship with politicians, Blair suggests that (2010, p. 186):

Trust, as a political concept, is multilayered. At one level, no one trusts politicians, and politicians are obliged from time to time to conceal the

full truth, to bend it and even distort it, where the interests of the bigger strategic goal demand it be done. Of course, where the line is drawn is crucial and is not in any way an exact science. . . . Without operating with some subtlety at this level, the job would be well-nigh impossible.

This view of politics led Blair to state that one of his biggest regrets as prime minister was to have introduced the 2005 Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), legislation he described as 'utterly undermining of sensible government' (2010, p. 516).

Resources invested in communication also continued to rise during the Brown administration. By 2008, the number of staff working in central government communication had increased by 73 per cent from 1998 (see Table 5.2) and COI spending on direct marketing and communication in public information campaigns had increased by 43 per cent from 2007 to 2008 to £540 million of which 35 per cent was on advertising (COI, July 2010). Despite the controversies about the actions of special advisers, Brown's government employed 78 of them, the same number as his predecessor (Hansard, 2007).

The steady increase in investment in communication resources was driven by soaring media demands, the growing pressure for transparency in government communication facilitated by the enactment of the FOIA and the impact of digital technology. Recognizing the developing role of digital communities and social media, the Brown government opened a Twitter account and created the new position of Minister for Digital Engagement in 2008 and, the following year, that of director for digital engagement. According to the job advertisement, the director's work:

will require Government and individual departments to change the way they do business – from consulting citizens to collaborating with them on the development of policy and how public services are delivered to them. It will involve supporting Ministers and senior officials in entering conversations in which Government does not control the message or the dialogue. (McGee, 2009)

That year a Digital Inclusion Champion was appointed to encourage more people to go online, a role extended in 2010 by the Cameron government to include internet delivery of public services and the development of what was termed a 'Networked Nation'. Increased citizen-focused government communication, greater centralization in communication structures and more concentration on the regional and local media had been among the recommendations of the Phillis Review (2004, p. 5) and had been reiterated by the House of Lords' 2008 Inquiry (HOLSCC, 2009, pp. 37–8). Enhanced training and spread of best practice as well as more transparent government

**TABLE 5.2** Communication professionals in UK central government

Department	Dec. 1998	Sept. 2008
Cabinet Office	23	38
Ministry of Justice	–	77
Lord Chancellor's Department	16	–
Department for Culture, Media and Sport	13	21
HM Customs and Excise	10	–
HM Revenue and Customs	–	58
Board of Inland Revenue	17	–
Ministry of Defence	109	255
Department for Communities and Local Government	–	77
Department for Education and Employment	100	–
Department for Children, Schools and Families	–	68
Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills	–	42
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	–	106
Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (including agencies)	87	–
Ministry for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food	42	–
Foreign and Commonwealth Office	40	46
Department of Health	101	122*
Home Office	46	98
Department for International Development	17	24
Prime Minister's Office	14	31
Department of Trade and Industry	82	–
Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform	–	London Only 67

**TABLE 5.2** Continued

<b>Department</b>	<b>Dec. 1998</b>	<b>Sept. 2008</b>
Department for Transport (including agencies)	–	105
HM Treasury	18	28
Department for Social Security	60	–
Department for Work and Pensions	–	113
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>795</b>	<b>1,376</b>
<b>TOTAL ENTRIES</b>	<b>1,628</b>	<b>3,158</b>

*Source:* Cabinet Office letter, HOLSCC, 2009, p. 130.

communication and better collation of government communication statistics were also recommended by the House of Lords Select Committee on Communication, who had been unable to obtain from government a figure for the overall costs of government communication or reliable data regarding the number of people employed in communication (HOLSCC, 2009, p. 33). The Committee also noted that the ‘second class’ status of communicators within the civil service was a continuing problem because of the failure of some government departments to attract high calibre staff to communication posts (see HOLSCC, 2009, p. 27).

The Lords’ report emphasized less the potential of digital media and more the need to ensure a more open relationship with traditional news media in order to rebuild what they considered to be the breakdown in trust between government, media and public.

## **Counting the costs of government communication**

When David Cameron came to power as head of the 2010 coalition government, the previous year’s total cost of communications to government had been £1.01 billion (US\$1.38bn), of which £540 million (US\$858.5m) was direct communication activity through the COI, and £329 million (US\$523m) was estimated staffing costs (COI, 2010). Advertising expenditure had expanded under the Labour governments in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with the result that the COI had become the country’s highest-spending marketer

by 2009. Almost immediately, the new government announced a freeze on marketing and advertising activity.

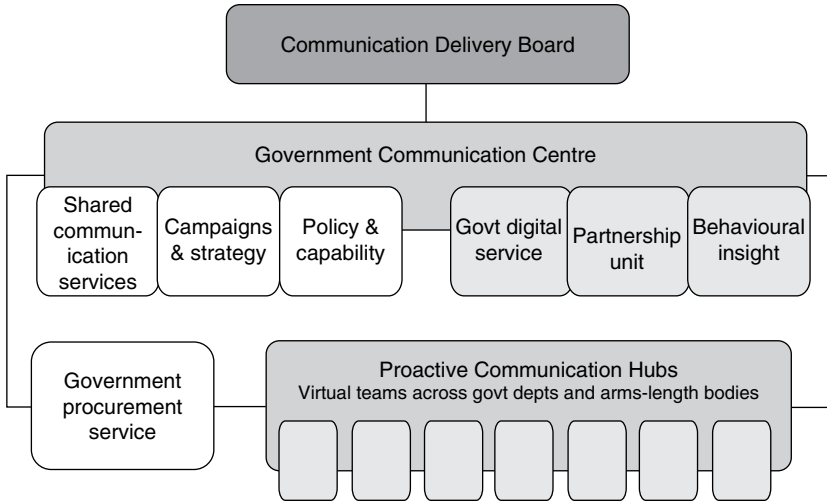
Instructed to carry out a review of the COI's future, the civil servant head of government communication published his report in March 2011, taking into account the new government's twin policy priorities of reducing the country's deficit and forging a smaller role for government and a greater one for citizens (the Conservatives' notion of the 'Big Society'). In this context, he suggested that government communicators would have to do more for less, and, in his words (Tee, 2011, pp. 5–6):

- to focus on priority issues and audiences, not on departments;
- to build new relationships and valuable partnerships in the civic and commercial fields;
- to improve effectiveness through better evaluation and insight;
- to focus on value for money and return on marketing investment (ROMI).

The report's publication marked a watershed for UK government communication as the Cabinet Office (2011) responded by announcing its plan to shut the COI by spring 2012 and manage advertising and marketing activity out of the Cabinet Office.

In June 2012, the new government communication structure was launched (see Figure 5.1) in the context of the Civil Service Reform plan. A Communications Delivery Board (CDB), chaired by the Minister for the Cabinet and including other ministers and officials, was established to consider cross-departmental communication issues, oversee the Government Communication Network (GCN) and approve the annual integrated communications strategies developed by new interdepartmental structures known as 'hubs' in which departments would collaborate on strategic objectives for government communication. Its approval is necessary for communication expenditure over £100,000 (US\$159,000).

The Government Communication Centre (GCC) depends on the Communication Delivery Board and is headed by a civil servant executive director who also acts as head of the communication profession. It coordinates three support service areas: *shared communication services* including media monitoring, regional news service, media planning and campaign evaluation; *policy and capacity* which develops professional standards and training; *campaigns and strategy* which works on strategy, planning and the development of cross-cutting themes across government organized around seven hubs. The hubs bring together communicators in aligned areas. For example, the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry for



**FIGURE 5.1** *Government communication structure in 2012*

Source: Retrieved 1 September 2012 from <https://gcn.civilservice.gov.uk/structure-of-government-communication/>

International Development are brought together in one hub to concentrate on Britain’s role overseas.

On 5 September 2012, for the first time the government communication plan for the year was published and the rollout of a branding programme across government was announced. The changes implemented over the previous two years were also reported: a 40 per cent fall in departmental communication staff from 3,438 in 2009–10 to 2,022 at the start of 2012–13 and a reduction from £532 million (US\$845m) in COI spending in 2009 to a projected £284 million (US\$451.5m) in 2012–13 (Kempston, 2012).

Moves were also made to strengthen the UK government’s digital environment. In response to the 2010 Lane Fox report (to examine how the government can use the internet both to communicate and interact better with citizens), the Government Digital Service was launched in August 2011, aiming to build on the work of direct.gov and bring together more than 400 government websites to create a more open, interactive one-stop shop for government services and information (see Bracken, 2011). It was succeeded in February 2012 by gov.uk.

Originally launched in 2006, the government’s introduction of e-petitions which, if they receive at least 100,000 signatures, can trigger a parliamentary debate, also suggested a sign of government commitment to enhancing public engagement. These encouraging developments built on the groundwork laid down by previous Labour governments, recognized by Britain’s position at

number four in the UN's 2010 country ranking of e-government development (United Nations, 2010).

These changes largely affected direct and digital communication activities. The area of media relations and the large number of departmental press officers engaged in these tasks (almost 4,000 in 2009, according to the COI's White Book) was left for future reform.

Cameron's reforming agenda did not extend to the criteria applied for the selection of his communications director at 10 Downing St. Appointed as a special adviser, Andy Coulson had edited the *News of the World* from 2003 until his forced resignation in 2007 after one of his journalists was found guilty of phone hacking. Coulson was considered a controversial choice given the continuing accusations of press wrongdoing and the implication that maintaining good relations with News International trumped ethical concerns. Coulson resigned in January 2011 and the subsequent closure of his former newspaper in the wake of new phone hacking allegations prompted the prime minister to set up the Leveson Inquiry. In doing so, he admitted that British politicians and the press had developed an unhealthy complicity:

The truth is, to coin a phrase, we have all been in this together: the press, the politicians of all parties – yes, including me. We have not gripped this issue [phone hacking]. (. . .).

To be fair, it is difficult for politicians to call for more regulation of the media because if we do so we are accused of wanting to stifle a free press or even free speech. But the deeper truth is this: there is a less noble reason, because party leaders were so keen to win the support of newspapers we turned a blind eye to the need to sort this issue, to get on top of the bad practices, to change the way our newspapers are regulated (Cameron, 2011).

As power flows to new forms of media, governments may feel more emboldened to take on an unruly press. They will surely adjust accordingly their communication activity which must now operate in the context of a more interactive, participatory, unpredictable digital world.

## **Challenges for UK government communication**

Announcing the establishment of the Leveson Inquiry (11 July 2011), Cameron spoke of his view that 'democracy is government by explanation and we need the media to explain what we are trying to do.' This media-centric view of government communication typified the Blair governments' approach. In the context of Britain's aggressive, partisan press, as government communication became more planned, coordinated and combative itself in the Blair years, media and government relations came to be seen as a zero-sum game.



Critics' views that government communication was less about providing clear, truthful and factual information to citizens and more about winning public approval were given added credence by the fact that the COI spent more on marketing and advertising than any other UK organization, spending most in pre-election years. The enhancement of the political dimension to communication expertise through the threefold expansion of special advisers in Blair's time also fuelled an impression that manipulation rather than communication is government's primary aim. However, despite criticisms when in opposition about special adviser numbers, the reality is that in office the coalition government expanded their number, rising from 68 on Cameron's arrival at 10 Downing St to 80 in 2011 (Pickard, 2011). It appears that when in government, politicians find they cannot do without the expertise and political commitment that special advisers can contribute and, it can be argued, that modern government requires.

UK governments of all stripes recognize that in democracies politicians must explain their policies and that governments need help and advice about how to do this effectively. Yet relentless and often legitimate media criticism of the way they have gone about this together with a difficult economic climate have made them unwilling to set forward the arguments for a properly resourced, professional communication operation.

Reviewing the Blair years and their aftermath, three key lessons emerge. First, communication is a strategic function of government requiring the development of skills, competences and capabilities adequate for a complex environment. Professionalization is and was necessary and it is a matter of concern that organizational cutbacks could downgrade communication's strategic role in UK government communication. Second, processes and procedures that help ensure the integrity of government communication are key to its credibility and this was not always sufficiently recognized in the Blair years. This meant that, despite the resources invested in government communication, Blair ultimately 'failed in spin' (Powell, 2011, p. 187). Finally, the period up to 2011 could be seen as representing the high-water mark of the power of the British mainstream media and thus of governments' obsession with courting their approval. Government communicators of the future will have greater challenges in addressing increasingly fragmented and distrustful publics as traditional forms of news consumption decline and government communication spending is cut.

## Notes

- 1 The Mountfield review was undertaken by a team chaired by Robin Mountfield, the Permanent Secretary of the Office of Public Service, and included Alastair Campbell and Mike Granatt, the head of the GICS, after concern was expressed by the new Labour government about the

quality of government communication. Its conclusions were published in Lord Mountfield (November 1997) *Report of the Working Group on the Government Information Service*, Cabinet Office, HMSO.

- 2 The review arose out of a recommendation of the Public Administration Select Committee's (PASC) inquiry into the Jo Moore/Martin Sixsmith affair, another government communication controversy, in its *Eighth Report, These Unfortunate Events: Lessons of the Recent Events at the Former DTLR* (HC 303).

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# 6

## Government communication in Australia

*Sally Young*

**A**ustralia is one of the few countries to have continuously been a democracy since the early 1900s and is also one of a comparatively small number of countries (approximately 30 worldwide) to have compulsory voting. Over 94 per cent of registered voters usually turnout at federal elections in Australia (AEC, 2010). And elections are held regularly, on average, every two and a half years at the federal level (where there are no fixed terms and, by convention, the prime minister determines the election date). This means, unusually by international standards, that the vast majority of Australians of voting age make regular assessments of their governments based on the information they receive. Because politics is highly mediated, much of this information comes from media representations. Australians are big media consumers and news is a very popular genre. In 2007, over 80 per cent interviewed for the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes said that catching up with the news was a regular part of their day (Phillips, Tranter, Mitchell, Clark & Reed, 2008). However, not all of this news consumption was about seeking out political news and, as in other mature liberal democracies, media use patterns are changing. Newspaper circulation has declined significantly and television news and current affairs programmes have generally (and, in many cases, quite dramatically) been losing viewers (Young, 2009). At the other end of the spectrum, internet usage is very high in Australia by international standards (Tiffen & Gittins, 2009, pp. 171, 177) and this is impacting upon the way in which Australians access news. Other factors are also altering the media landscape including digitalization, changing leisure patterns, the use of personal video recorders with the ability to timeshift broadcasts and the use

of portable devices such as 'smart' phones and tablet readers (for those able to afford them).

In terms of the media-politics environment, Australia has a dedicated portion of Parliament House set aside for the media (the Press Gallery) (see Lloyd, 1988). As a result of this close contact between politicians and journalists, especially in Australia's national capital, Canberra, critics accuse the Gallery of being prone to 'capture' by the politicians they work with (and vice versa). The Gallery has also been criticized for being 'out of touch' with citizens and for operating like a 'club' where reporters share similar backgrounds and mindsets and engage in a type of 'group thinking' (see Simons, 1999). Some Gallery journalists vehemently deny this and point to differences in journalistic styles and opinions as well as the competition that occurs for scoops and exclusives. Other journalists accept there is often homogeneity in topics and output (e.g. Kelly, 2001). Yet others note that, outside of the Gallery, a raft of other commentators, opinion columnists, bloggers and broadcasters also play an important role in communicating politics and government.

Australia has a federal system with three tiers of government (federal, state and local) which makes efficient government communication between the levels of government both important and challenging amidst the propensity for dispute, duplication and buck-passing of responsibility which can characterize a federal system. A unique physical landscape and vast geographical distances also pose communication challenges for Australian governments. While most of Australia's population is concentrated in coastal areas with the majority living in state and territory capital cities, some areas still face unique conditions. To take just one example, the state of Western Australia covers a land mass area of over 2.5 million kilometres making it larger than Alaska and Texas combined and 11 times bigger than the United Kingdom. Australia's demography is also an important factor in government communication. Australia is culturally diverse. English is Australia's official language but more than 4 million residents speak a second language and there are more than 200 languages spoken in Australia (Young, 2007a, p. xxv). Although Australia is, by international comparisons, a wealthy country, the resources necessary to participate in political life – including education, time and money – are spread unevenly – as they are in other comparable countries. However, of particular concern in Australia is the level of disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (SCRGSP, 2007).

## **Political and media environment**

Compared to journalists in many other countries around the world, Australian journalists work within a relatively free media environment. There is no explicit

constitutional protection for freedom of the press but there have rarely been any attempts at overt government censorship of the media in Australia, save for times of war. Significant High Court judgements in the 1990s pointed to an implied right of free political speech in the Australian Constitution (Stone, 2001; Williams, 2002). There is also, by world standards, a high degree of political rights in Australia in relation to electoral processes, political pluralism and civil liberties and a high degree of institutional checks and balances constraining the executive. In the Transparency International (2010) ranking of corruption, Australia was ranked number eight in 2010 as 'very clean' of 'corrupt practices in both the public and private sectors'.

In Australia, the most negative effects on the public sphere come not from government oppression nor censorship but rather the ways in which media and governments interact in a system of concentrated media ownership.

Australia's media system combines public and private broadcasting. Its public broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), is smaller in relation to national broadcasting than the BBC and some European public broadcasters, but larger than others (such as the United States). The ABC has a very large radio audience, a share of the television audience that has increased in recent years and an important internet presence. It has a reputation for displaying a high degree of journalistic scepticism and critical inquiry. Not surprisingly then, the ABC has been criticized by both progressive and conservative governments but it was particularly criticized by the conservative Howard government (1996–2007) over its reporting of the Iraq War in 2003. The government complained ABC reporting was 'anti-American' amid vocal claims by some conservative critics that the ABC exhibited general 'left-wing' tendencies (see Young, 2011, pp. 250–1). That era of criticism led to even more detailed editorial policies cementing the ABC as having the most prescribed, monitored and evaluated political coverage of any media organization in Australia.

In the commercial sector, Australia has one of the most concentrated media ownership structures of any liberal democracy in the world deriving, at least in part, from its relatively small national market but also from favourable public policy decisions made by various governments that advantaged the largest media players and consolidated their dominance (Chadwick, 1989). A handful of major companies dominate across commercial television, radio, magazines and pay television. Two companies control more than 90 per cent of metropolitan newspaper circulation and one of those – Rupert Murdoch's News Limited – has 68 per cent of the daily newspaper market and over three quarters of the Sunday newspaper market (Gardiner-Garden & Chowns, 2006; Tiffen, 2010, p. 85). This has an important impact on journalists' working conditions in Australia but also on the relationships between governments, politicians and other political actors with powerful media owners and their organizations.

News Limited (part of the global News Corp company) plays a particularly important role in political debate in Australia and its Australian-born owner Rupert Murdoch is a controversial figure wherever he operates. Murdoch's news outlets have tended to display 'an intellectual orthodoxy and an ideological uniformity' (McKnight, 2005, p. 54; see also Greenslade, 2003). When the conservative Liberal-National government determined that Australia would participate as a member of the 'coalition of the willing' in Iraq, the Murdoch press was conspicuously supportive. Political scientist Robert Manne (2005, p. 96) argued that between 2002 and 2004, the opponent Labor Party's policy on Iraq was reported with 'contempt' and 'persistent, harsh and frequently shrill criticism' in Murdoch's Australian newspapers. While the 'weapons of mass destruction' justification for Iraq and the mismanagement of the post-invasion seriously damaged Labor and Tony Blair in the United Kingdom, 'Iraq was barely discussed', during the 2004 election, in Australia. Manne (2005, p. 97) suggests that a plausible explanation for the differences in public debate was Murdoch's domination of 'the metropolitan press' in Australia.

For their part, many Australian journalists have identified problems in government-media relations as stemming not from media power but from the other side of the equation – the myriad ways in which governments seek to 'spin' and to influence media representations. Various Australian governments have been criticized for being inaccessible and secretive, for suppressing information, refusing to allow staffers to give evidence at parliamentary inquiries or for ruthlessly plugging 'leaks'. Journalists have stated that it has become increasingly difficult to gain information from the public service in particular (Grattan, 2005). Journalists have also expressed concerns that politicians and their media advisers (especially in incumbent governments) have come to play too dominant a role in newsmaking. All of the major media organizations in Australia joined together in 2007 to launch Australia's Right to Know Coalition (ARKC), citing concerns about media freedoms including being hindered by more than 350 state and federal secrecy laws. However, at the launch, Mark Scott (2009), the head of the ABC (one of the ARKC partners), pointed out that 'for many in the public, media excess is an issue generating more commentary than media freedom. Many would argue that the media has never been more intrusive, has never had more power.' There have since been high-profile cases of media-manufactured scandals, 'beat-ups' which sensationalize and dramatize, and controversial 'gotcha' journalism including the ethically dubious 'public interest' rationale used by a television station when it 'outed' a married MP who was filmed leaving a gay bathhouse and the publication by a News Limited outlet of nude photographs taken decades ago which the newspaper wrongly claimed were of controversial politician Pauline Hanson. After the presentation of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, Hanson was paid a confidential settlement and given a public apology.

## The development of 'the PR state'

Since the 1970s, but especially since the 1990s, Australian governments have dedicated substantial resources to influencing media representations of their actions. One of the most obvious indicators of this has been the growth of the 'PR state' (Ward, 2007). In the mid-1960s, the prime minister of Australia, Robert Menzies, had a personal staff of only four (Millar, 2010). In 1972, it was a controversial novelty when the Whitlam Labor government supplied all ministers with a press secretary. But, only three years later and using a broader definition of promotional activities, in 1975, the Coombs Royal Commission found more than 800 public servants were engaged in some form of public relations.

On coming to power in 1983, the Hawke Labor government further professionalized and extended its communication processes when it established the National Media Liaison Service (NMLS) (dubbed 'ANiMaLs' by journalists for its ferocious approach to media management). It served the Hawke and Keating governments until Labor's defeat in 1996. When the Howard coalition government came to power (from 1996–2007) it used a Government Members Secretariat (GMS) and more than 70 media advisers spread across Ministerial offices and over 450 ministerial staff (Ward, 2007, p. 9; Millar, 2010). The Rudd government (2007–10) and the Gillard government (2010–) have also relied heavily on institutionalized media management techniques.

How to classify the different groups of advisers (given their different titles and functions) makes tallying their numbers difficult but, in one estimate from 2007, there were said to be over 660 'Ministerial minders', press secretaries and Departmental Liaison Officers working for the federal government compared to 241 Press Gallery journalists reporting on federal politics (Fitzgerald, 2008, pp. 14, 17). And this didn't include the many communication officers working across the public service and in statutory bodies. Another estimate made by the newspaper the *Sunday Herald Sun* suggested there were 3,000 'spin doctors employed by federal and state governments' in Australia costing AUS\$250 million (US\$260m) annually in wages (Rolfe & Kearney, 2010, p. 29).

To take just one example of a state government, in 2010, it was reported that the Victorian government (representing a state of 5.5 million people) employed more than 780 public servants as 'media, communications, marketing and public affairs advisers' ('Labor's propaganda army', 2010, p. 1) including 12 who were paid solely to monitor the media plus many other 'subcontractors, PR teams and external consultants brought in for specialist projects'. The then Opposition complained that they had, by comparison, only 'four media advisers [while the state premier] has almost 1000'. The



disparity between the resources available to incumbents and those available to challengers is a serious issue in modern democracies even if there was some hyperbole in the Opposition's complaints that '[the state Premier] has built the biggest propaganda unit outside of North Korea' (Rolfe & Kearney, 2010, p. 29).

For their part, Australian governments have argued that their increased public relations resources are about information and consultation with citizens in an increasingly complex and mediated era rather than being about 'spin' or manipulating the media or public opinion. It is true that, for any citizen wanting government information, there is now a raft of information and resources available today from online and printed Hansards (transcripts of parliamentary proceedings) to live broadcasting and webcasting of parliament as well as extensive government websites and online information. It cannot be said that Australian governments are diffident or do not make information available. They are more likely to be accused of excessive self-promotion than censorship and of selective emphasis than repression.

More broadly, this issue of spin is an interesting one which brings into focus the role of the Australian media and whether it is a victim or willing conduit of government 'spin' given the 'information subsidy' that governments provide for commercial media. The media have traditionally had a heavy reliance on established and authoritative sources but, in the 2000s, declining audiences, revenues and journalism staff made them more receptive to information that was already neatly packaged and available. There was an increased reliance on government and politicians as sources, a more homogenous political news agenda (including an overwhelming focus on major party leaders and on opinion polls) and a greater reliance on government and party-provided material (Young, 2011, pp. 145–200). Some journalists argued they were being overwhelmed by the resources of government including the number of media advisers that governments employ (see Suich, 2004).

The issue of media advisers in government was brought into stark relief in 2010 when the Victorian state government deviated from the usual rhetoric that government-employed media advisers were funded by taxpayers because they play a vital role in informing the community about public policy and government activities. The cause for this backflip was that the Victorian Opposition had taken the state government to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal to try to force it to release its government 'media plans' – the plans detailing what government ministers do each week and the strategies involved – under Freedom of Information laws. In order to try to prevent the public release of those plans, the state government argued in a frank but extraordinary manner given previous claims to the contrary, that its media advisers were not about governance (as befits taxpayer funded civil servants) but were really political operatives employed to provide 'political

advice to ministers, which is directed at enhancing the re-election prospects of the government and of individual members' (Tomazin, 2010). Unlike the usual statements designed for public consumption, this was a legal argument designed to avoid disclosure of documents that the government did not want to release. It laid bare the blurry and controversial lines between governance and campaigning, and between policy and politics.

## **Government communication resources and advertising**

Australian governments not only provide themselves with extensive resources in the form of staff but also in government advertising, large communication/postage allowances and expensive public opinion research. These are advantages which challengers cannot afford and which, if used to excess and in an unaccountable manner, distort electoral competition to the incumbent's advantage.

Government advertising has been a particular problem in Australia because of the nature of political (election) advertising. There are very permissive rules on political advertising which have seen Australian politicians rely on it to a significant degree during elections. Once in government, politicians continue to see it as a powerful means of communication and, from the mid-1990s onwards, they began to use advertising more extensively in government. Governments have always advertised, whether the prosaic – public service job ads and commercial tenders – or the altruistic 'social marketing' campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s such as quit smoking campaigns and anti-drink driving campaigns. But the controversial campaigns seen in Australia from the mid-1990s were different and the level of spending was, by both historical and international standards, extraordinary (Young, 2007b).

The controversial campaigns were short term and, often, reactive. Their content suggested less emphasis on 'education' and 'information' and a greater emphasis on political persuasion. Ads were used to try to convince the public of the value of unpopular policies (such as a new Goods and Services Tax in 1998) or of the merits of a particular political agenda (such as industrial relations reform in 2005). There was an unprecedented use of taxpayers' money for partisan advertising during the Howard Liberal-National (Coalition) government. Over AUS\$1.7 billion (US\$1.8bn) was spent over the term of the government including advertising spikes before the 2001, 2004 and 2007 elections (Grant, 2003–4). But a similar misuse of resources was also happening at the state level by Labor Party governments. In NSW, Victoria and Queensland, government ad campaigns publicized government

achievements in electorally sensitive policy areas such as hospitals, schools, trains, crime and police recruitment.

Government advertising is a major resource for commercial media in Australia and provides a direct financial link between governments and the media outlets whose approval they seek. In 2006, five of the top ten newspaper advertisers in Australia were not retailers nor manufacturers but governments (four state governments – Victoria, NSW, Queensland and WA – and the federal government which was the highest spending) (Young, 2010a). In 2007 (an election year), the federal government was the top spending advertiser in Australia (Nielsen, 2009, p. 24).

Compared to media advertising patterns in the United States and United Kingdom, for example, this level of spending on government advertising is unprecedented and, when one political party can access such largesse to communicate their case, it can have highly undemocratic consequences. Australia has had a very stable two-party system from the mid-twentieth century onwards. Governments changed only infrequently at the federal level with periods of government of 23 years (1949–72), 13 years (1983–96) and, most recently, 11 years (1996–2007). But the 2000s were especially a period which saw entrenched incumbency including periods of government at the state level lasting over 10 years (Labor, Victoria, 1999–2010 and Labor, Queensland, 1998–current) and 16 years (Labor, New South Wales, 1995–2011). Arguably, the exploitation of incumbency benefits including government advertising was a contributing factor to the longevity of some of these governments in the 2000s. Yet, large spending on government advertising campaigns does not always have the effect the sponsoring government desires. Government advertising can become counter-productive when it is repeated ad nauseum and irritates taxpayers who know they are paying for it or when it rouses the ire (and deeper pockets) of opposing groups. In recent years, this has served as both a salutary lesson for governments and a worrying indicator of democratic health as important public debates are conducted via expensive advertising wars.

## **Two government advertising case studies: Industrial relations and mining tax**

In 2005, the federal Howard government planned changes to industrial relations (IR) laws that critics argued stripped workers of basic employment rights and were unfair. In the lead-up to the legislation being enacted, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) ran an expensive television advertisement campaign attacking the changes. The ACTU reportedly spent \$30 million on television and radio ads but also posters, car bumper stickers and a national

day of protest. This triggered a very expensive government counter-campaign aimed at promoting the reforms in a positive way.

Stage one of the government's campaign occurred before the release of the legislation and included television, radio and newspaper advertisements, a 16-page glossy information booklet, a telephone hotline and a website. The television ads especially were broadcast repetitively. It was reported that the government bought over 11,000 television spots in October 2005 alone (Andren, 2005). Stage two occurred after the government, reacting to public concern, introduced a 'Fairness Test' to employee contracts. In all, the government spent more than AUS\$120 million (US\$125m) on IR advertising (Marris, 2007).

Yet, despite all of the money spent, towards the end of the government's campaign, there were leaked reports saying the government campaign had failed to convince the public that the IR changes were a positive reform (Humphries, 2005). The degree of widespread concern about the changes was attributed – at least in part – to the effect of the ACTU's television advertisements and its broader campaign drawing attention to the issue. Industrial relations remained a major issue up to, and during, the 2007 election campaign. The Howard government lost office at that election and Howard lost his own seat which had not happened to a sitting prime minister since 1929.

During the government's IR ad campaign, the Labor Opposition had been extremely critical of the use of taxpayer money for such a controversial purpose. Opposition Labor leader Kevin Rudd had attacked the 'partisan' use of government advertising and vowed to address the problem with tighter regulations and a new system of scrutiny once in government. Once in office, the Rudd government seemed to make a fresh start when it instituted a new, more accountable system for government advertising campaigns which involved the Auditor General scrutinizing spending on large campaigns. But in 2010, the government hit a difficult patch over a complex and controversial policy of its own.

Rudd had proposed – it was later revealed without much consultation in Cabinet or caucus – to institute a mining tax or 'Resource Super Profit Tax (RSPT)'. The Rudd government wanted to impose a tax on mining company profits, arguing the resources belonged to all Australians and could only be exhumed once. It was to be levied at 40 per cent and applied to all extractive industry including gold, nickel and uranium mining as well as sand and quarrying activities. The mining companies – with deep pockets and wide influence in the business community and the commercial media sector – argued strongly against the plan, claiming it threatened Australia's economic future and would cost ordinary Australians. They began an 'ad war' against the tax in May 2010 which continued until the downfall of Prime Minister Kevin

Rudd in June 2010. The mining companies spent more than AUS\$26 million (US\$27m) on a six-week ad campaign against the mining tax (Davis, 2011). In response, the Rudd government watered down its government advertising reforms so it could engage in an advertising fightback.

The Auditor General (who had been given some scrutiny powers over government ad campaigns) was sidelined and an exemption provision was used to 'fast-track the government's AUS\$38 million campaign to counter the mining industry's complaints' (Needham, 2010). Unusually, the Auditor General then took the step of publicly criticizing the government for softening the rules and making it more difficult for government ads to be vetted. Along with a series of other incidents (discussed below), the mining tax foray was central to bringing Rudd's leadership into doubt. On 24 June 2010, deputy leader Julia Gillard took over as leader after challenging Rudd to a leadership ballot. Rudd had initially said he would contest but withdrew the next morning when it became clear that he did not have the support of his colleagues. One of Gillard's first acts after taking over was to negotiate a compromise on the proposed tax with the mining industry. On the basis of the resulting version, the mining industry's campaign had saved the companies an estimated AUS\$60 billion in tax over the next decade.

## Reaching citizens

In contrast to government advertising and more mediated means, direct communication between governments and citizens (and vice versa) is also important and occurs through many different forms including citizens sending or receiving correspondence from government departments, using government websites and phoning government agencies. Although Australia's population is small by comparison with many other countries, it is still large enough – 22 million in 2011 – to make direct communication between governments and individual citizens extremely challenging but there have been increasing examples of coordinated attempts to communicate directly with citizens.

An example of one noteworthy deliberative experiment was the 'Dialogue with the City' process held in Perth in 2003 which influenced the West Australian (state) government's policy on city planning. It involved a series of deliberative processes including a survey of 8,000 residents and a forum for more than 1,000 residents to discuss the future of their city. There have also been citizens' juries in a number of locations and also community surveys and many interactive online projects (New Democracy Foundation, 2009).

Many experiments have occurred at a local government level where service delivery (and thus communication) tends to be more direct. But at the federal level, and in several state governments as well, there has been the use of

projects such as Community Cabinets. These see government ministers, their advisers and the director general of each government agency all travel to a particular regional or remote community to meet 'with any community person or group wishing to talk . . . no suits, special meeting rooms or closed doors. . . . This is a cup of tea and casual clothing, in a public space' (Davis, 2001, p. 224). These experiments are noteworthy but, more generally, it is still the case that government communication is usually conceived of in mediated terms.

The internet has had a significant impact on government communication but so too has the rise of 24-hour news broadcasting and the changes to the news cycle these media have fostered. In Australia, 24-hour news broadcasting began in 1994 with the ABC broadcasting NewsRadio (news headlines every 15 minutes) followed by the introduction of 24-hour television news channel Sky News (on pay television only) in 1996 (16 years after CNN was launched in the United States and 7 years after Sky News in the United Kingdom) (Young 2010b, p. 245). The ABC launched its own 24-hour news channel on digital television in 2010.

Yet, while new media and technology have made political news and information much more widely available – including breaking news on television, news on mobile phones, online news websites and dedicated television channels – involvement by the public is still selective and uneven. Those media which devote the most time and space to detailed coverage of politics and government (especially broadsheet newspapers and public radio and television) tend to attract smaller audiences 'dominated by men aged over forty who [are] tertiary educated, well-paid, in managerial or professional jobs. They [are] older, richer and better educated than the general population' and this is also the case in other comparable countries (Young, 2011, p. 59). Reaching a broader spectrum of citizens means appearing in a range of media – including popular media and media that are not specifically focused on politics.

Whether to evade informed scrutiny (as Press Gallery journalists lament) or to try to communicate more directly with a greater number of people (as politicians claim), Australian politicians have increasingly tried to reach people beyond news journalism and communicate with more targeted audiences. As prime minister, John Howard relied heavily on talkback radio as it was a medium he believed reached a sympathetic conservative constituency but that also had wider influence. Labor leader Kevin Rudd and his successor Julia Gillard made use of FM radio to reach young people. Rudd and Gillard were also regulars on television breakfast shows which had a high proportion of female viewers. Famously, Rudd also went on a television comedy show in 2007. Some government MPs use direct mail, blogs, websites, YouTube clips and Twitter (in which Prime Minister Julia Gillard was, she admitted, a reluctant participant).

## Greater chaos, less control? The future of government communication in Australia

Australia is facing many of the key political and social trends seen in other mature liberal democracies including a decline in party identification (by citizens but also by parties which increasingly try to personalize their appeals to the electorate), along with changing media outlets and audiences, and changing political communication techniques. There is, as there has been for at least two decades, a 'permanent campaign' mindset which means that, once in government, politicians continue relentlessly campaigning and, as Dan Nimmo (1999, p. 75) noted, they turn 'office itself into a full-time campaign platform'. But a more volatile political environment is making governing in Australia far less predictable with consequent effects for government communication.

The entrenched incumbency patterns of the 2000s have been starkly disrupted. In 2010, the federal election (which came only two months after Rudd was deposed by Gillard) resulted in a hung parliament – the first at the federal level since 1940; four independent MPs determined which party would govern. The same year, the Victorian state government was voted out of office after eleven years and the Tasmanian state election saw such a large swing against the government and such a close result between the two major parties that (as with the federal election) it took over two weeks for the results to be formally declared. In March 2011, a NSW state government which had been in office since 1995 saw a crushing defeat and a Labor government that had been in office in Queensland since 1998 was also defeated in 2012.

Of these events, it is the deposing of Rudd as prime minister by his own party in 2010 that best highlights some of the key shifts in the context of government communication including the ferocity of the news cycle, the power of media representations, the significance of trust and reputation for leaders and the importance of internal government communication as well as external media management.

One of the events for which Rudd's premiership is remembered was an act of political communication in the form of oratory – a speech he gave formalizing an apology to Indigenous Australians. But it was also a speech and a key phrase that came to haunt Rudd. He had declared climate change 'the greatest moral challenge of our time' but, in early 2010, when his proposed Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme began to look like an electoral liability, he blithely postponed its introduction. The decision to drop the signature policy item of his first term had an impact on Rudd's reputation and the mining tax fiasco then exacerbated concerns about his leadership.

At the same time as these policy issues were occurring, an increasing number of media stories were turning the spotlight on Rudd's character.

In 2009, it was reported that Rudd had made a flight attendant cry when he abused her after receiving the wrong meal. There were ongoing stories about Rudd's behaviour towards his staff including reports of a high turnover in his office as many staff chose to leave (e.g. Lewis & Rehn, 2009). An essay published in 2010 by a journalist who had spent time with Rudd argued that anger defined him and that Rudd was a 'politician with rage at his core' (Marr, 2010). In media reports, Rudd was increasingly characterized as a micromanaging 'control freak' who refused to delegate, a relentless 'automaton' with a 24-hour work ethic who expected his media advisers to start work at 4.30 a.m. (e.g. see Crabb, 2010; Marr, 2010). The News Limited papers were especially scathing and some critics saw the relentless criticism as part of a News Limited 'war on Labor'. This accusation was so widespread in political and media circles that even News Limited-owned newspaper the *Australian* acknowledged there was talk of a News Limited 'bid to get Rudd' (Elliott, 2010). There were also later claims that Labor powerbrokers had been using the media to wage a destabilizing campaign against Rudd.

Rudd's own internal communications processes were another factor in his downfall as they had encouraged internal strife. Important decisions were made by a 'kitchen Cabinet' – a tight group of Rudd and three ministers – while others in the caucus were not consulted about issues affecting their portfolios. Even the kitchen cabinet was deemed too wide at the end of Rudd's tenure with, reportedly, one of the ministers (Lindsay Tanner) being sidelined to the extent that Rudd held fake budget meetings in front of Tanner (then finance minister) and, 'after the meeting concluded and [Tanner] had left, the other three members of the committee – Rudd, Julia Gillard and Wayne Swan – would reconvene and discuss their budget plans in detail' ('Stay out of the kitchen', 2010). Rudd's office was said to be 'chaotic and dysfunctional' (Lyons, 2008), a bottleneck with information not getting through and decisions going unmade because Rudd wanted to deal with every issue. Backbenchers and even ministers found it difficult to gain access to Rudd. These processes alienated many in his caucus and, when Labor Party powerbrokers decided that Rudd was an electoral liability in 2010, his unpopularity with his colleagues meant he did not have the support to win a leadership ballot against Gillard so he decided not to contest the ballot. And, 20 months later, in February 2012, when Rudd did mount a leadership challenge against Gillard, he secured only 31 votes in the Labor caucus ballot compared to Gillard's 71 votes; the most emphatic result in modern Australian history for a prime minister facing a leadership challenge.

Less than a year before he was ousted, Rudd had been one of the most popular prime ministers in Australian history. The deposing of Rudd happened in an unusual manner and with unprecedented speed because of the mix between a more volatile political environment and rapid and vociferous news cycle. The events showed a curious mix of how information was so available



at an episodic, microlevel – many Australians knew that he yelled at an air hostess, for example – but less so at the larger, thematic, macrolevel. This was particularly true in terms of policy. Through a series of economic stimulus packages, the Rudd government had steered Australia through the worst economic crash since the Great Depression. Australia was one of the few liberal democracies to avoid the late-2000s recession but that larger context was, compared to the economic debates going on overseas, surprisingly little discussed. Rudd government policies including the acronym-heavy NBN (National Broadband Network), ETS (Emissions Trading Scheme), BER (Building the Education Revolution), indigenous housing and reform to COAG (the Council of Australian Governments) were not well covered in the mainstream media. Generally, there was a notable lack of interest in public policy, perhaps overshadowed by the more colourful stories about Rudd's character, but perhaps also part of broader shifts in how the media reports government.

As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, government communication in Australia is being shaped by a series of realizations: incumbency advantages do not always triumph, political leaders can rise and fall in popularity in dramatic fashion in short timeframes and there are limits to how governments can control information (an old principle in a liberal democracy but one made starkly more obvious in the Rudd case when internal leaks played such a role). Yet, familiar features also continue to shape government communication including powerful media outlets (sometimes with agendas of their own); the significance of moneyed interests and advertising to political debate; the reality that, despite weakening party identification, party powerbrokers still play a powerful role in realpolitik in Australia; and, finally, that media reporting of government is invariably situated, always controversially, between valuable scrutiny of government and idle gossip, between opening up the processes of government while perhaps failing to adequately examine the system as a whole.

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# 7

## The wavering implementation of government communication in France

*Philippe J. Maarek*

*It is only when one has won the communication war that it  
becomes possible to start acting.*

NICOLAS SARKOZY<sup>1</sup>

**F**rom the 1980s, local and national government communication has increased considerably, at least in most Western countries. It is possible to identify two main causes of the extension of what has been known as 'government public relations' and, for most of the twentieth century, 'propaganda'.

The first reason is the professionalization of political communication and, notably, the professionalization of political campaigns (Maarek, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2007, 2010; Holtz-Bacha, Mancini, Papathanassopoulos & Negrine, 2007). This professionalization is closely linked to an increased personalization of political communication, leading to an inclusion of the private life of the politicians in the public sphere. French President Nicolas Sarkozy's 2007 winning presidential run and Barack Obama's similar victory in the United States the following year have epitomized this evolution, with campaigns built on so-called storytelling, a fictionalization of their personal life as the backbone of their campaigns (Salmon, 2008; Maarek, 2011). No wonder, then, that when arriving at the helm of their countries, modern politicians are now transposing some of the same communication tools which have been helping them to win office. Government *spin* has undergone increasing

scrutiny, particularly in the light of Prime Minister Tony Blair's premierships in the United Kingdom (Campbell, 2007).

The second main reason for the expansion of government communication is the relentless development of more and more so-called new media, which have considerably transformed communication flows in the public sphere (Mouchon, 2000; Maarek, 2007, 2011). While top-down communication from governments to their citizens was the basic model until the 1980s, private individuals are now active in the global communication flow. Bottom-up and horizontal communication have become as legitimate in the public sphere as top-down communication from governments and politicians. Through internet, with Twitter, Facebook and other social media, private citizens are now able to respond to the voices of the strongest rulers, as clearly shown by the sudden and quick collapse of the Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan regimes in 2011.

Within this context, French government communication has undergone a massive, yet still wavering transformation in the past 30 years, slowly developing from a poorly defined and structured patchwork until the mid-1970s to today's centralized yet strangely discreet communication office serving under an ever changing unstable chain of command.

We will see in the first part of this chapter that the emergence of a specific institutional body in charge of French government communication since the Second World War has been a slow and hesitant process. This probably explains, as we will document in the second part, why today's *Service d'Information du Gouvernement* [Government Information Service] still does not seem to play a leading part in voicing the French government actions while the latter management seems to change at whim after every presidential election.

## **The emergence of a specific institutional body in charge of French government communication**

### ***Propaganda or communication?***

Organizing and centralizing the French government communication was only considered necessary on the verge of the Second World War, and the need mainly rose as a means to compensate the lack of French communication efforts as compared to Nazi propaganda in Germany, orchestrated by Joseph Goebbels, the Reich Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda from March 1933.

The first truly autonomous institutional body in charge of French government communication was nearly stillborn. A former journalist and later politician,

Louis-Oscar Frossard, was appointed as the first (and only) French Propaganda Minister (*Ministre de la Propagande*) by Leon Blum in his less than one month second government, in 1938.

It was only in 1939, when the menace of war had considerably increased, that the French government now headed by Edouard Daladier decided to establish a *Commissariat General à l'Information* [Information General Commissariat] within the prime minister's office. When his government resigned, the new war government headed by Paul Reynaud replaced it with a brand new 'Information Ministry' which rather strangely became, in the last and short-lived government of the Third French Republic, the 'Ministry of Information and Public Works' (16 June–10 July 1940).

After the Second World War, while none less than the future French President François Mitterrand had been briefly appointed as a transient *Secrétaire d'Etat à l'Information* (State Secretary – subminister – for Information), the need for a unified centre of government communication was not felt any more. The various branches of the former Information Ministry were scattered in 1947 across several parts of the French administration. Two of its main parts remained in the Council President Office: the *Service Juridique et Technique de la Presse* [Juridical and Technical Press Department] (SJTP) and the *Documentation Française* Department.

The SJTP was created on 17 November 1947, and was mainly used as a way to help organize the relationship between the French government and the French press, which was a shambles after the war: many newspapers had been banned because they had been collaborating with the Nazis.<sup>2</sup> Positioned within the Council President Office, the role of the SJTP, as its name suggests, was more legal and political than engaged in government communication activities. The SJTP was mainly used as a tool to influence newspapers, notably as the working arm of the French system of subsidy to the printed press (Maarek, 2008). In 1975, it took on the audiovisual media and became the *Service Juridique et Technique de la Presse et de l'Audiovisuel* (SJTPA). In 2000 as a new *Direction du Développement des Médias* [Direction of Media Development] (DDM), it continued to be in charge of the relationship of the state with the printed press and the state owned public television channels, but also became an advisory office for the regulation of the internet and the new media. The last links of the DDM with government communication, if any, were cut in 2010 when it was relocated within the much less prestigious Ministry of Culture and Communication, and merged with some parts of administrative offices under the name of *Direction Générale des Médias et des Industries Culturelles* [General Direction of Media and Cultural Industries] (DGMIC).

For the record, the other main leg of the former Information Ministry was established in 1947 as another administrative department within the

Council President Office, and named the *Documentation Française* [French Documentation]. It has more or less taken on the role of a kind of specialized library and documentation centre for the whole French administration and for the general public.

### **Government communication on the agenda: The influence of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's presidency**

The 1958 French Constitution of the Fifth Republic had given a much stronger role and more autonomy to the president in relation to the prime minister. From then on, a semi-presidential constitutional regime started to dominate French politics: whenever the president was supported by a majority of MPs in the lower chamber, he or she would effectively run the country, the prime minister being reduced to a subaltern coordination role. Only on the few occasions when the majority did not support the president, would the prime minister be able to really run the country, though the president would still keep some political power (the three such periods until now are called the *cohabitations* because of the out of the ordinary compromises the two diverging political power centres had to accept).

Unlike the two first French presidents of the new Fifth Republic regime, General de Gaulle and Georges Pompidou, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing had a much more 'modern' approach to his role when he was elected in 1974 and he used fully this new leeway.

One of the first signs of his new understanding of presidential communication had been his decision to create a survey unit within the presidential office. At the same time, he tried to get close to the French people by regularly staging events which would make him appear interested in their down to earth preoccupations. But all these attempts failed to establish a link between Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and the people who were not evidently taken in by what were obviously communication gimmicks.

Initially a failure then, direct communication from the French president to his citizens has nevertheless been a permanent fixture since, even if sometimes in very different ways. The two successors to Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, François Mitterrand and Jacques Chirac, decided to have their communication follow a different course, based on a nearly regal instantiation of their office and person. Under the influence of a strong-willed communication advisor, Jacques Pilhan, François Mitterrand took to limiting his public appearances and establishing a new kind of popularity based on a mixture of distance and of a pretense of caring for the French people in an almost paternal way (hence his popular nickname *Tonton* – a word standing in French for *uncle* as in English *daddy* does for *father*) (Bazin, 2009). Mitterrand's silence was broken as needed by carefully staged media events. The most memorable

was a special television show *Ca nous intéresse, Monsieur le Président* (It's of interest to us, Mister President), in April 1985, when he demonstrated that he had a perfect knowledge of the vernacular idioms spoken in the popular suburbs of the main French cities.

Though coming from the opposite side of the political spectrum, Mitterrand's successor, Jacques Chirac, hired the same communication advisor in 1995 in order to achieve the same kind of image building and followed this pattern, even after Pilhan's premature death. Though not always high in the popularity polls, Jacques Chirac thus managed to maintain a familiar and friendly image in the eyes of the French citizens, with a kind of differentiation between his (ever positive) image as a person and his (variable) image as a politician.

### ***The creation of the Service d'Information et de Diffusion du Premier Ministre [Prime Minister's Information and Diffusion Department] (SID)***

In the mid-1960s, some need for coordination of the communication of the various ministries had started to appear. Three successive attempts tried to fill the gap between 1964 and 1974. This lack of stability explains why the three successive administrative bodies implemented one after the other, and placed within the prime minister office, had not been very efficient, at least in regards to their participation in strategic decisions on government communication.

The task was difficult since these rather weak bodies faced competition with the return of a full minister in charge of information since the beginning of the new Fifth Republic in 1958. Front-ranking politicians held this office, such as Alain Peyrefitte from 1962 to 1966. This was the result of an idiosyncrasy of the French media system. Since the end of the nineteenth century, the French printed press had enjoyed complete freedom, but the audiovisual media had not been granted the same latitude. After the Second World War, all the radio and television channels had been regrouped within a strengthened State monopolistic body, first the *Radiodiffusion Television Française* (RTF), in 1949, which then became the *Office de Radiodiffusion et de Television Française* (ORTF) in 1964. So the role of the successive information ministers was rather to ensure that the state radio and television was running smoothly and to supervise the monopolistic state body.<sup>3</sup>

The situation changed considerably during the first years of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's presidency. One of his most significant measures for the French media system, still influential today, was his decision to modernize it by dissolving the enormous ORTF only a few months after he had been elected



and to replace it by more autonomous though still state-owned companies.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the presence of an information minister became meaningless and the position disappeared.

Furthermore, Giscard d'Estaing undertook a bold modernization of the French Civil Service, introducing at the same time new and better channels of communication to the citizens and a new policy of administrative transparency. Two of its main aspects were a January 1978 Law on the protection of citizens against personal computerized data in government administration and also in the private sector,<sup>5</sup> and a July 1978 Law on access and transparency of administrative acts and documents. Both are even more crucial today with the emergence of the internet and privacy concerns.

Valéry Giscard d'Estaing then endorsed the creation of the first administrative body possessing true powers of coordination of French government communication, the SID. As clearly explained by one of his former directors, the fact that the newly created administrative body was called 'service' had a precise meaning: it was intended to fulfil a 'public service' role, thus giving government communication a new meaning which encompassed a new pedagogy of relationship between the ministers and the citizens (Ollivier-Yaniv, 1997, 2000).

The short six articles of the prime ministerial decree (*Décret*) of 6 February 1976 gave (in its article 2) a precise description of the tasks of SID in four points:

- taking on interministerial information tasks;
- giving technical assistance to all public administrations and if necessary, coordinating them;
- distributing information to members of parliament and to the press on the activities of public administrations and organisms;
- coordinating and/or ordering surveys needed at interministerial level.

For the first time, government communication was thus formally recognized, even if the word 'communication' was never stated. The tasks allotted to SID were clearly dealing with the process, and its legal basis gave it the powers to intervene in any communication activity of any part of the government and its administrative offices, and to assert control if it felt it was necessary.

Though theoretically granted strong powers of intervention in government communication, SID more or less willingly decided to let the various ministers and administrative offices organize their own relationships with the press, only helping if required. For these reasons, SID decided to have as little direct relation with journalists as possible, leaving this domain to the various ministers,

and focused rather on trying to coordinate their activities. SID concentrated on two of its tasks: the coordination of the nationwide public communication campaigns, and survey activities coordination (organizing media monitoring, and answering some formal ministers' requests for technical help).

The most visible part played by SID was to help build massive communication campaigns promoting specific government actions intended to mobilize French citizens, either on a regular or on an ad hoc basis. In 1976, a few months after its birth, SID was influential with a communication campaign promoting the wisdom of *Bison Fûté* (The Clever Buffalo) in order to reduce hours of traffic jams on the main holiday highways. The campaign was so successful, and the French people took so well to this apparently far-fetched idea of a buffalo helping drivers, that it is still replayed over and over, summer after summer, up to now – though this animal paradoxically has never been found in France!

Several other government campaigns coordinated by SID in the following years have had a strong impact on French citizens. Some of their slogans are still current in today's common language despite the fact that many were too young or not even born when they were initiated (Benoit & Scale, 2008). '*Un verre ça va, trois verres, bonjour les dégâts*' ('A glass is OK, three glasses, hello damages') in 1984 reminded audiences that the third glass of wine should put you off driving and '*Tu t'es vu quand t'as bu*' ('Do you look at you when you have drunk?'), a 1992 campaign, are some of the best examples of these powerful and memorable slogans.

The genre in which SID excelled was public health or safety campaigns, which might be considered to be apolitical, and not clearly showing that the government was behind them (Marchetti, 2008; Benoit & Scale, 2008). The author of the government messages was often unclear (a buffalo!) and not really related to ministers, or sometimes only connected to the administrative bodies in charge of implementing the government actions (for instance, the Road Accidents Prevention Office – *La Prévention Routière* – rather than the Transport Ministry).

In this area, SID gained more influence, becoming coordinator of the diverse government campaigns as soon as they obtained a significant profile. But the SID never conceived its role as being more than 'technical', and these campaigns, though modernized, still belonged to the top-down communication model. SID never tried to advise ministers on strategic communication decisions they were undertaking (Benoit & Scale, 2008). Coordination, but not action and a clear desire to stay as far away as possible from engaged politics was the outcome. This could be seen as a contradiction since government actions are nonetheless the consequences of politicians' decisions.

## **French government communication today: From 'new' management to politicization?**

### ***Government communication as a 'new' management form helping public service***

The emergence of new media has considerably increased the *visibility* of administrative actions with a nearly instantaneous possibility of public awareness. The need for better technical management of government communication has grown. This explains the appearance of the so-called new management which has been more and more prevalent in State and administrative offices nearly everywhere in the world at about the same time (Garnett, 1992; Graber, 1992; Mancini, 1996).

At the end of the twentieth century, French local government bodies (regions, departments, big cities) have followed this general trend. They started to move from the formerly hierarchical, secretive and barely advertised administrative decision-making processes to more modern administrative management methods. The extension of decentralization led in France by President François Mitterrand in the 1980s also automatically brought about an extension of local government communication (Maarek, 2003).

But, mimicking the trend found at SID at the central level, the many local communication offices created throughout France undertook to disassociate themselves as much as possible from elected politicians who were governing their constituencies. This explains the rise in France of the idea that a new kind of *communication publique* was now to be promoted, as a shortcut for Public Service Communication – what the Germans would call *Regierung Öffentlichkeitsarbeit*, literally Government Public Relations. The idea was to distance these communication services from the political side of decision making in order to ensure an alleged neutrality of the administrative services to the public.

This understanding was particularly promoted by State Councillor Pierre Zémor, a former communication advisor to former Prime Minister Michel Rocard. Author of a White Paper on the organization of public service communication in France, he put forward the idea that the job of the communications officers of national or local administrative bodies is quite different from the tasks of the personnel helping politicians with their personal political communications. He also pointed out in his report that the duties of these new communication officers were much more complex than those of the chief of an 'ordinary' press office. They should not only prepare information for citizens, but also develop a relationship with them, and evolve marketing campaigns to help carry out public services and enact local and national government policies

as well as organize civic and institutional campaigns, and so on. He also pointed out that these professionals should try and obtain autonomy from the politicians who hire them, thus tempting a breakaway from 'hardcore' political communication (Zémor, 1992).

Under Pierre Zémor's initial chairmanship, an association named *Communication Publique* was then established to help with gathering and informing the main communication directors of the most important local and national government bodies. In 1995 *Communication Publique* put out a thick practical handbook mostly written by professionals from the field, providing well-thought-out practical texts and expert accounts of the different elements in government public communication (Messenger, 1995). Pierre Zémor himself published his ideas on the topic in parallel (Zémor, 1995; Lemaire & Zémor, 2008). Several surveys carried out among about 400 Communication Directors of Regions, Departments and Town Halls of the main cities between 1995 and 1999 by the Center for Comparative Studies in Political and Public Communication (CECCOPOP) have clearly pointed to this rising awareness, but also this desire to maintain some distance from the politicians (CECCOPOP, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998).

The consequence of this dichotomy was (and still is) the tacit division of government communication between two categories of actors, each ministry reproducing the dichotomy hence created at the prime ministerial level. Each minister (or subminister) had (and has) a communication department in charge of communicating his actions, while a more political communication unit directly attached to the minister's cabinet and not always composed of civil servants, is in charge of strategic decisions and of the personal communication of the politicians. The same often applies to local government communication, where budgets allow.

### ***The 1990 transformation of SID into a 'Service d'Information du Gouvernement': To what effect?***

The year 1990 saw a reorganization of the SID which signalled that its main tasks were now government *communication* rather than plain *information*. A 15th June administrative 'Arrêté' signed by the prime minister separated the functions of SID into three more dynamic main departments:

- the *Government Information Division*, the more 'political' part of SID, dealing with public opinion polls to monitor news on the web and to centralize the surveys requested by the various ministries; international news monitoring and agenda planning were also located there;

- the *Division of Information on Government Actions* in charge of publications of government activities, public relations and the coordination of government communication campaigns;
- finally, the *Division of Means and Administration* in charge of the running of SID, both its administration as well as the production and diffusion of SID communication material.

Nevertheless, while this new organization was meant to clarify the tasks of SID, notably in regards to the prime minister and other ministers' offices, concrete changes were not so visible. The fact that the word *information* rather than *communication* was still formally used and maintained in the name of the service itself, betrayed the fact that SID had not discarded its former role of being only a technical help for government communication. It clearly still was not meant to become a true decision maker or to take part in the development of communication strategies, a fact noted by the keenest observers (Benoit & Scale, 2008). SID's way of understanding its role was a mirror image of the alleged 'neutrality' claimed by the *Communication Publique* officers mentioned above.

In 1996, the need to give greater visibility to SID activities led to its rebranding as *Service d'Information du Gouvernement* [Government Information Service] (SIG). Though remaining within the prime minister office, the newly named SIG was thus clearly deployed as the communication advisor and coordination for all ministers of the government and their administrations, while still allowing the word *information* to be used to name the service rather than *communication*.

Inertia being what it is, SIG apparently still felt and acted as if its part in government communication should only be 'technical'. So an even more clear definition of its tasks at the core of government communication was decided, and enacted by a stronger administrative measure, a decree, on 28 October 2000 (Decree 2000–1027). Instead of dealing obliquely with the restructuring of the administrative organization of SIG, as in the past, the new decree, still binding today, detailed at length in its article 2 the four main tasks assigned to SIG:

- analysing the evolution of public opinion and media content;
- distributing to members of parliament, to the press and to the general public information about governmental action;
- taking on interministries communication of general interest at national level, and in liaison with the other government branches, whether in France itself or abroad (liaison with the ambassadors all around the world);

- ensuring technical support to the various French administrative bodies and coordinating their communication policies, particularly when dealing with communication campaigns and surveys.<sup>6</sup>

The word *communication* is finally used for the coordination of French government and administrative offices' campaigns with a strengthened SIG. However, though this new definition of the SIG's tasks makes clear its important role in the technical side of government communication, it is very noticeable that strategic communication decisions are still mainly out of its scope: SIG is still meant to be an ordinary technical advisor (Benoit & Scale, 2008).

### ***Managing government communication from the prime minister's cabinet: The 2002–4 attempt***

An interesting attempt to really coordinate government communication came in 2002. Appointed by Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, his communication advisor, Dominique Ambiel launched a new initiative. Every Monday, he gathered the communication advisors from all ministries, thus short-circuiting even the ministers themselves to coordinate – even to direct – the flow of government communication. Absences at these Monday meetings were not tolerated. These meetings were for selecting sound bites to use in speeches, examining survey results analysis and coordination of upcoming media events and media interventions. But the 'institutional' communication directors, the civil servants, were not invited to these meetings, demonstrating even more clearly the gap between the 'political' decision makers in government communication and the 'technical' services, limited to playing a technical part in a similar way to the SID, then SIG, had interpreted their mission statements.<sup>7</sup>

Dominique Ambiel's directions were obeyed, helped by his close connection to the prime minister. Although this strong directorship of government communication was an interesting and efficient initiative, it was not always well received either by the politicians or by the public officials. Politicians saw here a limit to their powers and public officials did not enjoy being so clearly 'out of the loop'. But bad luck intervened to prevent the permanent implementation of this experience in truly managing French government communication: in 2004, Dominique Ambiel had to resign abruptly for personal reasons, and the experience was never really taken up by his successors with similar efficiency.

## ***Managing government communication from the president's office: The 2008–10 attempt***

On his election, it was clear that Nicolas Sarkozy had a particular understanding of his role in the French executive office that was more expansive than his predecessors. He had even openly said to some journalists, 'The Prime Minister is a collaborator. I am the boss' (*'Le Premier Ministre est un collaborateur. Le patron, c'est moi'*).<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, not only did Sarkozy frequently take care himself of the communication of some of the main government decisions, but he sought to control individual ministers' communication with the public. On 1 January 2008, ministers were publicly informed that any interview or public statement they gave had to be approved ahead of time either by the prime minister's office or by the Elysées Palace, an unprecedented decision which potentially short-circuited the Prime Minister François Fillon (which he nevertheless endorsed publicly).<sup>9</sup> Another telling decision was the permission given to several of the president's advisors who were officially allowed to speak openly to the press. This gave the president's advisors, who were normally kept in the shadow, an unusual degree of freedom. This move was explained as being a sign of transparency,<sup>10</sup> but the result was that the ministers' voices could now be superseded by the president's advisors, which happened for some time.

The communication unit of the Elysées Palace was also considerably reinforced under the supervision of Sarkozy's Communication Director Franck Louvrier one of his most long-standing and trusted aides and former director of his winning 2007 campaign. Louvrier took on the task of developing a Web 2.0 strategy that would appeal to younger French citizens. He established an Internet Watch unit within the Communication Office of the Presidency whose five initial members undertook a fortnight observational trip to the White House.<sup>11</sup> The unit was managed by Nicolas Princen, only 24 years old at the time, who was quickly nicknamed *Mr Buzz* by mocking (or worried) bloggers.<sup>12</sup> A Twitter account for Nicolas Sarkozy was opened, in addition to his previously established Facebook account, a decision heralded by Franck Louvrier in August 2009 with an open letter published by the prestigious daily *Le Monde*.

This informal extension of the involvement of the presidency in government policy communication took on new institutional form on 16 April 2008, when a decision was made to appoint a well-known political communication advisor, Thierry Saussez, as the head of the SIG. The fact that Thierry Saussez had been active in the campaigning team of Nicolas Sarkozy and was still one of his close advisors relegated the role of Prime Minister François Fillon, since it was clear that Sarkozy would run SIG over the head of his prime minister.

Moreover, at the same time, a Decree of 14 April 2008 established a new high-ranking position of *Délégué Interministériel à la Communication*

[Inter-Ministerial Communication Delegate] (DIG). This new position was modelled on that of Alastair Campbell's, Tony Blair's chief communication adviser, who had been appointed to the new position of Director of Communication and Strategy of the British government. The DIG was given, for the first time, real power over the communication of the whole government, much stronger than the coordination powers previously allocated to SIG (and not ever really put to use, as already noted) with the power to countermand ministers' communication, as established by the article 1 of the Decree:

The Delegate is kept informed of the communication projects devised by the government members. He follows the preparation and the application of these actions. He is in charge of evaluating their audience and their efficiency. He coordinates all kinds of surveys and press activities put up by the ministries. In this capacity, he is to be made aware, and must approve, any study in this domain by any ministry.<sup>13</sup>

The key to the new system soon became soon obvious: on 16 April, when Thierry Saussez was appointed head of the SIG, he became at the same time the first DIG.

Looking positively at the 2008 change in the way government communication was organized, it appeared that at last, after exactly 50 years of the Fifth Republic, communication's importance had been recognized and given adequate institutional recognition. Thierry Saussez stated publicly that it was time to accept the fact that government communication should be managed as a policy among others and therefore could not be disassociated from politics to be efficient: 'It is sometimes said that on the one side there are campaigns in the public interest and on the other, campaigns for political reforms and policies. To my eyes, this separation is senseless' (Saussez, 2008).<sup>14</sup>

The fact that government communication would be planned in relation to the Elysées Palace and the president's office as well as with (or instead of) the prime minister's office was unexpected and unusual. But after all, this was in accordance with the new French institutional balance favouring the president and not the prime minister. *French government communication* was somehow taking the path of becoming *French state communication*, organized and strongly led as never before.

But fate decided otherwise. While he managed to increase considerably the budget of SIG, which was quadrupled between 2008 and 2009 from 6 to 22 million euros,<sup>15</sup> a number of Saussez's main decisions had unexpected unhappy outcomes. To cite some of these mishaps,<sup>16</sup> he devised a huge 1 million euro survey of French youngsters (*La Grande Consult*) through a popular radio channel, *Skyrock*, which led to surprisingly insignificant results. 1.6 million euros were uselessly spent to prepare a new internet gateway for



France, which was so badly conceived that it was barely accessible on its launch on 14 July 2010, and had to be quickly taken offline after less than a month.

When Saussez resigned a few months later, in October 2010, the jury was still out on the success or failure of the new institutional arrangements. It took nearly six more months to come to a conclusion which *tacitly* and *formally* marked a step backwards in the development of the institutional autonomy of a French government communication office, as one might have hoped two years ago.

The *tacit* change was the fact that the new person appointed as head of the SIG on 24 March 2011, after a long transition of nearly half a year, was Véronique Mély, a former member of François Fillon's cabinet, marking a clear change in the balance of the office, which moved again close to the prime minister, not to the president.

But the main *formal* and institutional change came hardly a month after the arrival of the new SIG's head. A Decree signed on 27 April 2011 (N. 2011–459) put an end to the Inter-Ministerial Communication Delegation and to the powers theoretically granted to the former DIG. The experience of truly institutionalized and centralized government communication and the move towards a kind of French state communication was over.

## Conclusion

French institutional government communication is certainly much more professionalized than at the beginning of the 1990s, and SID, now known as SIG, has played an important role in this positive evolution. But the understanding of its role at a technical level did not sufficiently clarify what French government communication should consist of and, at the time of writing, it is still looking for some stability and strength. As some French scholars have noticed, looking at the example of public information campaigns, these campaigns, though carried out on behalf of the government, do not give the impression that there is indeed a policy of government communication in France, or if there is one, it is *invisible* (Marchetti, 2008).

Government communication bodies in France, beginning with the SIG within the prime minister office, should still be understood mainly as providing technical support for government decisions (pragmatically following the decisions of whoever is more powerful at the time, either the prime minister or the president of the Republic).

But the fact that the two attempts to develop government communication at an institutional level, in 2004 by the prime minister's office, and in 2008 directly by the president's office, have been hindered by a succession of

mishaps and bad luck, does not mean that an attempt to truly strengthen and unify the French government voice is not going to succeed in the future. Interestingly, these two experiments have both proven that actually managing government communication means a politicization of that management, unlike the understanding of 'neutral' public service shared by most of the communication officers heading the various government communication bodies, starting with SIG itself.

In the meantime, one can conclude (Maarek, 2003), first, that the acceleration of modern communications requires government communication to reach more and more French citizens more quickly and efficiently and second, that there is a need for a qualitative improvement in communication that bears comparison with communication in the private sector, and that deals well with the development of social media.

More doubtful is the possibility of developing autonomous government communication that serves only public service, caring only about its technical aspects, without any interference of political communication and the balance of political power.

The move towards a new kind of unified, coherent and strongly managed 'government and state communication' might well be the future to wish for France in order to reach a new level of efficiency, since it is now clear that it cannot be completely dissociated from political decision to be fully efficient as some French civil servants had thought.

Will this be supervised by the president's office, as Nicolas Sarkozy intended, or by the prime minister's office? This is less clear. The newly elected French president in 2012, François Hollande, repeatedly claiming to restore a 'normal' presidency, in his own words, immediately closed down the Elysées Palace survey group and forbade his advisors to speak directly to the media. Similarly, he seemed to be moving government communication back to a more traditional pattern. The politician-appointed minister and government spokeswoman, Najat Belcacem, was placed 'in charge of (. . .) information on the government activities' and is plainly 'Informed as much as necessary on the various actions of the Government ministers'<sup>17</sup> with SID providing technical help. Whether this is a step back towards the traditional *information* pattern of government policy under the helm of the prime minister or a bold move to restore clear leadership of government communication, removing it from the Elysées Palace, is too soon to say.

## Notes

- 1 The whole sentence reads: 'La communication est à l'action ce que l'aviation est à l'infanterie: l'aviation doit passer pour que l'infanterie puisse sortir: c'est lorsqu'on a gagné la bataille de la communication qu'on peut

- commencer à agir' (interview in L'Express, 17 November 2005, [www.lexpress.fr/actualite/politique/nicolas-sarkozy-contre-attaque\\_483925.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/politique/nicolas-sarkozy-contre-attaque_483925.html), last accessed on 14 October 2012).
- 2 Some other historical data and further factual information on this department may be found on its successor's (DGMIC) website, [www.ddm.gouv.fr/article.php3?id\\_article=198](http://www.ddm.gouv.fr/article.php3?id_article=198), last accessed on 31 August 2012
  - 3 An enlightening account of this confusion of powers is Alain Peyrefitte's memoirs, as former information minister at the time (Peyrefitte, 2002).
  - 4 ORTF gave birth to no less than seven different organisms: Radio France, regrouping all the various State radio channels – TF1, Antenne 2 and France-Regions 3 (FR 3) – the three (only) television channels and three 'technical' organisms – TDF, which took on the technical diffusion network (relays, etc.), SFP, in charge of the ORTF production means, including the studios, and INA, in charge of preserving the television and radio archives.
  - 5 This Law on *Informatique et Libertés* (computers and freedom) goes in fact far beyond its title by establishing a powerful independent commission notably able to check on any electronic filing, including any kind of personal individual data. Later, internet has easily being included in this broad definition.
  - 6 These four mission statements can be found on the front page of SIG webpage [www.gouvernement.fr/premier-ministre/service-d-information-du-gouvernement-sig](http://www.gouvernement.fr/premier-ministre/service-d-information-du-gouvernement-sig), last accessed on 14 June 2012.
  - 7 On this and on the influence of Dominique Ambiel's weekly meetings, information has been directly confirmed to the author by one of the meetings' participants, Julia Bigot-Rideau, then communication advisor and press attaché for the 'State Secretary of Sustainable Development', thanks to several interviews with the author of this chapter, years 2002, 2003 and 2011.
  - 8 Reported by journalist Bruno Dive in the regional daily *Sud-Ouest*, 22 August 2007, p. 6. (See also Jost & Muzet, 2008; Maigret, 2008; Musso, 2008.)
  - 9 See his statement in [http://archives-lepost.huffingtonpost.fr/article/2008/01/17/1084675\\_francois-fillon-exige-plus-de-solidarite-gouvernementale.html](http://archives-lepost.huffingtonpost.fr/article/2008/01/17/1084675_francois-fillon-exige-plus-de-solidarite-gouvernementale.html), last accessed on 19 March 2012.
  - 10 About this claim for increased transparency in the running of the French State, see the president communication director, Franck Louvrier's open letter in *Le Figaro*, 20 October 2007, p. 7.
  - 11 In *Les Echos*, 5 August 2009, p. 2.
  - 12 See [www.liberation.fr/politiques/010131726-nicolas-princen-l-il-de-sarkozy-sur-le-web](http://www.liberation.fr/politiques/010131726-nicolas-princen-l-il-de-sarkozy-sur-le-web), last accessed on 19 March 2012.
  - 13 Decree 2008–335 of 15 April 2008: 'Le délégué est tenu informé des projets de communication envisagés par les membres du Gouvernement. Il suit la préparation et la mise en œuvre de ces actions. Il en évalue l'audience et l'efficacité. Il coordonne les dispositifs d'études d'opinion et de presse mis en œuvre par les ministères. A ce titre, il est saisi, pour approbation, de tout projet d'étude proposé par un ministère.'
  - 14 'On entend parfois dire qu'il y a d'un côté les campagnes comportementales que l'on qualifie d'intérêt général et (de l'autre) les campagnes sur les

- réformes et les mesures qui seraient politiques. Cette séparation n'a aucun sens à mes yeux', in an open letter to *Le Figaro*, 4 and 5 October 2008 in [www.lefigaro.fr/debats/2008/10/04/01005-20081004ARTFIG00235-redonnons-du-sens-a-la-communication-politique-.php](http://www.lefigaro.fr/debats/2008/10/04/01005-20081004ARTFIG00235-redonnons-du-sens-a-la-communication-politique-.php), last accessed on 19 March 2012.
- 15** Budget given by Thierry Saussez, interview in *Le Journal du Dimanche*, 28 June 2009, in [www.lejdd.fr/Medias/Actualite/Saussez-La-com-gouvernementale-est-un-service-public-16737](http://www.lejdd.fr/Medias/Actualite/Saussez-La-com-gouvernementale-est-un-service-public-16737), last accessed on 19 March 2012.
- 16** On these mishaps, see for instance [www.lefigaro.fr/medias/2010/10/11/04002-20101011ARTFIG00510-thierry-saussez-quitte-le-sig.php](http://www.lefigaro.fr/medias/2010/10/11/04002-20101011ARTFIG00510-thierry-saussez-quitte-le-sig.php), last accessed on 19 March 2012.
- 17** Décret N. 2012-784, 30 May 2012, from article 1: 'Elle est chargée de rendre compte des travaux du conseil des ministres et, plus généralement, d'exercer une mission d'information sur les activités du Gouvernement. Elle est informée, pour l'exercice de ses attributions, des différentes actions menées par les membres du Gouvernement.'

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# 8

## Government communication in Spain: Leaving behind the legacies of the past

*María José Canel*

### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

**O**n 20 October 2010, Spain's Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez-Zapatero reshuffled his cabinet in order to, as he said in a press conference, 'seize the moment of the definitive recovery of the economy and employment'. With this idea, communication was centralized, and he trusted in people 'with a great capacity for communication to explain clearly to Spanish society what we are doing' (Rodríguez-Zapatero, 2010). He was attempting to change the structure of communication in order to send clearer and more effective messages.

But these changes did not take place. Only months later, on 28 July 2011, Rodríguez-Zapatero was obliged to call early elections, four months before his term of office was meant to end. It was the culmination of Spain's ninth democratic constitutional legislature, nine periods of government which, together with the constituent period (1975–9), add up to 36 years of development and consolidation of democracy, following the 36 years of dictatorship under the Franco regime.

The blueprint for communication set out in January 2012 by the new government of the Popular Party led by Mariano Rajoy is another addition to the different approaches and formulas with which Spanish governments have

communicated in democracy. This chapter offers an analysis of this evolution in an attempt to account for the context of government communication in Spain at the time of writing.

## **A brief look at history: From militarization to democracy**

The system of government communication today in Spain has been developed under the 1978 Constitution. This was the result of a complex and delicate constitutional negotiation process which led to the consensus to establish a democratic system after more than 150 tumultuous years.

The forms of government adopted during this turbulent time and immediately prior to the period analysed in this chapter are as follows (see Table 8.1): in 1923 after a coup d'état, the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera was established, lasting for more than six years; on 14 April 1931, after Republican-Socialists won local elections, the Second Republic was proclaimed and King Alfonso XIII went into exile; between 1934 and 1936, uprisings against the government of the Republic followed one after the other on 18 July 1936 military troops revolted under the command of General Franco, unleashing a civil war between Nationalists and Republicans until Franco's victory on 1 April 1939. Finally, on 20 November 1975, Franco died, bringing to an end a dictatorship that had lasted almost forty years.

Within this historical context, the practice of government communication began its institutionalization in 1923 with the establishment of the Office of Information and Press Censorship during the military dictatorship, which functioned as the government office of spokesperson and was placed under the Ministry of the Presidency (Campos, 1999; 2010, p. 443). This regime imported the pyramidal and centralized Napoleonic structure<sup>2</sup> for the dissemination of government information: the system of 'compulsory insertion' (i.e. publication of the information issued by the regime was mandatory for all media) granted the State a predominant position for ensuring an information structure based on coercion and censorship (Campos, 1999, p. 105).

This way of organizing government communication was to be taken up again during the Franco regime (1939–75): based on the small press offices that worked as the censorship offices of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, their propagandistic nature was maintained together with the right of the State to disseminate information. This right was reinforced in 1951 with the creation of the Ministry of Information and Tourism, which consecrated the idea that disseminating information was one of the different activities of a State that regulated everything involving the press, propaganda, information, radio broadcasting, cinema, television, theatre and tourism.

**TABLE 8.1** Milestones in Spain's recent history

1923–9	Coup d'état and the establishment of Primo de Rivera's dictatorship
1931	Second Republic
1936–9	Civil War
1939–75	Franco dictatorship
1978	Constitution approved by referendum
1979	First constitutional general elections. UCD (Union of the Democratic Centre) Party
1979–82	UCD governments (Democratic Centre Union)
1982–96	Socialist governments (PSOE). Three legislatures. Felipe González
1996–2004	Popular Party governments (PP). Two legislatures. José María Aznar
2004–11	Socialist governments (PSOE). Two legislatures. José Luis Rodríguez-Zapatero
2011–	Popular Party (PP). Mariano Rajoy

Finally, the Franco regime confiscated media whose editorial lines had been opposed to the *Movimiento Nacional* (National Movement), in other words, to the single party called the Falange (*FET y de las JONS*) which, together with those called 'vertical' trade unions (those not proscribed by Franco), state agencies and public posts, civil servants and numerous social organizations, comprised the majority group in Spanish society under Franco; these media were handed over to this 'National Movement' (hence it was known as 'the Movement Press'). When the Franco regime ended and the 'Movement Press' was closed down, the only place to accommodate its workers was within the new public administration. As will be seen, they have formed an important part of the staff of government communication offices during 32 years of democratic governments, from 1975 until 2011.

With the death of Franco on 20 November 1975, a process began that came to be called the 'Democratic Transition' (García Morillo, 1996; see also Field & Hamann, 2008). The first democratic elections were held in 1977, the new constitution was passed in 1978 and a period of democratic alternation in power began in 1979, with governments of the Democratic Centre Union-UCD (1979–82), Socialists-PSOE (1982–96), Conservative Popular Party-PP (1996–2004), Socialists-PSOE (2004–11) and Popular Party-PP (2011–).



## The political landscape: The result of laborious consensus-making

The 1978 Constitution establishes Spain as a constitutional monarchy, with a parliamentary system, both chambers being elected by the people; it also establishes a decentralized territorial organization with 17 autonomous communities. Several features of this system deserve more discussion to provide a better understanding of how government communication operates in Spain.

First, the prime minister, elected by parliament, is not 'one among equals' (*primus inter pares*) but is given great powers by the Constitution (established with the aim of consolidating governments after years of instability), and is not actually called 'prime minister' but rather *Presidente* (president) (and the second in command is called *Vice-Presidente*, vice-president). The prime minister and his/her government have considerable power to control parliament's agenda, schedule and outcomes; the whole structure and organizational chart of the government depends upon the prime minister's will (López Guerra, 1992). The prime minister also has a strong influence over the electoral list and the crucial rank order on that list. This has important implications for communication. First of all, it makes the prime minister the most important factor for the media (see Álvarez & Pascual, 2002, pp. 267–8). Second, communication structure and resources are highly dependent upon the prime minister's sensitivity to communication matters: it is s/he who decides priority of ranks and resources, and the personal relationship between official communicators and the prime minister is crucial for decision making in communication matters.

Secondly, Spain is a state with a system of regional autonomies (*Estado Autonómico*); it is a national state in which autonomy for historical nationalities and regions is recognized (it is not, as is the case for federal systems, the federation of actually existing states). Every autonomous community has its own legislature, executive and judiciary infrastructure. To this must be added the singular nature of the multiparty system in Spain: the D'Hondt method of proportionality for allocating seats in parliament makes it difficult for third national parties to get seats, but it facilitates the presence of nationalist/pro-independence parties, that, though smaller, have strong backing in certain autonomous regions. The result is a parliament with two major parties and an average of eight nationalist/pro-independence parties. As a consequence, it is difficult to obtain the required absolute majority, and in fact, five of the nine legislatures since the transition have had governments with only a simple majority. But there is no tradition of coalition government in Spain. This has important implications for government communication: the central

government has to tailor its messages to the different languages and cultural specificities of different regions; communication of central government public policies (especially of those with shared powers) has to compete with communication from the regional–autonomous governments; finally, central government ministers often have to travel to the autonomous regions to reach out to the people and thus extend the central government’s message.

## The media landscape

Spain’s media landscape is characterized by the private press on the one hand and a dual broadcasting system of public and commercial broadcasting on the other. Several features deserve mention for the present analysis.

First, media concentration and a partisan press are the norm. Table 8.2 shows the most important media groups. Prisa is the largest, doubling the audience figures of the second largest, Planeta (Artero, 2010).

Many studies have shown the partisan character of the Spanish press (Semetko & Canel, 1997; Gunther, Montero & Wert, 2000; Artero, 2010; Canel & Sanders, 2006, 2010; Canel, 2012, just to quote some). In general, Prisa, Zeta and Mediapro occupy the centre-left of the ideological spectrum, whereas Planeta, Vocento, Unedisa and Godó are on the centre-right.

Second, Spaniards are mainly television viewers (3.8 hours a day, Uteca, 2011). Whereas newspaper readership has always been low, with a lower circulation rate than the European Union’s average (85 issues per 1,000 inhabitants, as compared to 166) (AEDE, 2011, figures are for 2009), television and radio have always commanded massive audiences. While 88.4 per cent

**TABLE 8.2.** Media groups in Spain

Prisa	Planeta	Vocento	Unedisa	Mediapro <sup>a</sup>
<i>El País</i> newspaper	<i>La Razón</i>	ABC newspaper	<i>El Mundo</i>	<i>Público</i>
SER radio network	newspaper	12 regional	newspaper	newspaper
Pay television	<i>Onda Cero</i>	newspapers	<i>Marca</i> (sports	La Sexta
digital platform	radio	<i>Qué</i> (free	newspaper)	television
Digital+	network	newspaper)		network
<i>Cuatro</i> televisión	<i>Antena 3</i>			
network	television			
	<i>Adn</i> (free			
	newspaper)			

<sup>a</sup> At the time this manuscript goes to press, important changes are taking place in the Mediapro group: the paper edition of the *Público* daily newspaper has been closed down (February 2012) and the television station *La Sexta* has been bought by Planeta.

watch television daily, only 37.6 per cent read the press and 57.7 per cent listen to the radio; 41.5 per cent accessed the internet the day before (EGM, 2011a, figures are for 2011). Daily newspapers reach an overall circulation of 3,775,230, of which 2,949,129 pertain to the general information press, 722,504 to the sports press and 103,597 to the economic press (AEDE, 2011). Regional press circulation is 2,202,880, more than half of total figures.

Third, the landscape of the Spanish television system has radically changed during the last twenty-three years. First of all, its structure has been liberalized: it was only in the late 1980s (1988) when Spanish television moved from being a public monopoly (with only two state channels) to a competitive multichannel system, with all the networks increasingly concerned about ratings. In 2010 there were three main private national operators managing several channels (Telecinco, the leader with 25.5% of the audience share, Antena 3 – 15.8% – and La Sexta with 6.8%), one national public operator (CRTVE, with two channels and 24.1% of the audience share) and thirteen regional public operators (owned by the regional governments). Audience share is concentrated in the first five operators (83.5%). Nowadays 71 per cent of homes have DTT, 9 per cent cable, 15 per cent satellite and 5 per cent IPTV (internet Protocol Television) (Uteca, 2011).

There have been interesting modifications in the public broadcasting service. Legislation in 2006 brought important changes with the idea of guaranteeing the channels' independence, its public nature and confirming it as a public service. The chief post is no longer a *Director General* (General Director) appointed by the government (whose mandate expired with the election of a new government); the channel is governed by an executive body (the *Consejo de Administración*, Board of Administration) elected by parliament, which also chooses the chairperson of the corporation and its board from among these 12 members, needing a qualified majority of two-thirds. The first chairperson designated in this way resigned in July 2011. On 20 April 2012, alleging the parliament's incapacity to reach an agreement, the government established the possibility of absolute majority if on the first round of voting the qualified majority of two-thirds could not be reached (Decree-Act 15/2012). Appointment of present chairperson passed parliament in June 2012. Act 8/2009 also changed RTVE's financing system: with the suppression of income through advertising, its main income now comes from the general state budget (42%). It is still too soon to assess whether these modifications are producing a more independent and less pro-government coverage.

Fourth and finally, whereas newspaper readership and television audiences are decreasing, internet use is increasing: in 2005, 19.7 per cent mentioned they had accessed the internet the day before; this figure more than doubled (43%) in 2011 (EGM, 2011b). Moreover, 83 per cent of internet users also use social networks (Fundación Orange, 2011), which have become a tool

for the development of social movements. These in turn have become the mouthpiece for social protests and complaints expressed to public and economic authorities; mobilizations through social media crystallized with the campaign for regional and local elections in 2011 in what has been called the *15-M movement* (for the 15 May 2011) by the 'Outraged' who have generated the Occupy movement.

Some data regarding the journalistic culture will help to complete our picture of the media landscape in Spain and permit a better analysis of government communication. Survey research suggests that Spanish journalists are moving from a partisan–ideological paradigm towards a more adversarial–apolitical one. A new generation of journalists has been shown to be more impartial, factual and critical than their colleagues who, trained during the Franco era, see the media's role as contributing to the consolidation of the democratic system and its institutions; this previous generation tends to be more interpretative in their style, oriented towards advocacy and supportive rather than critical of institutions (Canel & Piqué, 1998, pp. 317–18; Barrera & Zugasti, 2006).

## **The development of government communication: Giving central place to communication**

When General Franco died in 1975, the King named Adolfo Suárez as prime minister. Suárez was well aware that 'the country had to change radically' in order to avoid 'a new confrontation between Spaniards' (interview in Prego, 2000, pp. 19–20). Urged on by the need to generate confidence in the idea that 'it was possible to live together in democracy' (interview in Prego, 2000, p. 54), and basing himself on the German experience (Campos, 1999, p. 143), in 1977, Suárez created the 'Office of Information Services' which was meant to disseminate to the media information from cabinet meetings and visits from international governments (Decree 2761/77). In 1978, aware of the need to centralize in one person broad powers to provide information about the activity of the presidency (the prime minister's office) (Campos, 1999, p. 138), and to achieve better relations with the media, something regarded as 'of capital importance in a pluralist society', he placed the role of communications higher up in the organizational chart through the creation of the office of state secretary (subminister) (Decree 2157/78).

Table 8.3 illustrates the evolution of the rank of the government's spokespeople since 1982.

When the Spanish Socialist Party came to power in 1982, its leader, Felipe González, transferred to the government what he had learned during

**TABLE 8.3** Evolution of the government's spokesperson since 1982

Dates	Formula	Governments
1982–5	Government spokesperson = State secretary (subminister) for communication	PSOE 1982–6 1986–9
1985–8	Government spokesperson = Minister (who is also the Minister of Culture)	1989–93 1993–6
1988–93	A specific Ministry of Government Spokesperson is created	
1993–6	Ministry of Spokesperson	
1996–8	Government spokesperson = State secretary (subminister)	PP 1996–2000 2000–4
1998–2000	Government spokesperson functions are attributed to the Minister of Industry	
2000–2	A specific Ministry of Government Spokesperson is created	
2002–4	Government spokesperson = Deputy prime minister	
2004–10	Government spokesperson = Deputy prime minister	PSOE 2004–8 2008–11
2010–11	Government spokesperson = Deputy prime minister	
2011–	Government spokesperson = Deputy prime minister	PP 2011–

the election campaign: the importance of communication in bringing about change (Feo, 1993). Among other things, he understood that the vital need to strengthen Spanish democracy went hand in hand with the need to reinforce the figure of the prime minister, a challenge that would have the following implications for communication: he would be the one to appear most frequently at press conferences, and the prime minister's office would centralize relations with the media (Campos, 1999, p. 150). Different analyses have shown González's great ability to communicate (Álvarez & Pascual, 2002, p. 274). He has been characterized as a 'natural and unrivalled communicator' who was a crucial element that made up for a still weak and not fully systematized communication office (Canel & Sanders, 2006, p. 90).

Two months after these elections, González created the post of government spokesperson (filled by a state secretary) in order to adjust the pace of the bureaucracy to that of the media and thus achieve a more direct and accurate exchange of information; in the words of his first spokesperson, he was aiming to replace the 'state control' model he had inherited with a more professional communication approach (Sotillos, 1984, p. 380). In 1985, the job of government spokesperson was raised to the rank of minister (Decree 1087/85) (filled by the Minister of Culture), and in 1988 González took the most important step in this process with the creation of an entire ministry devoted to the government spokesperson with all the infrastructure that involved (Decree 727/1988). The structure acquired by the spokesperson in 1988 and its development would turn out to be determinant in the evolution that government communication has undergone in Spain until now.

When the conservative Popular Party came to power in 1996 it initially lowered the rank of government spokesperson back to a state secretary, with the resulting downsizing of the supporting structure. As revealed in interviews with those who worked as his spokespeople, at the beginning of his term, Aznar did not have a very clear idea of what he wanted to do with the organizational chart of government communication (interviews, 2009), which subsequently underwent changes during his two terms as prime minister: in 1998 the Minister of Industry was also given the role of government spokesperson; in 2000 Aznar created a specific Ministry of Government Spokesperson; and in 2002 a deputy prime minister was named as spokesperson for the first time ever.

In 2004 the Socialist Party returned to power and its leader, José Luis Rodríguez-Zapatero, consolidated the trend to unite the roles of government spokesperson and deputy prime minister in one person; he furthermore added a third *Dirección General* (General Direction, a State Office) whose function was to strengthen coordination of the message. In order to expand his message, in 2010 he attributed spokesperson functions to both the deputy prime minister –formally the government spokesperson – and to what is called the *Ministro de la Presidencia*,<sup>3</sup> but as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, there was hardly time to find out whether this formula was effective.

To summarize, the organizational chart for government communication in Spain has undergone different formulations. Formulas vary from the case in which the spokesperson is a state secretary to where the spokesperson has the next highest rank after the prime minister in the position of the deputy prime minister. In-between, there is the case in which the government spokesperson combines other ministerial responsibilities with that of being the government spokesperson; the case where s/he is a minister without portfolio (with very limited resources); and where s/he is a minister with

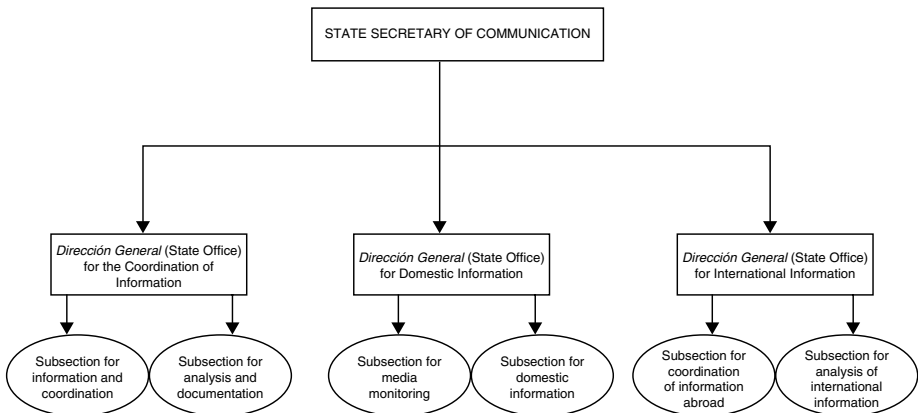
portfolio (and therefore with their own structure, office and staff). As Table 8.3 illustrates, the trend has been to put communication at the centre: for the last three governments the government spokesperson has held the highest rank after the prime minister.

## The organizational structure for government communication today

Figure 8.1 shows the organizational chart for government communication in 2011.

The communication structure is, generally speaking, as follows: under the *Ministerio de la Presidencia* there is a State Secretary for Communication to which state offices (*direcciones generales*) belong (each headed by a General Director, the next rank below a state secretary). Traditionally, there have been two state offices involved in communication (one for domestic information and another for foreign information). In 2004, a third state office was created for coordinating communication from the prime minister's office with the press offices of ministerial departments.

The latest restructuring of the organizational chart, carried out by the Popular Party government in January 2012, has the following features. The official government spokesperson is also the deputy prime minister and the State Secretary for Communication depends on that office. For budgetary reasons the previous three state offices (*Direcciones Generales*) dealing with communication functions have been reduced to one. Four subunits depend



**FIGURE 8.1** *The organizational chart for government communication in Spain, 2011*

Source: By author with information from the Ministerio de la Presidencia, 2011.

on the state office for communication: one for relations with domestic media, one for relations with foreign media, one to carry out research and one for electronic communication and new communication technologies (Decree 199/2012).

In the ministries, the person responsible for communication does not have the rank of a General Director but is only an advisor to the minister (this post is no longer called 'chief of the press office' but 'chief of the communication office' in order to include other activities that go beyond mere relations with the media).

The prime minister does not have a specific communications office or spokesperson. Since 1983 this office has had a team of advisers but its range of action is not so relevant (Ortega, 1992, p. 195). Both the development of this office and its latest restructuring of 2011 (Decree 1094/2011) indicate that there are a lack of adequate procedures in the prime minister's office for the conduct of more systematized and planned communication on the part of the prime minister. First, the only unit in this office that could be related to communication (the Department of Analysis and Studies, responsible for monitoring the government's image in the media and in public opinion, and the drawing up of strategic proposals) has not been given much relevance during the past three decades (interviews, 2009 and 2011). Secondly, what refers to the prime minister's participation in events is scattered in the organizational chart: on the one hand, the Department of Protocol is independent of the prime minister's advisers cabinet, and its work is more technical than strategic (interviews, 2011); moreover, the prime minister's agenda is drawn up by his personal secretary without any systematic procedure for long-term strategic planning, with the exception of very specific issues (Ortega, 1992; this way of working was corroborated in interviews in 2011). Finally, the structure of the office for crisis management does not include a communication dimension. All of these features are shown again in the latest restructuring of the government carried out in 2012 by the Popular Party (Decree 83/2012). Thus communication of the prime minister has to operate within these structural deficiencies.

## **Human and financial resources**

### ***Presence (and absence) of the public administration***

An analysis of the human resources devoted to government communication in Spain brings to light certain specificities as regards the presence of the public administration (civil service). First, the staff is made up of a combination of personal/political appointments and civil servants from the general state



administration. More specifically, in 2011 approximately 200 people were working in the central body –the State Secretary for Communications (forty of them in communication and the rest in administrative or technical tasks: ushers, administrative secretaries, etc.). Eight of them were personal/political appointments; the rest were civil servants who had reached their posts through competitive exam (career civil servants) or were hired (temporary civil servants). As already mentioned, this is also where the workers from the *Movement Press* were accommodated after the demise of the Franco regime, not all of them were retired until 2011, and were determinant as part of the staff of the office of the State Secretary for Communication (interviews, 2011).

At the ministerial level the average size of the communication staff is as follows: at the head is the Director of communications (with rank of advisor to the minister and not of General Director) – who in some cases has a deputy – three writers, one person to monitor audiovisual media, two people for monitoring wires, three administrative secretaries and two ushers. Of all these, only the Director is a personal/political appointment, as is this person's deputy, if there is one. Workers formerly from the *Movement Press* can also be found among the civil servants working in the ministries.

This staff structure has practical implications that go beyond the usual complexity involved in the coexistence of political appointees with civil servants. On the one hand, having inherited the workers from the *Movement Press* meant that for a long time recruitment, replacement and training processes to adjust staff to changing communication demands were put on hold. This led to an inflation of technical functions (performed by civil servants, such as accreditation of journalists or monitoring media content) to the detriment of managerial ones (such as strategy design or content production).

In 2011, a total of 400 persons were working in government communication (including administrative staff).<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to compare this figure with others over time because the official publications do not differentiate communication staff from other civil servants. But if we look just at the central communication unit (the state secretariat for communication), the data indicate, first, that the number of staff increases, the higher the rank of the unit;<sup>5</sup> and second, that the current number of 200 people has remained stable over the past few years.

Secondly, unlike in other countries, in Spain there is no specific corps of civil servants to work in the communication area of public administration. There are no civil servants in senior posts. There are no mechanisms for recruitment or specific training and promotion procedures with criteria related to professional communication. That is why, again unlike other countries, there is barely any explicit formulation of what values should prevail in government communication. Once again, we must look back to the Franco era to find the only formulation made in this respect: a decree from 1967, which, reflecting the ethos of the Francoist confessional State, established the 'norms of behaviour for civil

servants in the Ministry of Information and Tourism'. Although no longer in force, they deserve mention in that they show the regime's concept of state ownership of information: the information that the government provides is simply one more social institution like the 'institutions that were brought to light or recreated by the National Movement'. Therefore, civil servants, in their work of providing information from the State, shall fight the 'enemy', which is 'the great force of international communism'; an enemy against which 'any neutral attitude is inadmissible' (quoted in Campos, 1999, pp. 133ff.).

As there is at present no specific branch of the civil service devoted to communication, the values of the General State Administration for all civil servants also apply to those working in communication. It was not until 2007 that the Civil Service Bylaw established a comprehensive formulation of the concept, functions, rules and ethical principles guiding the civil service. Although it establishes objectivity, integrity, neutrality, impartiality, transparency, effectiveness and honesty (BOE, Act 7/2007, article 52) among its basic principles, in the section on ethical principles and norms of behaviour deriving from these general norms no reference is made to public communicators or the job of communication. In short, in Spain there is no guidance on the values that should guide the work of civil servants working on government communication to replace that issued by the Franco regime.

### ***Skills and education***

As shown in Table 8.3, there have been 13 government spokespeople (only 3 of them women) during the past 29 years. Whereas the government's spokespeople have a more political profile (none of the 13 were communication professionals), the State Secretary for Communication and the heads of ministerial departments' communication offices are always journalists (mostly with journalism degrees) who have worked in the media and have a personal relationship with the minister who hires them. The development of courses and degrees in organizational communication and public relations as well as of the professional field of corporate communication has led to a trend to hire people with this sort of background. The National Training Institute for Civil Servants established specific short courses on communication for civil servants in 2008.

### ***Financial resources***

It is not easy to access accurate and thorough information as to the cost of government communication. The official data available are published in a report regarding expenditure on advertising campaigns issued yearly since 2006.

In 2010, a total amount of €80,832,130 was spent in advertising and institutional communication. Compared with prior years, this expenditure amounted to a 50 per cent reduction with respect to 2006 (this reduction is due to the economic crisis). The only expense on the rise is internet communication. Finally, the government spends mainly on advertising campaigns and direct marketing; only 5.8 per cent is allocated to public relations campaigns (Ministerio de la Presidencia, 2010a).

## **The process: Tasks performed by the government communication office**

An analysis of how different decrees have formulated the tasks attributed to government communication offices in Spain from 1977 to today (the last was in 1999) reveals a slight trend towards a broader conception closely linked to management: moving from communication focused entirely on the government's relations with the media (dissemination of information from cabinet meetings, trips of senior officials, etc.) to a formulation that, albeit vaguely, refers to the idea of strategic management and planning (including the *devising* of an communication *policy* and its coordination). Nevertheless, these formulations are far from being a broader and more complete conceptualization of communication: for example, there is nothing referring to public relations activities and there is a lack of integration of the different communication tasks such as protocol, internet communication, the staging of events or crisis communication.

In practice, the main tasks carried out by government communicators are related to media relations management. The government spokesperson meets the press every Friday, after the cabinet meeting. There are no daily briefings by the government spokesperson or the ministerial departments; additional press conferences are called unsystematically. The weight of media exposure is very much on the leaders (the prime minister and the ministers) since they do not have a spokesperson. In fact, the directors of communication for ministerial departments do not brief the press; what they do is to arrange the ministers' media encounters.

Coordination is referred to as one of the most important challenges (interviews, 2008 and 2011); although directors of communication from ministerial departments functionally depend on the central unit for communication in practice they report to their ministers.

As interviews show, public officials do not undertake much strategic work; feedback research is not conducted; there is little planning for crisis communication, as shown in research case studies looking at government

communication relating to terrorist attacks and media scandals (see Canel & Sanders, 2006, 2010). Interviews also show that there is, however, an awareness of the need to transfer the knowledge and strategic skills common in election campaigns to government communication. In 2007 a new corporate identity (to include the word 'España') for all information and public relations activities of the government and the ministries was introduced. There is also an internet editorial office and an online information platform, last renewed in 2011.

## **Conclusions: Challenges for government communication in Spain**

This chapter shows that the design, organization and legislation relating to government communication in Spain have their roots in a conception of the State as the prime conveyor and manager of information.

This analysis corroborates what has been shown in previous studies (Canel, 2007; Dircom, 2007; Sanders, Canel & Holtz-Bacha, 2011): there have been a number of changes (new degrees in organizational and corporate communication, modifications to the organizational chart to give more importance to the rank of those in charge of communication, new courses for civil servants, new definitions of tasks, etc.) that allow us to say that government communication in Spain may be moving towards a more systematized structure. But at the same time innovation in communication is hindered by the legacy of the past, and today's challenge is to overcome the conception of the State as the prime manager and owner of information.

Challenges include, first, establishing useful mechanisms for safeguarding government communication from partisanship and self-promotion. The Law for Advertising and Institutional Communication was approved in 2005 both to improve distribution of governmental messages and to disassociate accurate and neutral information on public policies from political opinion and partisan messages. Prohibited content includes material that undermines public policies, is sexist, encourages violence, or promotes government achievements. Although this law has meant a step forward towards transparency in communication expenditure (every year the government has to send to parliament a report on the aims, costs, tools used and companies contracted for all its campaigns) it does not address the broad variety of tasks that communication in today's world demands: the legislation refers only to advertising campaigns; it does not consider the outsourcing of professional public relations services (in fact, the sporadic calls for bids have been controversial). Finally, the mechanisms for control are defective:

the Complaints Committee (established just three years ago) depends on the government's state secretariat for communication. It has so far received several complaints but none has been upheld (written information provided by the secretary of the Committee at a personal query).

Other challenges include establishing mechanisms that foster transparency in government communication;<sup>6</sup> renewing staff to rebalance technical tasks with those of management and planning; creating organizational charts that integrate in a more professional and thorough way the different communicative tasks that a government carries out; updating the profiles of those who manage communication departments; establishing recruitment, training and promotion processes typical of the public administration that will guarantee the values of neutrality and public service, also at senior level; the use of the internet for closer interaction with citizens; and finally, research, since although studies have been carried out on election campaigns, very little has been published on government communication. All of these challenges must be approached in the context of an increasingly fragmented media sector and an ever less compliant public television station, which is in the midst of a deep economic crisis. Future research should concentrate on finding out whether the structural changes taking place are contributing to government communication that is moving away from the Francoist 'state control' model of its remote origins.

## Notes

- 1 This chapter is mainly based on a revision of the evolution of organizational charts, published analyses and existing legal texts. However, given the paucity of material published, this research draws on information taken from an ongoing research project based upon in-depth interviews with Spanish government spokespeople. Information from six interviews has been used here: three were with the highest rank of government spokespeople and three with Secretaries of State for Communication. People interviewed cover all governments since 1993. Interviews were conducted between 2008 and 2011.
- 2 The present Spanish Civil Service has its roots in that established in the nineteenth century following the French Napoleonic system. More specifically, Napoleon's establishment of the Bureau d'Esprit in 1792 has been identified as pioneer in the organization of administrative structures for the dissemination of governmental information (see Campos, 1999, p. 105).
- 3 The *Ministerio de la Presidencia* is a ministry without portfolio: it supports the prime minister and has a political function. It also coordinates matters of constitutional relevance: relations between the government and parliament, governmental committees, coordination of the cabinet meetings, and so on.

- 4 These figures include only the staff of the Secretary of State for Communication and the communication offices of the different ministries; they do not include the communication staff from state bodies or agencies such as museums, the state train company or state security forces. To give an idea of the total figure for civil servants, the information available, which includes regional ministries and agencies, puts the number at 131,954 (Ministerio de la Presidencia, 2010b).
- 5 Thus, it increased from 30 persons in 1979, when it was a State Secretariat for Information to 300 in 1988, with the creation of a Ministry of Spokesperson (data taken from Campos, 1999, p. 176).
- 6 On 23 March 2012, the government presented a *Draft Bill on Transparency, Access to Public Information and Good Governance* that at present is still in the discussion phase in Parliament.

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# 9

## Government communication in democratic Poland: 20 years after the collapse of communism

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**T**he collapse of communism in 1989 in Poland and other Central European countries resulted in changes in many areas of social, political and economic life. The communist policy of censorship was replaced by the introduction of democratic institutions with the hope of creating suitable conditions for the emergence of a public sphere. Government communication was one of the most important areas of democratic change and, unlike the fields of political communication and electoral campaigns, has been little studied in Poland. This chapter offers an analysis of government communication during the transition from the communist regime and the consolidation of the democratic system in Poland.

### **Political and electoral systems after the collapse of communism**

Curry claims that transformation out of communism in Poland led the way for the transition of the rest of what had been the Soviet bloc (2008, p. 165).

Poland was the first country in the region which had a non-communist government. The main aim of the new government was 'unmaking communist control' (Curry, 2008, p. 170). It was formed in September 1989 by Tadeusz Mazowiecki who was a Catholic journalist and advisor to the Solidarity leader Lech Wałęsa. The Western-educated economist Leszek Balcerowicz, as a minister of finance and deputy prime minister, was responsible for the process of transition from state economy towards the free market. Poland was one of the poorest countries in the Soviet bloc but an economic reform – called 'shock therapy' (Curry, 2008, p. 171) – made rapid privatization and foreign investment possible. Poland's access to NATO in 1999 and the European Union in 2004 are crucial facts for Poles. The membership of both institutions was a symbol of Poland's turn to the West and a guarantee of its international position in Europe.

The present political system in Poland was created in 1992 by the 'small constitution' and was consolidated by the Constitution adopted in 1997 (Dobek-Ostrowska & Łódzki, 2008, p. 226). Legislative powers are held by the parliament, which has two chambers, the *Sejm* (the lower house of the Polish parliament) and the Senate, elected every four years. Executive powers reside with the president, elected every five years along with the government, which is appointed by the president (Godlewski, 2005). The political system in Poland is semi-presidential (Lisicka, 2002, p. 29). There are structures typical of a parliamentary model in which the government is accountable to elected members of parliament who can pass a vote of no confidence in the government and, additionally, ministers can take a seat in parliament or come from outside this body. On the other hand, there are structures typical of the presidential model such as an elected president who has the power to appoint the government.

A multiparty system, characterized by fragmentation, polarization and a lack of stability, took shape in Poland in the early 1990s. At the beginning of the political transformation in Poland, political parties were weak and conflict between them was common. The only parties which have been active for the whole two decades are the post-communist Left Democratic Alliance (*Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej* – SLD) and the Polish Peasant's Party (*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe* – PSL) (Sula, 2008, p. 324). Until 2005, the Polish party system was characterized by competition between the two blocs based on a strong axiological division: post-communist left party (SLD) versus post-Solidarity centre-right parties Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* – PiS) and Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska* – PO). However, during the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2005, 2007 and 2011, an increasing level of competition emerged between the two post-Solidarity parties – the liberal Civic Platform and the conservative Law and Justice Party. Since the inception of political system reforms in Central and Eastern Europe, democracy

was accepted by all mainstream parties in Poland as an indisputable form of government for the country (Sula, 2011, p. 55). After the first decade of transformation, which was characterized by many changes of governments (three coalitions and eight prime ministers in seven years), a kind of stability was achieved in the second decade. However, only two governments and two prime ministers, Jerzy Buzek (1997–2001) and Donald Tusk (2007–11), saw out their entire terms. Four parties, the PO, PiS, SLD and PSL, played the most important role from 2001 to 2011.

## Media landscape and journalism culture

In the early 1990s, the Polish media began to undergo a profound structural transformation from the media controlled by the Communist Party to an independent and free media market.

There are more than ten national daily newspapers (quality, business, tabloids and sport) associated with different ideologies, creating a pluralistic press market (see Table 9.1).

There are four major newspapers, two qualities (*Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita*) and two tabloids (*Fakt*, introduced in 2003 by Axel Springer, and *Super Express*). The crisis of readership has been noted in recent years. The circulation of all national and regional daily newspapers has fallen dramatically during the past six years. The distribution of quality newspapers fell by about 45 per cent (*Gazeta Wyborcza* from 444,989 copies in 2006 to 246,252 copies in 2012, *Rzeczpospolita* from 157,340 copies in 2006 to 85,088 copies in 2012), the tabloid *Fakt* by about 33 per cent (from 585,453 copies in 2006 to 391,652 copies in 2012) and the tabloid *Super Express* by about 24 per cent (from 215,583 in 2006 to 164,639 copies in 2012) (*Wszystkie dzienniki traca*, 2012). The two biggest quality newspapers (*Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita*) dropped from 24.4 per cent of readership in 2007 (Polskie Badania Czytelnictwa, 2008, p. 115) to 16.4 per cent in 2012 (Polskie Badania Czytelnictwa, 2012, p. 80). The same trend is observed in the case of the two tabloids *Fakt* and *Super Express*: 26.4 per cent of readers in 2007 (Polskie Badania Czytelnictwa, 2008, p. 115) and 17.7 per cent in 2012 (Polskie Badania Czytelnictwa, 2012, p. 80).

The Polish opinion magazine market is also well developed and reflects considerable political diversity. As research has shown, (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2011a, p. 143; 2011b, p. 194; 2012, p. 38), there are weekly magazines such as the left-wing *Polityka* and *Przekrój*, conservative *Uważam Rze. Pisane Inaczej*, neutral *Newsweek Polska* and *Wprost* and the Catholic *Gość Niedzielny*. Those weeklies were read by 38.2 per cent of readers in 2007

**TABLE 9.1** Daily newspapers and their readership

	Title	Owner	Type	Political preferences	Readership 2007 (%)	Readership 2012 (%)
1	Gazeta Wyborcza	Agora	Quality	Left	19.45	12.73
2	Fakt	Ringier Axel Springer	Tabloids	Conservative	18.10	12.35
3	Metro	Agora	Free tabloids	Neutral	8.41	5.85
4	Super Express	Murator	Tabloids	Neutral	8.33	5.43
5	Dziennik (2006–9)	Axel Springier	Quality	Conservative	7.27	–
6	Rzeczpospolita	Presspublica	Quality	Conservative	4.95	3.63
7	Przegląd Sportowy	Ringier Axel Springier	Aport	Neutral	4.64	3.20
8	Gazeta Prawna/ Dziennik Gazeta Prawna	Infor Biznes	Business	Neutral	2.35	2.25
9	Gazeta Podatkowa	Wydawnictwo Podatkowe	Business	Neutral	0.84	0.70
10	Sport	Ringier Axel Springier	Sport	Neutral	–	0.46
11	Puls Biznesu	Bonnier	Business	Neutral	0.52	0.33
12	Gazeta Gieldy Parkiet	Presspublica		Business	0.25	0.25

Source: Polskie Badania Czytelnictwa, 2008, p. 115 and Polskie Badania Czytelnictwa, 2012, p. 80.

(Polskie Badania Czytelnictwa, 2008, p. 80) and 29.8 per cent in 2012 (Polskie Badania Czytelnictwa, 2012, p. 80).

*Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita* have no formal relations with any political party but the level of partisanship in both cases is high. Since its launch, *Gazeta Wyborcza* represented left-wing political and ideological values and supported specific politicians rather than political parties. The support of these newspapers tended to be what Blumler and Gurevitch regard as 'conditional' (1995, p. 65) and changed frequently in the past two decades: in 1990 it supported Tadeusz Mazowiecki and was against Lech Wałęsa; in 1995 it supported Lech Wałęsa and was against Aleksander Kwaśniewski; in 2000 it presented positive coverage of Aleksander Kwaśniewski (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2011a, 2011c).

Until 2006 the editors of *Rzeczpospolita* tried to keep their distance from political parties. From 2006 to 2011 the newspaper was instrumentalized by the government of Jarosław Kaczyński and used by the right-wing Law and Justice Party (PiS) as a tool of political propaganda.

The dual model of commercial and public service broadcasting was established in 1994 by the Broadcasting Act. There are three broadcasters which dominate the radio market. The leading commercial station RMF FM is owned by the German media group Bauer (from 2006). It had 23.7 per cent of listeners in 2007 (Radio Track, 2008, p. 112) and 23.4 per cent in 2012 (Radio Track, 2012, p. 112). Radio ZET belongs to the Polish Eurozet company and it was listened to by 19 per cent of the audience in 2007 (Radio Track, 2008, p. 112) and 15.6 in 2012 (Radio Track, 2012, p. 82). The public Polish Radio with four stations had 32.8 per cent in 2007 (Radio Track, 2008, p. 122.) and 22 per cent in 2012 (Radio Track, 2012, p. 82). All these data show that a position of Radio RMF FM is stable but Radio ZET and public Polish Radio lost many listeners.

Television is still the main source of information for Poles and the main channel of political advertising. Two commercial television channels TVN (ITI holding) and TV Polsat (Cyfrowy Polsat) are owned by Polish companies. Three public television channels (TVP1, TVP 2, TVP Info) which operate on the television market were leaders in the 2000s attracting the largest television audience. Research shows that 43 per cent of the audience watched public television in 2008 (*TVP1 ma*, 2008) and only 29.6 per cent in July 2012 (*Polsat w dół*, 2012).

There is no clear answer to the question about the level of professionalism of Polish journalists. Hadamik (2005, p. 222) claims that it is a kind of combination of 'the old and the new' elements of journalistic professionalism. On the one hand, values of the old journalistic culture still exist, such as 'publicist' journalism which is characterized by taking a point of view, presenting political preferences of journalists and the use of an aesthetic

and expressive writing style. On the other hand, this culture has evolved and modernized influenced by global development trends. Polish journalism, which is not an isolated island on the world map, is affected by global problems such as deprofessionalization, the lowering of journalistic standards due to commercialization, a trend towards tabloidization of political content, sensationalization and horse-race pattern coverage.

Content analysis of election news coverage conducted in 2005, 2007 and 2009 (Łódzki, 2011; Dobek-Ostrowska, 2011c; Dobek-Ostrowska & Łódzki, 2011; Pilarska, 2011) showed that Polish journalistic professionalism is varied. There was no common pattern as to how journalists applied professional rules, ethics and values such as objectivity, neutrality, truth, factuality, reliability, honesty and balancing of sources (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2011a).

The politicization of public service media in Poland both at the organizational and editorial levels have been widely discussed by journalists, politicians and researchers over the past two decades. State control of the media is linked to the activities of the National Broadcasting Council (NBC), a body appointed by parliament (the *Sejm*), which also nominates members of the governing bodies of the public service media organizations. Most members gain their position because of their identification with the ruling parties rather than because of their professional qualifications. Political influence has also been observed at the editorial level especially in news content (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2011c, pp. 201–2; Łódzki, 2011, p. 231; Pilarska, 2011, p. 163; Piontek & Hordecki, 2011, p. 211).

Polish public service media, created by the Broadcasting Act in 1992 (although they did not start until 1994), face different types of crises related to the lack of sufficient funding, programming distinctiveness, lack of identity and technological development (Jakubowicz, 2007, p. 246). However, practice has shown that the ruling parties and successive governments in Poland have been concerned with gaining more power over public service media rather than with creating conditions for innovation and improving transparency in the public service. Journalists working in public radio or television stations have been hired according to their political preferences. A change in the stations' management and staff takes place after each election.

In contrast to public service broadcasting, commercial radio and television stations have more autonomy in covering politics. They follow what Mazzoleni calls 'commercial media logic' (1987). Their support for political parties is occasional, unpredictable and temporary and their approach to political actors can be defined as 'negativism' (see Farnsworth & Lichter, 2008) in which they take a negative, critical stance devoid of objectivity towards politicians.

Opinion polls show that public trust in all politicians is low (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2011a, p. 234). In the 2006 polls, only few respondents (5%) considered

politicians a group that serves the public interest while 40 per cent stated that journalists serve the public interest and over 57 per cent defined them as honest, reliable and trustworthy (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2011a, p. 53). Such a high regard for journalists and such a low one for politicians distinguishes Poland from other Western countries. It may also affect the way journalists themselves perceive political elites. Supported by the public, journalists feel entitled to be strongly critical of the whole political class, and especially of the government, and this negativism is attractive to audiences disappointed with politics.

Commercial media invite representatives of different political parties to comment on current affairs as a way of ensuring political pluralism. However, their selection is influenced by interviewees' popularity and attractiveness. Generally, journalistic interpretations and commentaries dominate in the news.

The private television channel TVN pays a lot of attention to political news, and tries to maintain high standards of journalism. Content analyses of election news coverage in 2005, 2007, 2009, 2010 and 2011 show that TVN is making attempts towards the development of honest and fair news coverage (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2011b, p. 157). TV Polsat and radio station RMF FM are typical examples of commercial media, where the path of development is determined by profit and the standard of news programmes is rather low.

The main private media are in the hands of Polish owners such as ITI (*TVN*, portal *onet.pl*), Polsat (*TV Polsat*), ZPR (Radio Eska network, daily tabloid *Super Express*), Agora (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, Radio Agora networks, portal *gazeta.pl*) and Eurozet (radio ZET), differentiating Poland from other Central and Eastern European countries where commercial radio and television stations are owned by American (in Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania), German (Hungary) or Scandinavian companies (Hungary, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia). There are also German groups active in this part of Europe, such as Ringier Axel Springer (daily tabloid *Fakt*, weekly magazine *Newsweek Polska*), Bauer (Radio *RMF FM*, portal *interia.pl*) and Verlagsgruppe Passau (regional dailies).

According to the data provided by Eurostat 2011, 67 per cent of Poles are internet users, 31 per cent more than in 2006 (Pliszka, 2012, p. 14), so that Poland occupies the eighteenth position out of 27 European Union countries in terms of the percentage of internet users. In 2011 about 90 per cent of users were interested in information and political news (Zaczkiewicz, 2012, p. 24). The main portals are owned by the largest media and telecommunication companies operating in Poland namely, *onet.pl* by ITI (owner of TVN), *gazeta.pl* by Agora (owner of *Gazeta Wyborcza*), *interia.pl* by Bauer (owner of RMF FM), *wp.pl* by Orange. Despite the fact that every year the internet has more



users, Polish political actors are not interested in this medium and the internet has a rather limited position in political communication.

The question is how this pluralist media landscape serves communication between the government and the citizen. Do they explain policies, government decisions and motivations of the prime minister and government ministers? Do they attempt to help citizens to understand the governmental processes better?

## **The development of government communication**

For the purpose of the analysis of government communication the past two decades can be divided into two periods: from 1989 until 2001 and from 2001 until the present day. These two periods are connected with the adoption of the Act on the Access to Public Information of 6 September 2001 (Dz. U. vol. 112, item 1198, with amendments). As a consequence, the transformation of government communication in Poland has taken place on both a normative and organizational level. On the normative level, the changes concerned the ratification of international laws and the introduction of new domestic regulations, whereas the changes concerning the organizational level affected the professionalization of management in government administration through the creation of the civil service corps and the introduction of new marketing communication tools.

Changes to government communication on the organizational level included a transition from an administration based on officials unconditionally loyal to the Communist Party to an administration based on a politically neutral civil service. Legislation introducing a system of a neutral civil service corps was finally adopted in 1996.<sup>1</sup> The reform of the civil service has resulted in two levels of posts in government administration – the political level, covering high state posts (ministries, secretaries and undersecretaries of state) and members of political cabinets (political advisers and assistants), and the civil service level. The civil service ensures the professional and politically neutral execution of state tasks and the continuity of the functioning of institutions independently of the current political situation and changes of government. Applicants are selected in open and competitive recruitment procedures. Advisers and assistants in political cabinets are employed only for the time in office of their political masters. Both groups of employees (members of the civil service corps and members of the political cabinets) participate in government communication. The main tasks of government communication are fulfilled by civil service corps and political assistants and advisors are the supporters of the persons occupying high state posts. This division is an effect of binding Polish legal regulations.

## The structure of government communication

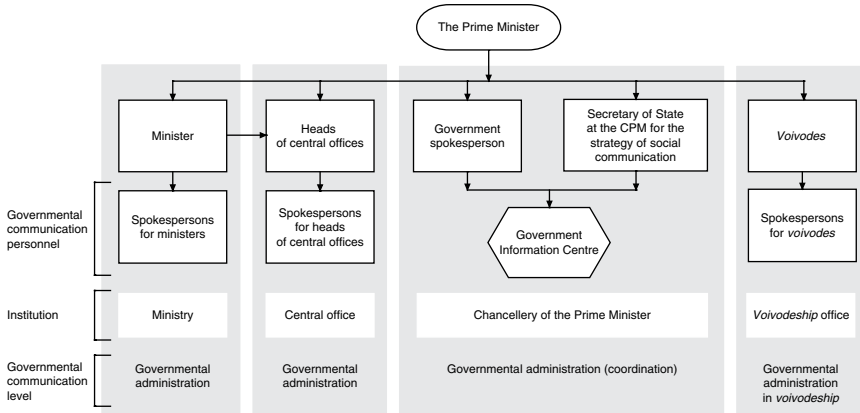
Government communication structures are determined by the Ordinance of the Council of Ministers on the Organization and Tasks of Spokespersons in Offices of Government Administration Organs of 8 January 2002 (Dz. U. vol. 4, item 36). The tasks of government information policy concerning the individual ministers or *voivodes*<sup>2</sup> are executed by the minister's and *voivode's* spokespersons, respectively. Apart from the spokespersons for ministers and *voivodes*, spokespersons for different central offices can also operate within the government communication framework. The Ordinance states that the cooperation of spokespersons is the responsibility of the government spokesperson. The government spokesperson is a political post and appointed and recalled by the prime minister and subordinated to him or her. Since 1989, the function of the government spokesperson has been fulfilled by 18 people in 13 cabinets. The government spokesperson has a leading and coordinating role in the field of government communication, although there is no subordination between the government spokesperson and other spokespersons in ministries and other offices. The lack of subordination can cause some difficulties of coordination which are discussed in the conclusion of this chapter.

The spokespersons are organizationally supported by offices servicing the government administration body in which the spokesperson operates. The government spokesperson is served by the Chancellery of the Prime Minister (CPM) and, within it, by the Government Information Centre (GIC).

The structure of government communication in Poland is based on four formally independent levels (see Figure 9.1). The first level is that of the government spokesperson and the CPM. The second level is that of spokespersons for ministers. The third level is that of spokespersons for the heads of central offices and their relevant bodies (e.g. the Central Statistical Office). The last structural level of government communication is that of the *voivodeship*.

The Ordinance No. 2 of the Head of the CPM of 18 January 2012 determines the scope of the responsibilities of those occupying high state posts in the Chancellery and establishes both the position of the government spokesperson and that of the Secretary of State, who is responsible for 'social communication strategy' (as it is called in the ordinance, although there is no explanation as to what this strategy is) and for the GIC. Thus, the GIC, managed by its director and three deputies, works for and answers to the government spokesperson and the Secretary of State.

The organization of government communication structures at the level of ministries has no uniform model that is binding for the entire administration. For example, the Minister of Economy has no spokesperson and its Press



**FIGURE 9.1** *Structure of government communication in Poland*

Department<sup>3</sup> is responsible for the Minister of Economy's communication. The Press Department is a unit of the Minister's Secretariat and is headed by the Chief of the Press Department. In the Ministry of Justice, the spokesperson responsible for government communication is directly subordinate to the minister and the Information Department is part of the minister's office, one of the ministry's organizational entities. In the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, government communication is the responsibility of the minister's spokesperson, a member of the civil service corps, answering to the minister's office. The Ministry of Environment is another example where the Press Bureau is an independent organizational entity cooperating with the politically appointed spokesperson. In the Ministry of Environment tasks pertaining to government communication are also implemented by other organizational entities such as the Bureau of the General Director and the Ecological Education Department. In the case of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, its spokesperson is serviced by a separate organizational entity, the Press Spokesperson Bureau. Moreover, government communication carried out by the Minister of Foreign Affairs also makes use of the Department of Public and Cultural Diplomacy and the European Information Department.

## Government communication resources and tasks

The tasks and public services carried out by government communication bodies are defined in the Press Law of 24 January 1984 (Dz. U. vol. 5, item 24, with amendments), according to which spokespersons are obliged to provide journalists with information. All spokespersons working for the government provide information on government policy and execute the tasks defined in

the Act on the Access to Public Information. The tasks of the government spokesperson (in the CPM) include, in particular, the explanation of government policy, including public presentation of government activities, commenting on domestic and foreign events concerning government policy, responding to the press and ensuring cooperation of services responsible for government information policy. The tasks of the spokesperson for the minister or *voivode* include, in particular, explaining the activity of the minister or *voivode*. For example, in the Ministry of Economy (where there is no spokesperson), the tasks of the Press Department include contacts with the media, preparation and distribution of press information and official communiqués, organization of media events, including press conferences and briefings and preparation of responses for publication. The duties of the Press Department of the Ministry of Economy also include the preparation and implementation of information and promotional actions.

## Human resources

As far as human resources in the CPM (where the government spokesperson is based) are concerned, 516 members of the civil service corps were working there in July 2011 out of a total of 589 of all CPM employees (15 persons of whom were members of the Chancellery's political management and 35 were political advisers and assistants). There are 32 employees (members of the civil corps) working in the GIC.

In the Ministry of Environment, government communication tasks were implemented by 21 persons in 2011, including 8 Press Bureau employees, a spokesperson and 6 employees from the Political Cabinet and 6 employees in the General Director Office and the Ecological Education Department. In the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the tasks were carried out by 22 persons, including a spokesperson, 12 persons in the Press Spokesperson Bureau and 8 in the ministry's Department of Public and Cultural Diplomacy and 1 person in the Department of European Union Law. In the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, government communication tasks were implemented by 7 persons. On the whole, there are around 200 employees working in communication in all ministries.

## Communication activities

A key role in government communication with the media is played by the GIC. It consists of a Monitoring Department, Content-Related Service Team, Media Servicing Team, Team for Press Servicing of the Polish Presidency in

the Council of the European Union and the Bureau-Administration Service Department.<sup>4</sup>

The responsibilities of the GIC Monitoring Department (seven people) include carrying out, based on the services of an external company, permanent daily monitoring of the press, electronic media and information agencies as well as maintaining the archive of radio and television broadcasts, press conferences and interviews as well as the preparation of media analyses. The Department also sends text messages on the current media reports to government members and the CPM management. The GIC in the CPM as well as a number of ministries use external media monitoring services. For example, the Foreign Ministry hires services to analyse Polish and foreign language media coverage of foreign policy.

Seven employees working for the GIC Content-Related Service Team are responsible for the preparation of press communiqués, press rectifications and analyses. The team is also responsible for the CPM internet services including updating of their content and cooperation with external contractors. The team is engaged in media relations for the prime minister's domestic and foreign visits. In 2010, the team prepared press releases concerning the prime minister's 65 meetings abroad or with foreign guests in Poland and in all, 500 press releases and background features were prepared. The Team for Content-Related Service also ensures press servicing for the Council of Ministers and prepares a press communiqué after each session of the Council of Ministers.

The GIC Media Servicing Team (six people) is responsible for the organization and logistics of the prime minister's and ministers' meetings with the media including press conferences and other media briefings. The team offers access to photographs in its free of charge archive on the CPM website.

The tasks of the Team for Press Servicing of the Polish presidency in the Council of the European Union (two persons) include cooperation with domestic and foreign media, the presidency's internal and external communication strategy, media monitoring, preparation of press releases and other documents connected with the Polish presidency.

A separate area of services provided by the GIC concerns the implementation of the Act on the Access to Public Information. Those tasks are fulfilled by the Bureau-Administration Service Department (six persons) which provides responses to applications for access to public information (sent by journalists, citizens and institutions) and manages the content of Public Information Bulletins of the Council of Ministers and the Chancellery (<http://bip.kprm.gov.pl>). In 2010, the GIC received 94 applications in letter form and 1,314 applications in electronic form to the [bip@kprm.gov.pl](mailto:bip@kprm.gov.pl) and [dziennikarze@kprm.gov.pl](mailto:dziennikarze@kprm.gov.pl) websites. The GIC administers the government website under

the [www.premier.gov.pl](http://www.premier.gov.pl) and [www.kprm.gov.pl](http://www.kprm.gov.pl) domains. The new service [premier.gov.pl](http://premier.gov.pl) started to operate in December 2009 and was updated in the first quarter of 2011. It consists of a greater number of multimedia links to social portals (Facebook, Twitter, Blip, YouTube) and more colourful graphics. The new service permits the viewing of online transmissions and video reports from the prime minister's announcements. There is a 'press centre' sub-website, with the contacts for GIC and spokespersons for ministers or *voivodes*, and also tools such as 'accreditations', 'applications for interview', or 'text messages' and 'write to the Prime Minister' form.

In the opinion of public relations and marketing experts (Macheta, 2009), the prime minister's website replicates the US White House website architecture and offers higher information content compared with its former version. Experts note, however, that the new service confirms, as in the case of the websites of other state offices, including ministries, a lack of definition regarding Poland's corporate identity.

The GIC uses five social media as government communication tools: Facebook (first post on 15 December 2009), YouTube, Twitter and Blip (first entry on 16 December 2009) and Flickr (launched in August 2009).

The [premier.gov.pl](http://premier.gov.pl) website, like the services of ministries, is placed way down in all websites' ranking lists. According to the alexa.com list, the prime minister's website occupies 3,234th place in the ranking of Polish websites that receive most visits. In the United Kingdom, the British prime minister fares even worse. His website ([number10.gov.uk](http://number10.gov.uk)) is placed 6,114th in the UK ranking, the website of the German Federal Chancellor ([www.bundeskanzlerin.de](http://www.bundeskanzlerin.de)) occupies 25,551st place in Germany and the French president's ([elysee.fr](http://elysee.fr)) is in 5,508th place. On the other hand, Britain's [www.direct.gov.uk](http://www.direct.gov.uk) providing services and information to its citizens was placed 39th in the national rankings. Among Polish ministries, the Ministry of Justice enjoys the highest position occupying 738th place, while the Ministry of Science and Higher Education is outside the ranking list.

In contrast to the model applied in the GIC, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs oversees the running of 32 internet services. The number of visitors of Ministry of Foreign Affairs websites varies from 1.4 million to 4,000 annually. Independently of the internet services, the ministry also takes advantage of the popular social media including Flickr, Blip, Twitter and YouTube since 2009, Facebook since 2010 and *Goldenline* and *Nasza klasa* since 2011.

Apart from websites, portals and social media, an important government communication tool is the Public Information Bulletin (PIB) aimed at making public information available to all interested parties. However, PIB websites are used only as 'notice boards' because they do not conform to a uniform IT standard. They are not searchable by means of data search and aggregation tools and access to information through PIB website is difficult due to the

lack of uniform structure and layout. Furthermore, PIB website and public administration websites duplicate information. This is due to the fact that around 90 per cent of public administration bodies run their own websites and they usually contain more information and tools for communication between the state and the citizen than the PIB does (Hofmokl J., et al, 2011, p. 8).

## Conclusion

Poland has travelled a long and difficult path from the days of the communist regime to achieving a consolidated democratic system. The Democracy Index 2011 classified Poland as a flawed democracy and only the Czech Republic was determined as a full democracy in the region (*Democracy Index*, 2012). Polish democracy's defects included a low voter participation rate in elections (less than 50%), low levels of trust in government, parliament and political parties, little knowledge of the activities of public institutions and, finally, the weak condition of civil society, especially in regard to the participation in NGO activities. For example, in 2011, only 15 per cent of Poles were members of organizations, associations, parties, committees, councils, religious groups and unions. A 16 per cent were engaged in activities for their communities and 23 per cent participated in a public meeting not at work (Czapiński & Panek, 2011).

The Press Freedom Index places Poland in twenty-second position and in third place among post-communist countries (*Press Freedom Index*, 2013). It is worth mentioning that every year this position improves. Little by little, the public sphere, civil society and political culture develop and this is also reflected in government communication.

The analysis of communication sources, structures, tools and activities of Polish governments allow us to argue that the development, importance and role of government communication has been weak and underestimated by Polish ruling parties and coalitions. In practice, those responsible for this area of government activities have been frequently changed, occupying secondary positions and playing still an unsatisfying role in the process of communication. It seems that the government should pay more attention to government communication.

The development of government communication in Poland is influenced by the implementation of new technologies and new legal regulations together with dynamically developing strategies and tools for commercial marketing. The development of new technologies has contributed to the advancement and popularization of useful tools allowing the government administration to make use of social media. The adoption of new legal regulations has resulted

particularly in more accurate rules concerning government activity in the field of access to public information for citizens and journalists.

The Act on the Access to Public Information exacted new standards of direct government communication with citizens and through the media. The Act also obliges the administration to provide public information to society. In addition, the development of private electronic media was a factor that changed the standards of communication between governments and citizens in Poland after 1989. In 2001 the first television channel broadcasting 24 hours a day was created. This channel has created new possibilities and obligations for the government in terms of quicker, direct and online television communication.

The analysis of government communication in Poland shows there is absence of both central management in government communication as well as clear structures and managerial rules for this communication. Such unified rules (necessary but still non-existent) for government communication could apply not only to staff and management structure but also to financial and operational aspects of government communication. They should apply to norms as well as practice, which would enable the differentiation between public government communication and political communication of the ruling parties.

## Notes

- 1 The currently binding act of 21 November 2008 came into force in 2009.
- 2 A *voivode* (Polish: *województwo*) is a governor of a Polish province – *voivodeship* (Polish: *województwo*) appointed by the prime minister. There are 16 *voivodes* in Poland and 16 *voivodeships*.
- 3 The departments responsible for government communication in each office and ministry are named differently – Press Department, Press Bureau, etc.
- 4 Data is from 1 January 2012.

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# 10

## Government strategic communication in the democratic transition of Chile

*Rodrigo Uribe*

### Introduction

**O**n 11 March 1990, Patricio Aylwin, the candidate of the *Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia* – a coalition of Christian Democrats, Socialists and other social democratic forces – became the first democratically elected president of Chile after 17 years of military dictatorship under Augusto Pinochet. It was the final moment of an authoritarian government that had taken power in September 1973 and was characterized by the destruction of political freedom, the violation of human rights and the rapid implementation of a neo-liberal economic and political model.

The process of re-establishing civil liberties, democratic values and full respect for human rights developed by the new democratic governments during the 1990s and part of the first decade of the 2000s has usually been called the political transition<sup>1</sup> (Siavelis, 2009) (Table 10.1). Although analyses of this period of Chilean history have been carried out from different perspectives – including economic, political and communicational viewpoints – no studies have scrutinized the structure and trends of government communication that developed as part of this transitional scenario.

With the purpose of examining this issue, the chapter is divided into two major sections. The first provides background information on the political

landscape and the media context in which government communication was carried out. The second section examines government communication in terms of both the organizational structure of government communication and the key trends detected in this period. All the information was obtained by desk research, the author's experience as government advisor, and interviews with experts (government communication officers and the main presidential advisors on communication strategy), whose viewpoints have not been explored before in the literature on Chilean government communication.<sup>2</sup>

**TABLE 10.1** Primary political landmarks of contemporary Chilean history

September 1980	The Chilean Constitution was approved by a plebiscite controlled by the Pinochet government (1973–90)
May 1983	First national protest against the Pinochet government
October 1988	National referendum to determine whether Pinochet would extend his rule for another eight-year term in office. The dictator was defeated in this plebiscite
December 1989	First open presidential election won by Patricio Aylwin (Christian Democrat, candidate of the <i>Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia</i> )
March 1990–4	Patricio Aylwin's presidency
March 1994–2000	Eduardo Frei's presidency (Christian Democrat, member of the <i>Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia</i> )
March 1998	Pinochet resigned as Commander-in-Chief of the Chilean Army and assumed the position of lifetime senator
October 1998	Pinochet arrested in London
March 2000–6	Ricardo Lagos' presidency (Socialist, member of the <i>Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia</i> )
March 2000	Jack Straw (British Home Office Minister) released Pinochet due to ill health
August 2005	Main amendments to the Chilean Constitution
March 2006–10	Michelle Bachelet's presidency (Socialist, member of the <i>Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia</i> )
December 2006	Pinochet's death

## Political and media landscapes

### ***A brief overview of the Chilean political system***

During the transition, Chile was ruled by a centre-left coalition, *Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia*. The opposition consisted of two right-wing parties, the conservative Independent Democratic Union (UDI) and the more liberal National Renovation. In addition to these two main coalitions, there were other left-wing groups: the Communist and Humanist parties. All the Chilean parties operated within a political system characterized by two basic principles of the Chilean Constitution (1980). On the one hand, the strong central role given to the figure of the president as the head of state, and on the other, the idea of creating a political system that would promote stability as its central value.

In this constitutional order, Chile was and is governed by a president who is the head of state and government. The president is elected by the direct vote of the electorate in general elections.<sup>3</sup> Although the 1980 Constitution establishes the existence of three branches of the State, there is a clear pre-eminence of the executive (presidentialism) over the legislative and judicial branches (Carey, 2002). The legislative branch – also directly elected by the electorate – consists of two houses, the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies. In the original design of the 1980 Constitution, the Senate was composed of 38 elected senators (2 per each of the 19 districts elected every 8 years) plus the Institutional Senators (eliminated in 2005): 9 designated senators (changed every 8 years) and all the former presidents of the Republic (lifetime senators). The Chamber of Deputies consists of 120 members (2 per each of 60 districts), who are elected every 4 years (Carey, 2002). Finally, the judicial branch is composed of the Supreme Court of Justice, the Appeal Court and other minor courts. The highest level is the Supreme Court, which consists of 21 judges, one of them elected President of the Court. All the members of the Supreme Court are selected by the President with the agreement of the Senate (Correa, 1999).

Pinochet's new constitutional order also created a number of legal institutions to encourage an unchanging and authoritarian political system (called a protected democracy). The first was the restriction on the number of votes needed to modify the Constitution (more than 60% of MPs and Senators). This prevented many changes due to Pinochet supporters' reluctance to make significant modifications until 2005, when some of the most conspicuous authoritarian elements were removed from the Constitution, including the provision that there should be institutional senators (Nogueira, 2008). Nevertheless, the most significant authoritarian characteristic (still in force) is the binominal system for election of both chambers of the legislative branch.

The law selected the most-voted candidate from each of the two most-voted lists (unless the most-voted list obtained twice the votes of the second-place list). Although this system was allegedly created to encourage the stability of the political system by promoting large, solid and disciplined parties, in practice the binominal system has promoted a centripetal competition within the major coalitions. Moreover, the binominal system has caused structural distortions in the effective consolidation of democracy, such as the underrepresentation of minority parties and a decrease in electoral participation, particularly among young citizens (see Table 10.2).

### ***The Chilean media system***

The new democratic governments continued the privatization of the media system, which had started during Pinochet's regime as a consequence of the process of liberalization of the entire economy. In this context, the media landscape during the transition was characterized by the commercialization and concentration of media outlets. Other relevant trends detected in this period were the increasing relevance of both electronic media and entertainment-oriented content.

### ***A commercialized environment***

Despite the attempts of Pinochet's regime to control media content in the 1970s and 1980s, its simultaneous promotion of the free market caused a paradoxical effect: some of the private media were able to reconstitute spaces of ideological plurality in the midst of a society controlled by a dictatorial government (Palacios, 2003). It has been suggested that in this context, the transition of the mass media began earlier, during Pinochet's regime, and therefore the media system could normalize its agenda during the first years of the political transition (Tironi & Sunkel, 1993). Democratic governments continued the process of media privatization in the early 1990s by redefining the property of public media and by promoting the creation of private outlets. In these years, the new democratic regime redefined the way in which state-owned media (television, radio and newspapers) would operate. The basic idea was to eliminate public funding in order to prevent direct government influence on media content, which was a traditional practice of the Pinochet era (Tironi & Sunkel, 1993).

Simultaneously, numerous private media outlets emerged and consolidated. In the case of the television system, the process started in the final months of Pinochet's regime when the Chilean State granted television concessions to private groups in a questionable fashion. This policy ended a legal monopoly

**TABLE 10.2** General characteristics of the political landscape

The political landscape						
Political system	Electoral system	Democratic freedom (2006)	Press freedom (2006)	Good government indicators (1996/2006)	Share of votes/seats of the largest party (1990 and 2006)	Turnout in national elections (1990 and 2006 presidential election)
Presidential The 1980 Chilean Constitution is the fundamental law of the country.	Presidential election: Absolute majority (50% plus one of the valid votes). Parliamentary elections: binominal system (two seats per district). Registration in the system: voluntary, but once a person is registered in the electoral system, voting becomes compulsory.	1	Legal environment: 8 Political environment: 11 Economic environment: 7 Total Score: 25	Voice and accountability 1996: 0.78 2006: 0.88 Political stability: 1996: 0.70 2006: 0.56 Government effectiveness: 1996: 0.87 2006: 1.15 Regulatory quality: 1996: 1.29 2006: 1.43 Rule of law: 1996: 1.28 2006: 1.19 Control of corruption: 1996: 1.30 2006: 1.35	Parliament 1990 <i>Concertación</i> (coalition): 51.5%/69 seats Christian Democracy (Party): 25.99%/38 seats Parliament (2006) <i>Concertación</i> (coalition): 51.76%/65 seats UDI (Party): 22.36%/33 seats 1990 Senate <i>Concertación</i> (coalition): 54.63%/22 seats Christian Democracy (Party): 32.18%/13 seats 2006 (renewed only 50% of the Senate) <i>Concertación</i> (coalition): 55.73%/22 seats Christian Democracy (Party): 29.72%/5 seats	1990 Presidential Voters: 7,588,346 (94.7% of electors) 2006 Presidential Voters: 7,207,278 (87.7% of electors)

Source: The Freedom House Index (2006); the good government indicator is composed of measures related to political stability, rule of law, government efficiency and corruption (Kaufman, Kraay & Zoido-Lobatón, 1999).



in which only universities or the Chilean State itself were permitted to own television stations. Thus, private channels began operating and competing with traditional university or public stations in the VHF spectrum in 1990. As of that moment, private channels played a more prominent role in the Chilean television system, operating the licenses of some universities or creating new stations. Therefore, although Chile promoted a mixed media system in terms of property, overall the system was defined as commercially funded and operating as a semi-regulated market.

### ***A concentrated media market***

During the early years of the new democracy, small and alternative media created in opposition to the authoritarian regime attempted to redefine their identity and sources of funding. Nearly all of these media disappeared in the process, and only one – *Radio Cooperativa* – succeeded in reorganizing itself to face the demands of the market, capture advertising investment and redefine an editorial line attractive to audiences less involved in political issues. Moreover, other media outlets were subsequently created (such as the *El Metropolitano* newspaper in 1999), but failed to obtain sufficient advertising and therefore suffered the same fate as the vast majority of previous independent media (Dermota, 2002; Palacios, 2002).

A resulting paradox of the new democracy was the increasing economic and ideological concentration across different media. In the case of the press, two large groups began to dominate the market for audience (over 70% of reach) and advertisers (75% of the spending in the mass media) (Megatime, 2006). The *El Mercurio* Group – owned by the conservative Edwards family – controls three national newspapers (*El Mercurio*, *Las Últimas Noticias* and *La Segunda*) and twenty regional newspapers. The COPESA Group, whose principal owners are two economic groups with explicit sympathies with right-wing parties, owns *La Tercera*, *La Cuarta* and the free newspaper *La Hora*, as well as the weekly news magazine *Qué Pasa* (Cortés, 1998).

Terrestrial television stations operated in a mixed system with public stations, university outlets, private channels and local broadcasters. In the television market, the tendency towards concentration has prevented the development of local and minor players. An oligopoly of four stations, all located in Chile's capital, Santiago, controlled more than 85 per cent of the advertising investment and approximately 90 per cent of the audience share (Sunkel & Geoffroy, 2001). Paid television was not a relevant actor in this context because although its market penetration over the final years of the political transition (2005) reached approximately 40 per cent of the population, its audience share reached only 17 per cent and was distributed across 100

channels primarily dedicated to entertainment rather than information (Obitel, 2009).

Radio was the most diversified mass media in the country. During the 1990s and early 2000s, Chile had between 1,500 and 2,000 radio concessions, and large conglomerates (usually owned by international investors) only controlled approximately 15 per cent of them. These conglomerates, however, were located in Santiago (where 40% of the Chilean population lives) and have received the vast majority of advertising investment (98% of investment in radio advertising is in the metropolitan region). Therefore, although the large number of concessions has allowed Chile to have a certain degree of plurality, there was a clear concentration in terms of advertising investment and audience share (Ramírez, 2008).

### ***Other relevant characteristics of the media system***

Other relevant characteristics of the Chilean media system during the transitional period were the growing importance of electronic media outlets and the increasing importance of entertainment content. Regarding the former, there was a growing consumption of television news, the most important source of information about current affairs. Data from 2000 to 2005 showed that close to 80 per cent of Chilean citizens watched television to be informed about current events (CNTV, 2005). The internet deserves special mention, particularly since the year 2000. By the end of the democratic transition in 2005, 43.5 per cent of the households had a computer. Internet users between 12 and 60 years old – excluding the poorest 10 per cent of inhabitants – increased from 24 to 48 per cent between 2000 and 2006, more than any other country in Latin America (Subtel, 2008).

The rise of electronic media occurred within the broader context of the increasing development of entertainment-oriented content (a phenomenon closely related to the growing market-driven environment). As has been widely described in the international literature (Esser, 1999), Chile was also part of a clear tendency towards a lower presence of political issues and an increasing predominance of any content defined as entertainment. Although the amount of time devoted to informative content on television increased during the transition, there was a high presence of topics traditionally labelled soft news, such as crime and sports, which were reported as the principal themes on the major television newscasts during the period 2000–5 (Valenzuela & Arriagada, 2009). Examining the available data by genre shows that the amount of time devoted to entertainment programmes increased from 8 to 20.5 per cent between 1996 and 2004 (Marín, 2007).

## The structure of government communication

In examining the main characteristics of government communication in Chile in the period from 1990 to 2006, two particular issues are stressed namely, the structure of government communication and the main tendencies detected in the implementation and development of government communication. While these issues and tendencies emerged during the Chilean political transition, they continue to be valid for understanding contemporary Chilean government communication and will be discussed in the following section.

During the transition, the structure of government communication was headed by the Ministry General Secretariat of Government (SEGEGOB). This ministry was led by the government spokesperson and had four divisions including the Secretariat of Communications (SECOM). The Director of Communications of the Chilean Government (or Director of SECOM) had the specific role of determining governmental and presidential communication needs and actions. Working alongside the Secretariat was the presidential Cabinet, the group of direct advisors to the president (including the head of the presidential press office and other senior advisors). Therefore, and formally speaking, the Minister of the General Secretariat of Government was the spokesperson and the Director of Communications was the strategist who provided the information and analysis to face communicational challenges and problems of the government and the president of the Republic. In addition, the structure of government communication included the presidential Cabinet. This was a group of advisors without formal authority but with significant influence on the president on a variety of issues, including communication strategies and direct contact with political editors. Among these advisors a relevant figure was the head of the presidential press office, who was in charge of the relationship with the correspondents in the presidential palace of government (*La Moneda*).

During the political transition, the general structure of SECOM remained essentially the same. The institution was composed of a director, a deputy director and a group of departments in charge of dealing with presidential and government communication needs. There was a Studies Department dedicated to producing media analyses (audience and content) and public opinion polls (telephone and face-to-face surveys and qualitative studies). The Department of Intra-Government Advice was in charge of providing analyses and occasional communication support to the different ministries (such as helping to prevent and manage communications crises). The International Press Department was in charge of monitoring the presence of the Chilean State and government in the different international media outlets. The number of professional people working for SECOM was roughly 100 (approximately 90 in 1990 and 114 in 2006), two-thirds of whom were journalists (approximately

60%) and the rest were political scientists, sociologists and other social scientists (SEGEOB, 2006).

The communications strategy designed by SECOM was primarily carried out by communication actions such as ministerial and presidential interviews, speeches, and a strong presence in public activities to stay in touch with citizens (such as ceremonies, inaugurations, anniversaries and other public events). Simultaneously, the SEGEOB Minister and/or the Director of Communication conducted press briefings with political editors and journalists highlighting the main elements designed in the strategy to be covered by the media (newspapers, radio and particularly television). In this context, an increasing use of sound and image bites and other production techniques were observed. Another important tool for government communication was advertising, which was legally restricted to informing about policies (SECOM had no budget for advertising). However, advertisements should not be understood as merely informational elements because they all depicted the logo and/or mentioned the 'Chilean government'. Sponsorship was also used as a promotional tool by supporting different activities with social impact. Finally, from the late 1990s there was an increasing use of the web. Some of the more traditional uses of this new media included a system of presidential email and the publication of governmental and presidential news on the web page.

Although this structure seems to be effective to face the communication challenges of the government, it could not always work efficiently. At least, two relevant problems with this structure can be described: the redundancy in several roles and the difficulty of combining governmental and presidential communication.

### ***An organizationally redundant system***

The organizational structure of government communication had certain problems during this period, which caused a lack of coordination and disputes on some occasions. The most important organizational difficulty was the redundancy in the communicational structure. A case in point is that the Communications Director (head of the ministerial division) formally reported to the SEGEOB Minister, although they both usually developed a direct and parallel relationship with the president (both were traditionally appointed by the president and had their offices at the Governmental Palace). In addition, the SEGEOB Minister and the Director of SECOM developed direct links with media directors, editors and journalists, and simultaneously briefed them. This meant that, in practice, the coordination of their efforts primarily depended upon the personal relationship between the SEGEOB Minister and the Director of SECOM.

Another case of overlapping structure was the existence of other officers who directly gave communication advice to the president and interacted with media professionals. One example was the above-mentioned head of the presidential press office, who was in charge of the direct relationship with Governmental Palace correspondents and political media editors for issues directly related to the president. In addition, some presidential Cabinet advisors usually participated in communication design. In fact, during certain moments of the 20-year period, the presidential advisors directly assumed the definition of the communications strategy.

### ***The difficulty of combining governmental and presidential communication***

The other major problem of the government structure of communication was the difficulty of combining the development of governmental and presidential communication. Although SECOM was formally in charge of all government communication, in practice this institution prioritized the presidential figure and the communication of selected policies. This decision could be related to several factors. First, the strong sense of presidentialism in Chile caused support for the government to increase whenever public support for the president rose, and not vice versa (Morales & Navia, 2007). Second, SECOM was part of a ministry and could not force any other minister (or authority) to adopt a particular communication strategy. Third, SECOM had limited human resources in comparison with the government's communicational needs. Fourth, some policies were more relevant for the political project of the government and consequently required particular attention. Finally, the budget for the communication of public policies was not centralized, but rather managed by each ministry (usually associated with the budget of each policy). In practice, a relevant part of the government communication was decentralized (developed by each ministry) and some exceptional key policies or crises were supported or directly managed by SECOM, either by the Department of Intra-Government Advice or directly by the Director of Communication.

In this context, a parallel communicational structure was developed in each ministry or public service to deal with daily communication problems. Thus, the role of the minister's (or public service's) press officer was reinforced, and local communications areas increased their number of communications advisors. Although there is no official information about the number of people working in these communications offices, one could estimate at least 500 communications advisors in the government structure: 2 or 3 journalists in each of the 22 ministries, local government offices (15 regional intendancies

and 53 provincial governments), and other public offices such as the Chilean Trade Commission (PROCHILE) or the Records Office (*Servicio de Registro Civil*). All were administratively independent from SECOM because they were in charge of supporting media relations for their particular authorities and organizations.

## **Main trends in government communication**

In the context of the Chilean political transition, five main trends can be described in Chilean government communication, all starting from a moment of exception, and depicting a process of growing modernization and partial professionalization of government communication.

### ***The increasing relevance of the president***

One of the major trends during Chile's democratic transition was the increasing relevance of the president as the central figure of government communication. Interestingly, in the early years of the new democratic government the situation was different; government communication had a more institutional focus primarily derived from the existence of an essentially feeble democracy and the pressures exerted by more radical political sectors. Thus, at the beginning of the political transition, government communication focused on the process of renewed national unity, the value of democratic institutions, and the notion of a government that promoted political and economic stability in conjunction with civil liberties and justice. As time went by, and democracy became relatively more established, the central point of government communication was to increase the focus on the presidential figure, a trend that was particularly clear after the establishment of the second democratic government (1994).

There are several important issues related to this process of the presidentialization of government communication, including the fact that during the second (Frei) and the third (Lagos) governments of the *Concertación*, the primary strategists were people close to the president. This is an interesting issue that reveals the increasing status of communication: this area was placed under the charge of someone of the president's confidence.

### ***The growing emphasis on presidential approval ratings***

The early years of the Chilean transition were filled with high levels of instability, pressure and negotiation by the major political actors (political

parties, armed forces, the Catholic Church and other macrosocial organizations). In terms of public opinion, the goals of government communication strategy at the time were to help handle social demands in the context of the complex process of political negotiation that was played out at the highest political level.

When the major tensions of the transition began to decrease, the task of improving the president's public opinion approval ratings began to take a more prominent role. On the one hand, this started to be a critical measure of public support for the government and crucial in the evaluation of presidential performance (as true in the rest of the world). On the other, it is important to note that the presidential approval ratings should not be merely understood as a political marketing tactic. Healthy presidential approval ratings was a means of organizing and keeping close political forces in relative order, particularly within a context in which there was increasing centripetal disorder, and infighting within the government coalition and the entire political system (Paley, 2001).

### ***The development of modern forms of communicating with citizens***

An important issue for government communication in the new democratic environment was the growing development of modern forms of communication with citizens. In practical terms, this change implied a different media emphasis and message development in which electronic media, particularly television and its logic, became more central. Similarly, ministers and the president began to use other media spaces and formats to explain government ideas directly to citizens. This change may be related to the relevance of television and other electronic media as a source of information and entertainment as well as the process of the people's disengagement from politics (Putnam, 1995; Riquelme, 1999).

In the Chilean case, the lower level of interest in politics in general, distrust and cynicism, among citizens detected in different democracies in the world had some particularities (Riquelme, 1999). The lack of freedom during Pinochet's government and the social movement created to restore democracy facilitated the connection between people, and politics and public issues in the late 1980s and early 1990s. After the early years of transition, this situation began to change, as was true in many other democracies in the world, for reasons such as the privatization of society, disorder in the political system, corruption and the failure of politicians to connect with the needs of the people. Chilean citizens began to have misgivings about politicians and became less interested in political issues. This disengagement was more

prominent in the case of political institutions and their members than in that of the president of the Republic.

In this context, government communication – partially influenced by developments in the United States – increased the role of the president outside the traditional circuit of news media, such as in magazine, television programmes and radio interviews. The president used these spaces to present policies more directly and include a greater personal touch in speeches, characteristics that became key aspects of presidential communication.

In addition, new dimensions emerged associated with the role of the president as a political leader, such as depicting the president's personal and family life as well as greater emotional proximity to the people. The development of this attribute is significant as it acquired increasing relevance over time and could be considered among the central aspects in improving presidential approval ratings.

### ***Allocating more resources to government communication***

Another relevant feature of this period is that the Chilean government began allocating significant amounts of human and financial resources to develop effective communication with citizens. Such is the case of the employment of public opinion measurement techniques. National face-to-face surveys, telephone polls, focus groups, the use of electronic devices to evaluate online reactions to presidential speeches were used to track citizens' opinions and provide input for government decision-making processes. The limited data available show that in 2004 this item of the SECOM budget was US\$400,000 compared to approximately US\$600,000 in 2006 (SEGEOB, 2006).

As mentioned earlier, ministers and other government authorities hired a number of communication professionals. This trend was particularly clear in terms of the number of communications advisors and press officers working for the ministries and other public agencies. In fact, it was difficult to find any minister or head of government agency or service who did not work directly with a team of communication advisors.

### ***The development of a divergent agenda between the government and the media***

In the early stages of the political transition, the major media outlets assumed a collaborative attitude towards the changes promoted by the new democratic government. In general terms, the major news media agreed to the need



to promote a smooth transition. With the arrival of the second democratic government in 1994, the media developed a more critical attitude towards the government (mainly caused by their earlier media transition), generating a new scenario for government communication (Tironi & Sunkel, 1993).

Indeed, the development of critical media is a healthy process in any democracy. The difficulty in the Chilean case was twofold. On the one hand, the process of the media distancing itself from the basic goals of the new democratic government occurred faster than the political normalization of the country. On the other hand, the separation took place in the context of the absence of a pluralist media system. The occurrence of these two issues generated additional difficulties in developing an agenda that was more prominent in political liberties (such as modifying the Constitution and the electoral system), social changes (such as negotiations with labour unions) and justice for human rights victims.

In this scenario in which the media system underwent an earlier transition than the political system did (Tironi & Sunkel, 1993), the mainstream media tended to show a conservative bias more frequently, and in conjunction with the rapid depoliticization of society in general, government communication was consistently unsuccessful in positioning the importance of continuing with the basic political and institutional changes. These initiatives were usually framed as either remote from the real problems of people, disturbing social peace, or causing unemployment, contexts in which government communication efforts were unable to reposition the idea of the relevance of political changes.

## Conclusions

During the Chilean political transition, government communication developed in a complex scenario. Politically speaking, it is important to note the high relevance of the figure of the president and the existence of a protected democracy. The latter particularly produced a legal scenario that did not encourage significant changes in the process of democratizing the country, a situation that was simultaneously reinforced by a media system that tended to be overconcentrated (paradoxically stimulated by the policies of the democratic governments) and more heavily focused on apolitical content.

In terms of the structure of government communication, the organizational design was characterized by redundancies and a lack of synergy. Moreover, the focus on presidential over government communication contributed to the development of a parallel structure dominated by ministerial communication advisors, which caused a lack of coordination and disputes. Clearly these problems were related to the absence of a state structure (financial, human and organizational) equipped to face the complexities of the contemporary

demands of political communication (Alvarez & Caballero, 1997). Moreover, the structure of government communication facilitated the concentration of the efforts on presidential communication and some key policies, rather than on government communication.

In terms of trends, during the political transition, government communication efforts faced a process of clear modernization and shifted from focusing on the exception to putting the accent on contemporary worldwide governmental communication challenges. A case in point is the process of the increasing presidentialization of communications and the emphasis on improving presidential approval ratings, which have been largely described in the literature worldwide (Poguntke & Webb, 2005). Similarly, the increasing allocation of resources and the relevance of public opinion were in keeping with worldwide characteristics of contemporary political communication, usually linked to what many authors have labelled as *Americanization* of politics and communication (Negrine & Papathanassopoulos, 1996). In addition, other international trends were the development of both new forms of communicating with citizens that was less engaged in politics and a divergent agenda between the government and the media.

Nevertheless, some aspects of these trends could be also explained by local characteristics. The presidentialization of communications also has a significant correlate with the Chilean constitutional order, the cultural relevance of the presidential figure and the restrictions of the government communication structure. Similarly, the divergent agenda between the media and government could be explained in part by the process of media concentration and its conservative bias.

All in all, it is important to observe that the Chilean political transition was, in essence, a process of modernization and partially a professionalization of government communication. That is to say, this transition was a process that shifted from an exceptional state regime (characterized by the promotion of institutional and political projects with few resources and little interest in the public's opinion of and support for the presidential figure) to a state displaying the major characteristics of contemporary political communication in developed democracies. Although there were increases in the amount of resources allocated, the incorporation of some highly skilled communication advisors, the regular use of public opinion tracking and the growing use of modern communication techniques such as sound bites, it is also true that a number of communication professionals were not specialists in strategic communication with political considerations frequently superseding communication criteria. There was also a lack of use of more sophisticated and modern political and marketing communication techniques such as microsegmentation of audiences. In this context, it is difficult to assert the clear existence of a proper professionalization process of the government communication during the political transition.

## Notes

- 1 This chapter does not aim to debate the exact boundaries of that process (an issue where there is no consensus among scholars and commentators), but to examine a broad period of time – approximately 1990–2006 – in which there is general agreement that Chile was undergoing a transition from an authoritarian regime to democracy.
- 2 Many of the insights presented in this chapter are the result of my conversations with Eugenio Tironi (Director of Communications 1990–4), Pablo Halpern (Director of Communications 1994–8) and Ernesto Ottone (Head of presidential advisors 2000–6). My deep thanks to all of them for their generosity in sharing their experience and knowledge.
- 3 The Chilean Constitution established a four-year presidential period for the first democratic government, and six years for subsequent governments. In 2005, this norm was changed for a four-year presidential period.

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# 11

## Government communication in Southern Africa

*Nkanyiso Maqeda and Percy Makombe*

### Introduction

In Southern Africa, national identity, economic development and state security have been the key guiding principles for governments in the post-colonial period. From the attainment of independence in 1980 and 1994 respectively, governments in Zimbabwe and South Africa sought to control the media and communications, ostensibly to help in nation-building and development. However, these noble objectives have also included a tendency to use media and government communications to increase the concentration of political power in the hands of the ruling elite.

This chapter carries out a comparative analysis of government communication in Zimbabwe and South Africa. The two countries are chosen because of their contrasting situations. South Africa is widely viewed as a thriving democracy characterized by free and fair elections, a free and diverse media, and protection of human rights and freedoms for citizens since the first democratic elections in 1994. Zimbabwe on the other hand has in the recent past been widely viewed as following an autocratic trajectory, characterized by disputed elections, erosion of press freedoms and an assault on the rights of its citizens particularly from the late 1990s to 2009 when a unity government, popularly known as the inclusive government, was formed.

## Overview of the political and electoral systems

### *South Africa*

South Africa is a diverse country with 11 official languages and a population of 49 million people. When the National Party (NP) gained power in 1948, it institutionalized racial segregation which became known as apartheid. Apartheid South Africa was characterized by state repression and violence that was central in perpetuating the tenure of the National Party. In the late 1980s, however, the apartheid government began to lose its hold on power as a result of mounting internal pressure and international sanctions leading to talks with opposition parties and the legalization of the liberation movements as well as the release of political prisoners.

In 1994 Nelson Mandela became the first democratically elected president of South Africa when his African National Congress (ANC) party won 62 per cent of the vote. South Africa employs a proportional representation system under which a party is allocated seats according to the number of people who have voted for it. Parties have a ranked party list system. Members of parliament elect the president who can serve for no more than two terms of five years each. The country is a constitutional multiparty democracy with 13 political parties represented in the National Assembly of Parliament. South Africa is organized around three tiers (local, provincial, national) of government.

Since 1994, South Africa has organized democratic elections whose results have been accepted even by the losers. In a rare feat for Africa, Mandela decided not to seek a second term, thus paving the way for Thabo Mbeki to succeed him after the 1999 elections in which the ANC won 66.36 per cent of the vote, just a point short of a two-thirds majority, a key figure that allows a party to change the country's constitution. Mbeki was succeeded by Jacob Zuma who was elected after the ANC won the 2009 elections with 65.9 per cent of the vote in an election in which the total number of votes cast was 17,680,729, representing 77.3 per cent of registered voters.

The ANC is the biggest party with 264 of the 400 National Assembly seats. Of the country's nine provinces, the ANC controls all but one which is controlled by the largest opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA). The ANC also controls five of the six metropolitan municipalities. South Africa has two houses of parliament (the National Assembly and the National Council of Provinces). The Assembly is the most important body responsible for monitoring executive performance and passing legislation.

## ***Zimbabwe***

Zimbabwe has a population of approximately 14 million people, uses three official languages out of the eight main languages spoken in the country. The country has an elected president and members of parliament are elected by their constituencies in a first-past-the-post system. The legislature is made up of the Lower House (House of Assembly) and the Upper House (Senate). The House of Assembly has 210 members consisting of 200 elected members and 10 non-constituency members of parliament appointed for five-year terms. The Senate is made up of 66 members with 50 elected and 6 appointed senators. Ten chiefs elected from the Chiefs Council make up the complement for the Senate.

The presidential term is five years, with no limits on the number of terms an individual may contest elections. In the March 2008 presidential vote, Morgan Tsvangirai, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) candidate, received 47.9 per cent of the vote compared to 43.2 per cent for the Zanu PF candidate, Robert Mugabe. According to the Zimbabwe Constitution, for a candidate to assume the presidency, he/she must garner at least 50 per cent plus one vote. None of the candidates achieved this figure in the first round of voting, precipitating a runoff. However, Tsvangirai withdrew from the contest after Mugabe's Zanu PF with the help of the state security machinery, unleashed a wave of violence, making it impossible for Tsvangirai to campaign.

On 15 September 2008, Zanu PF and the two MDC formations signed a Global Political Agreement (GPA) that created the basis for the establishment of a coalition government negotiated with the facilitation of the then South African President Thabo Mbeki under the aegis of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The agreement created the basis for a coalition government. This transitional arrangement added to the governance structure the position of a prime minister and two deputy prime ministers.

Since independence in 1980, unlike other typical autocratic regimes in Africa, Zimbabwe has consistently held elections when they are due, leading Mugabe and his party to argue that Zimbabwe is a democracy. However, the reality is that President Mugabe and his party have systematically narrowed the democratic space for any opposition group that has dared to challenge them. Welshman Ncube (1991, p. 42) has argued that 'behind the facade of constitutional democracy lay an authoritarian political system characterised by the proscription of democratic space'. One of the defining features of the Zanu PF government, which has ruled the country since independence in 1980, is that it is virtually impossible to distinguish between the party and government. Studying government communication in Zimbabwe is therefore equivalent to studying the communication strategy of Zanu PF. Even though



there is an inclusive government, Zanu PF retains control of the strategic security and information ministries.

## Overview of the media landscape and culture

The demise of the apartheid government in South Africa and the arrival of majority rule in 1994 saw the liberalization of the media sector. Freedom of the press is enshrined in the Constitution of South Africa. In their 2010 Press Freedom Index, Reporters without Borders placed South Africa at number 38 out of 178 countries.

South Africa has a vibrant and diverse newspaper industry of 24 dailies and 25 weeklies published largely in English. The highest circulation daily newspaper is a tabloid called the *Daily Sun* which has seen its circulation rise from 78,000 when it was launched in 2002 to over 500,000 in 2010 and it has a market penetration of 51.8 per cent. In December 2010 a new daily, *New Age*, was launched. This paper is owned by the Gupta Group which has strong ties to the ANC and especially to President Zuma, leading to commentators to suggest that the *New Age* is really the *New Agent* for the government.

Print media are important for government communication in Africa as they give governments the ability to reach mass audiences who are potential voters. In March 2011, the South African government announced that it would launch a newspaper because it was being misrepresented by the independent media. Government spokesman, Jimmy Manyi, argued that 'the media is censoring a lot of government information' (*Sowetan*, 2011) and that editors of commercial newspapers should not be left to choose what government information should be printed. He also said that *New Age* newspaper would be published in all the country's 11 official languages and would be distributed nationally. In Manyi's words, 'We want it in the streets in every township and rural areas. It will be bigger than all of you guys (journalists) put together' (*Sowetan*, 2011).

In June 2011, Manyi revealed that the government was still concerned about the negative coverage it was receiving in the media and as part of the strategy to deal with this, the government advertising budget would be centralized and handled by the Government Communication Information Systems (GCIS). Previously the 74 national departments had handled the procurement of their own advertising space and time. According to Manyi, the budget would be centralized so that government could advertise in media that 'pass on our content much more effectively to the public of South Africa' (*Independent*, 2011). In 2011, the South African government had an advertising budget of 1.7 billion rands (US\$220m) of which 52 per cent went to radio and television and the rest to print media. It appears that the government is determined to

use this financial leverage to ensure that journalists report government in a favourable way (*Mail & Guardian*, 2010).

South Africa has a public broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), funded through a licence fee and advertising as well as government subsidy. Before independence in 1994, the National Party (NP) used the SABC as a propaganda tool. According to Horwitz (2001, p. 2), appointment to senior positions within the Corporation depended on political ties rather than professional expertise. It was only in the 1990s, as it became apparent that apartheid was becoming untenable, that the outgoing NP government liberalized and attempted to democratize the broadcasting industry. Faced with certain defeat in the country's first democratic elections in 1994, the NP became concerned that one of its major tools for maintaining political power was going to fall into its opponents' hands. The ANC for its part was worried that it would participate in an election in which the NP had effective control of the SABC.

The task of ensuring that the SABC board is non-partisan and free from government interference is a challenging one, especially as the government has continuously come to the SABC's financial rescue. In October 2010, for example, the Corporation sought a R1-billion (US\$130m) bailout from government having made a R900-million (US\$117m) loss. Appointments to the Corporation's board are made according to the 1999 Broadcasting Act whereby the Portfolio Committee on Communications invites the public to make nominations for appointments. The Committee then draws up a shortlist, conducts interviews and presents its findings to the National Assembly for recommendation to the president.

In 2006 there was an outcry following claims that the then SABC Group Executive of News had created a 'blacklist' of reporters, analysts and commentators who should not be interviewed because their views were believed to be critical of government. Although the SABC at first denied the existence of such a blacklist, they were embarrassed together with the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) when the High Court ruled that there was manipulation of news at SABC between 2005 and 2006. The judge went further and criticized ICASA's failure to take action to correct the anomaly on the pretext that it had no jurisdiction over SABC programme production. According to the judge, ICASA's lack of interest in putting things right meant that 'the SABC may with impunity manipulate and distort preparation of its news and current affairs coverage and publicly lie about it when they are caught out having done so' (Davies, 2001).

Unlike South Africa which has both public and private broadcasters, Zimbabwe has maintained a restricted operating media environment particularly in the broadcasting sector. The country has only one broadcaster, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC). The 1957 Broadcasting Act

granted the State a monopoly over all broadcasting in Zimbabwe. ZBC, then called the Rhodesian Broadcasting Corporation (RBC), was entirely owned by the government. The then Secretary of Information stated that under the Rhodesian Front-led government, the RBC was supposed to 'speak with the government's voice alone' (Saunders, 1999, p. 7). Other voices had to be drowned out because they were regarded as a threat to national security and interests.

According to Saunders, after independence in 1980 there were three main challenges regarding relations between the media and the government, namely:

- How could the national media be changed to meet the needs of national development, reconciliation and, most importantly, the new political reality of black majority rule?
- How could the print media, held in private hands, be freed of white control?
- How could these reforms avoid repeating government domination and manipulation of the media? (1999, p. 7)

However, the change from the minority Rhodesian government to majority rule did not lead to the transformation of the media's function. The new government essentially used the media to strengthen its hold on political power which it framed as being in the national interest.

Since independence, the government of Zimbabwe has continued systematically to use legislation as a tool to manage news output and information access for citizens. Under Section 14(1) and (2) and Section 27 of the Radio Communications of 1994 and Broadcasting Act of 2001, for example, the government has established and maintained a monopoly over the broadcasting services.

Zimbabwe was ranked number 123 in the 2010 Press Freedom Index by Reporters without Borders, an improvement from the previous year's ranking of 136. This improvement came on the back of the granting of publishing licences to four independent daily newspapers including the previously banned *Daily News* by the Zimbabwe Media Commission.

While the opening up of space for independent media in the print sector has won plaudits, the electronic media sector remains severely restricted and is raised as one of the key outstanding issues in interparty negotiations. Under pressure, the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe, which is controlled by the Minister of Media, Information and Publicity awarded two radio licences to two organizations closely linked to Zanu PF party. One was awarded to AB Communications, an organization led by broadcaster Supa Mandiwanzira who announced that he would contest the 2012 parliamentary election on a Zanu

PF ticket and the other to the Zimpapers Group which is closely controlled by the Minister of Information. Zimpapers Groups has Star FM which began broadcasting in June 2012 while AB Communications has ZiFM which began broadcasting in August of the same year.

## Trends in government communication

Government communication in South Africa is the responsibility of the GCIS launched in May 1998 on the recommendation of the communications task group (Comtask) appointed by the then Deputy President Thabo Mbeki in 1995 to review relationships between government communication functions at national, provincial and local level (GCIS, 2002a, p. 2). Some of the key recommendations from the Comtask report which were then implemented included the development of a professional communications unit within each ministry as well as a centralized communications service agency which today is known as the GCIS.

The GCIS is led by a chief executive officer (CEO). Political ties seem to be important for appointment to this critical position. The GCIS head serves as the government spokesperson and also chairs the GCIS Executive Committee (Exco) which coordinates government communication. The GCIS has three branches (see Table 11.1) – communication and content management, corporate services and government and stakeholder engagement – each headed by a deputy. The GCIS Exco is composed of the CEO, the deputy CEOs and the chief directors. All those occupying senior positions in GCIS have at least first degrees across the fields of media, journalism, development studies, economics, marketing and political science.

The Communication and Content Management department coordinates the formulation and execution of the National Communication Strategy including conducting research to assess and advise government on public communication needs. The department also monitors media coverage of government and trains government communicators.

The Corporate Services branch is responsible for management support services, providing a project management service to enhance performance in the delivery of GCIS's mandate. It is also responsible for coordinating and implementing effective strategic planning and performance monitoring.

The Government and Stakeholder Engagement branch is tasked with providing leadership and strategic advice to the provincial and local government communication system, providing leadership in the interface of national government communication with provincial communication programmes.

The CEO is the most senior person in government communications and reports to the Presidency and Cabinet. The CEO is also responsible

**TABLE 11.1** South Africa government communication structure

<b>Chief Executive Officer</b>		
<b>Deputy CEO Communication &amp; Content Development</b>	<b>Deputy CEO Corporate Services</b>	<b>Deputy CEO Government &amp; Stakeholder Engagement</b>
<b>2010 Government Communication Project Management</b> This was a special position created specifically to manage government communication around the 2010 World Cup Chief Director	<b>Finance, Supply Chain &amp; Auxiliary Services</b> Chief Financial Officer	<b>Cluster Supervision: Human Development; Social Protection &amp; Community Development; Governance &amp; Administration Clusters</b> Chief Director
<b>Communication Service Agency</b> Chief Director	<b>Human Resources Chief</b> Chief Director	<b>Media Engagement</b> Chief Director
<b>Content &amp; Writing</b> Chief Director	<b>Information Management &amp; Technology</b> Chief Information Officer	<b>Provincial &amp; Local Liaison</b> Chief Director
	<b>Internal Audit</b> Chief Audit Executive	
<b>Policy Research</b> Chief Director	<b>Property &amp; Facilities Management</b> Chief Director	

for developing and maintaining an integrated international communication plan that promotes South Africa internationally. This involves working with ministries and South Africa's embassies. This function was developed to improve coordination especially for foreign visits. Previously there had been no clear lines of responsibility for organizing such visits which fell between foreign affairs and various government departments. The visits are now coordinated by the Communication and Content Development branch under the directorate of Communication Service Agency (CSA) in collaboration with Foreign Affairs or in some cases parliament if it is a parliamentary visit. The CSA is responsible for branding government and developing its corporate identity. It is in charge of bulk media buying on behalf of government and also distributes information products.

An important aspect of government communication is the development of government and stakeholder engagement. The provincial and local liaison directorate provides direction on the interface of national government communication with provincial communication programmes. There are GCIS offices in each of the nine provinces. The offices work closely with provincial governments, in particular the Premier's Offices, to ensure the message of government is disseminated in a seamless manner to the public. For example, the government introduced in 1999 Thusong Service Centres (TSCs) whose purpose is to provide general information about government services. They do this through direct information sessions, meetings, and also through provincial and national awareness programmes (Public Service Commission, 2010, pp. vii).

With regards to government-media relations, South Africa seemed to be making positive progress when, in May 2001, editors and senior journalists met Cabinet to discuss the establishment of a Presidential Press Corps (PPC). The PPC was conceived with the aim of providing easy access for the media to the president, ministers and senior government officials to ensure that information published or broadcast by journalists was as accurate and as up to date as possible (GCIS, 2002b).

However, the project got off to a bad start when, as part of the security clearance required for journalists, questions were asked about their sex lives and bank accounts. This provoked an uproar and concern that the government was trying to obtain personal information for sinister motives, leading to an apology from the Minister of Intelligence to the journalists concerned. Although the Corps system was supposed to improve communication and enhance the accuracy of information reported by the media, there was the feeling that this forum would be used by the government to manipulate the media (SADC Media Law, 2003, p. 6). It therefore never took off because of suspicions that the government had sinister motives.

In 2001, the government established a Presidential Participation Programme to provide a platform for face-to-face interaction with the citizens. Initially Cabinet decided that the *imbizo* (a forum for dialogue) activities should include at least one period a year of intense interaction between government and the people. However, during 2002 the Cabinet decided that there should be at least two *imbizo* periods a year to promote interactive governance and communication.

During the *imbizo*, senior officials from the three tiers of government at national, provincial and local level engage with citizens from all over South Africa. Senior officials who participate in the *imbizo* 'Focus Weeks' include the deputy president, Cabinet ministers, deputy ministers, premiers, local government representatives, Members of Executive Councils (MECs) in the provinces, mayors and other senior government officials. The president

then makes extended visits to the provinces and the communities have an opportunity to speak about their concerns as well as give feedback on the government's programme of action. This space is important as it is unmediated. It is a deliberative approach that tries to generate feedback in a bottom-up approach. As argued by Hartslielief (2005, p. 9), 'the *imbizo* qualifies as a rapid and cost-effective way of policy evaluation that could potentially lead to policy change, cancellation thereof or even the introduction of new items on the policy agenda.'

A new programme called the public participation programme (PPP) replaced the *imbizo* in November 2009. The programme still supports the president's initiative for government to serve and engage with the public. For example, in his public participation engagements in 2010, the Minister of Police visited communities in KwaZulu Natal over two days. He met interfaith organizations, youth groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), business as well as political organizations and urged them to support government in fighting crime. He also made an appearance at the trial of a serial killer who had terrorized communities in KwaZulu Natal. Later in the day he handed over a house to a local family whose shack was destroyed by rains leading to the death of the parents. The minister also had one-on-one interviews with the media.

Through its PPPs, the government seeks to demonstrate that it is in touch with people's concerns and that is willing to discuss with different stakeholders what needs to be done and how things can be improved. The handing over of the house presented an excellent media opportunity and created the perception of a concerned government. The presidency also introduced in September 2009 a toll-free hotline to the president's office for people to call and discuss their concerns. By September 2010, it was claimed that 30,500 complaints had been resolved by this means (SA Goodnews, 2011) and publicizing actions to solve these problems gave the impression that matters raised by the citizens were being attended to by the government. One criticism of the hotline and PPP, however, is that they create the impression that dialogue is only important with the national executive and unwittingly undermine the participation that should take place between the electorate and their representatives in all three tiers of government (local, provincial and national).

In Zimbabwe, when the country achieved independence in 1980, one of the key ministries was the Ministry of Information, Posts and Telecommunications. It was headed by a minister and the top civil servant was the Director of Information with a team composed of a Deputy Director, Under Secretary and Assistant Secretary. This ministry housed various departments including the ZBC, the NEW Zimbabwe African News Agency (New Ziana), the Zimbabwe Information Services (ZIS), the Zimbabwe Newspapers (Zimpapers) and the Telecommunications and Post Offices.

Responsible for all government communication from the other ministries, the ministry also dealt with the accreditation of local and international journalists who wished to work in the country. In addition to managing the information output of government, the ministry had regulatory and supervisory functions for communication entities including overseeing the telecommunications and post offices.

A Department of Information and Publicity ran a parallel operation from the president's office. This department was set up in 1980 with the primary role of serving the information and publicity needs of the president and Cabinet. It was headed by the Principal Press Secretary reporting to the Permanent Secretary who, in turn, reported to the Chief Secretary. Although the Ministry of Information's wide-ranging functions meant it was difficult to manage, the two structures served the government of the day relatively well primarily because there was no serious opposition and very few alternative channels of communication. According to a former Director of Information at the Ministry:

It was always a big challenge to manage and oversee the many units, which with the benefit of hindsight were not closely related to the co-function of managing government information. We had a huge staff complement to carry out functions ranging from Post and Telecommunications to servicing information needs of Ministries. Coordination was certainly a challenge, but we met all our key objectives. (Interview with Bornwell Chakaodza, 13 November 2011)

There is no doubt that the media monopoly helped the government as Zimbabweans could not access alternative information elsewhere. For example, people knew next to nothing about the genocide in Zimbabwe between 1982 and 1987 in which 20,000 civilians were killed by government soldiers in Matabeleland and Midlands on the pretext of crushing armed rebels.

In 2000, when the MDC presented a real challenge to the incumbent Zanu PF party, government management of information was radically restructured to deal with the new threat. The Ministry of Information was moved from being an independent ministry and placed as a department in the Office of the President, thus joining the strategic Ministry of State Security, which is also located in the President's Office. In 2000, despite the fact that the newly appointed Information and Publicity Minister, Jonathan Moyo, was a complete novice in the party (something unusual for Zanu PF which sets great store on members' seniority and history), he was put in charge of a full ministry with a seat in cabinet and direct access to and control of all public media houses.



All ministries channelled their communication or received their cue from the new Department of Information and Publicity. As a result, the government message was centralized and disciplined. They chose the issue of 'land' as their central theme. The opposition MDC were portrayed as puppets of the West who were opposed to the just cause of redistributing land to the majority black Zimbabweans. This message was repeated continuously through state media, and party and government communications. This blitzkrieg was possible only because the Minister of Information could literally direct the editors of all public media on what to publish and broadcast.

During Minister Moyo's era several young journalists who wrote openly partisan stories were rewarded with promotions while those who tried to remain professional were either demoted or removed completely. This model has been maintained to date.

In reorganizing the Ministry of Information, Post and Telecommunications, Moyo took away functions that did not directly involve the management of information and news and placed them elsewhere. For example, Post and Telecommunications were removed to form a new Ministry of Communications and Transport.

Moyo's second step in reorganizing government communication involved changing the personnel of the boards of directors for media institutions considered key for transmitting government propaganda namely, Zimbabwe Newspapers (print), ZBC (television and radio), NEW ZIANA (news agency) and the Community Newspapers Groups and the Mass Media Trust. The selection of these new boards was carried out by the minister who ensured that only those who held favourable views about the government were appointed. The result was that government could directly control information and communication output from several strategic bodies.

The third step saw new editorial appointments in the various media houses. Several editorial changes were instituted at *Zimpapers*, resulting in the removal of veteran journalists such as the editors of the *Herald*, the *Sunday Mail* and the *Chronicle*. According to one journalist: 'Terror tactics were used to flush out senior journalists to replace them with sycophantic greenhorns who were prepared to tow the line' (interview in Harare, 2005).

The people that the minister trusted were posted to key editorial positions. For example, Munyaradzi Hwengwere, who had served as the Principal Press Officer in the Department of Information in the president's office, was posted to the ZBC as Head of television news. He was so trusted by the minister that he had a level of editorial independence few journalists could afford. He revealed that after 2002, realizing that urban audiences had been put off ZTV news because of the one-sided nature of the coverage, he sought to reattract the audiences by bringing in MDC voices and faces into the news. In his words: 'We developed a three legged news format. First we would have

a government or Zanu PF voice, then an MDC voice and then end with an analyst who was invariably pro-government. I could afford to do this because I was trusted' (Hwengwere, interview, 24 October 2011).

Similar structural changes were instituted in relation to the ZBC. The board and senior management of ZBC were appointed by the Minister of Information in consultation with the president. However, as in the print sector, several veteran journalists and broadcasters were removed from ZBC and replaced by individuals loyal to the governing party. The following account from a senior journalist at *Zimpapers* illustrates the strategy of intimidation adopted by the government. According to MM:<sup>1</sup>

To the best of my knowledge, Jonathan Moyo never set foot in Herald House during his tenure but through his 'special' people (three names supplied), knew the building, its occupants and the goings on therein like the back of his hand. Because of patronage, these three never did an honest day's work while the professor was still minister. Theirs was a simple task: be the eyes and ears of the minister and you will be rewarded handsomely. Even their respective editors were powerless before this dreaded trio. In return, they would make daily trips to 'debrief Professor' at Munhumutapa Building. They would also be handed by Mrs Mukabeta, Moyo's then personal assistant, a floppy disc with stories to populate the front page. (Interview with author in Harare, 21 May 2011)

Under Moyo, government information dissemination became highly centralized and organized. This coordination and clarity of message was achieved through regular contacts with the editors and journalists. According to SS, a senior journalist at *Zimpapers*:

The minister used to have regular meetings with editors and desk editors to discuss policy issues. For example, when Dr Gono was appointed governor of the Reserve Bank, there were a series of meetings on what the media needed to do. In fact I must say, when there was something important happening, the minister would call editors to discuss the issue, e.g. pulling out of the Commonwealth and Silver Jubilee Celebrations. (Interview with author in Harare, 21 May 2011)

The media did not operate independently in deciding the story of the day nor could they report or hold alternative views as the minister determined the level of journalists' salaries and the lengths of their contracts.

Having used legislation to reduce significantly the capacity and ability of the private and international media to provide alternative information for the people of Zimbabwe, the government then literally took over the public media

to ensure that the media was entirely partisan in its coverage of what was happening in Zimbabwe. During Moyo’s tenure from 2000 to 2004, there was tight control of the content and output of the public media.

International media correspondents such as the BBC’s Joseph Winter and the *Guardian*’s Andrew Meldrum were expelled from Zimbabwe after government refused to renew their operating licences. A total of six private media houses were shut down. The situation continued even after Moyo had left his role as minister until the signing of the Global Political Agreement in 2008 and the formation of the coalition government in February 2009. Since then there has been an easing of attacks on the private media. However, the Zanu PF section of government retains great influence and control over the output of the public media.

Zimbabwe’s government communication is managed through the Ministry of Media, Information and Publicity, headed by a minister who also holds a full-time role as Commissar in the Zanu PF party (see Figure 11.1).

In principle, the role of permanent secretary is that of an impartial civil servant. However, in Zimbabwe the lines have been blurred as the Permanent Secretary actively speaks as spokesperson for one of the political parties in the inclusive government.

Below the permanent secretary there are five directors: Director of Urban Communications, Director of Rural Communications, Director of International

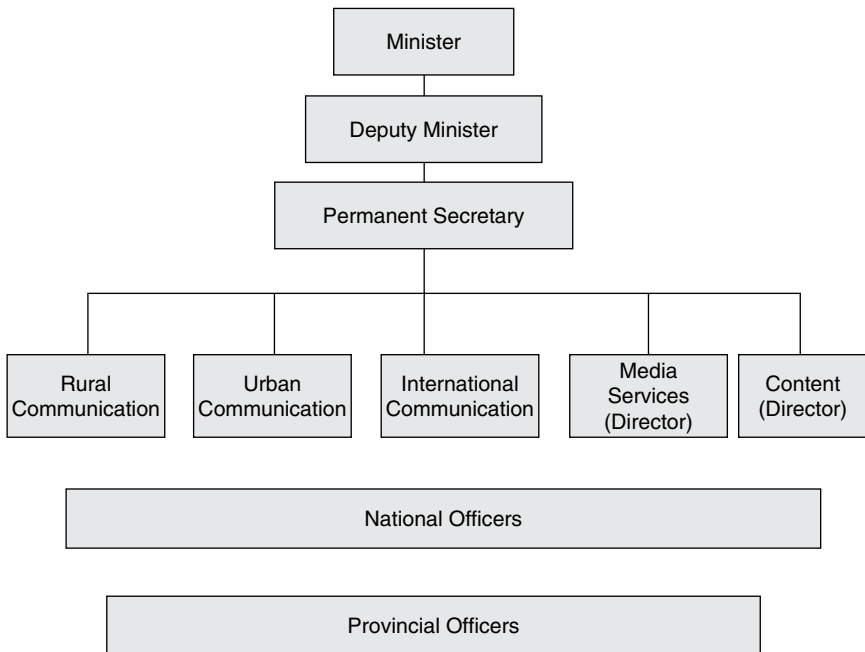


FIGURE 11.1 Structure of government communication in Zimbabwe

Relations and Director of Administration, Director of Content and Director of Media Services. The ministry has a staff complement of ninety, mostly based at the national office but has some additional staff at each of the country's ten provinces. Staff roles include press liaison, protocol, information dissemination, managing the president's press engagements, writing speeches, vetting and authorizing media house visits.

In general, the ministry operates in a highly secretive manner and does not easily release basic information to the public. While the secrecy is understandable for the Ministry of State Security, it is somewhat incongruous that the ministry in charge of government's public relations and communications is inaccessible. For example, on the government website which lists all of Zimbabwe's thirty-two ministries, the ministry's link is one of only two ministries that is not active and therefore information cannot be accessed.

All the other thirty ministries' links are active and contain basic information such as functions, roles, staff and programmes. Initially the problem with the link was perceived by the author to be a technical issue; however, attempts to acquire information proved that this was not the case. One director in the department was approached for information and their response was to require detailed security information about the writer, what the information would be used for, insisting that such information was covered under the Official Secrets Act. Even senior journalists and senior staff from other government ministries could not give basic information about the ministry and it was thus impossible to get reliable information on the structure and number of staff in the ministry.

At least two of the directors and a number of officers at national and provincial offices are retired army personnel. This is a typical trend in Zimbabwe where at all strategic institutions, serving or retired military personnel with a ZANLA liberation background are employed. ZANLA was the military wing of the Zanu PF during the war of liberation against colonialism.

The Ministry of Information's main functions include government communications and the administration of all legislation relevant to the media namely, the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA), the ZBC Commercialisation Act and the Broadcasting Services Act. In practice, the minister has extensive influence by law and through political pressure in the selection of the boards of trustees and senior managers.

## **Communicating the message**

The Urban Communication directorate actively uses ZBC television and radio to engage urban communities. The government also relies on music galas

where groups of the country's popular musicians are sponsored to perform overnight on selected occasions such as Unity Day and President Mugabe's Birthday. All these music shows are free for revellers and are broadcast live on the national television station and invariably contain political messages that reinforce the country's national flag but also include political slogans and messages of the Zanu PF party (Chikowero, 2011, pp. 291–313).

The Rural Communication directorate relies on the Community Newspapers Group and the Film Production Unit. Before the economic challenges of the post-2000 period the Community Newspapers Group had six newspaper titles based in six out of the country's ten provinces. These focused their coverage on community issues in the local areas. Funding has since become a challenge leading to the collapse of three of the newspapers, while the remainder are just getting by. This marks a complete change, as the group had received generous funding during the period 2000 to 2004 under Minister Moyo when they were actively used to disseminate political information. Similarly, soon after independence, government relied on the Film Production Unit to produce communication messages on its programmes and development issues which were transmitted in the rural areas through mobile cinemas. This programme is however suffering from funding constraints.

The International Communication Directorate has been one of the most active, particularly since 2000 when the country came under criticism from the international media and diplomatic circles for its controversial policies that included the sometimes violent land reform programme, state sponsored violence and torture of opposition leaders and activists and a sustained assault on human rights and press freedoms. In managing the fallout in the SADC region and Africa Union (AU), Zimbabwe closed ranks with like-minded countries, while in the international arena Zimbabwe put extensive effort in dividing the United Nations Security Council by ensuring Russia and China remained on their side to veto any resolutions against it as happened in 2008.

To push this policy the government's international communication relied on international consultants based abroad. They also identified and relied on selected intellectuals who wrote extensively in the local, regional and international media and attended international conferences to robustly defend the government's policies. The main frame of argument was the pan-Africanist view that Zimbabwe was being persecuted for carrying out land reform by imperialists spearheaded by Britain using a puppet opposition at home.

The Media Services Directorate is focused on fielding questions from the media and also organizing press conferences and preparing statements for senior government officials, including ministers, in particular the president, while the Content Directorate's main focus is on monitoring media output from the various media outlets to track how the government is being

covered in the various media. The directorate leans on the state-controlled media houses editorial teams if their output does not reflect the required message.

## Conclusion

Zimbabwe's government communication is intrinsically linked to the partisan political agenda of Zanu PF. The party views communication as being so strategic that it has invested heavily in organizing communication and employing only the most trusted personnel, particularly those with a ZANLA military background. It appears that the national agenda is defined through the eyes of a political party. The structure of government communication is organized to service the critical target audiences to ensure Zanu PF retains political power.

In that regard, the nature and practice of government communications in Zimbabwe does not encourage tolerance. It is about the control and maintenance of political power at all costs. Even though there has been a government of national unity in Zimbabwe since February 2009, the voices that have been amplified in government communication are those linked to Zanu PF.

There are fears that South Africa is following Zimbabwe's path, as the government has sought to control the public broadcaster and threatened to introduce a media tribunal and a Protection of Information Bill. While these are worrying developments, it is fair to say that South Africa's government communication encourages citizen engagement and political participation. The South Africa government has been much more willing to engage with the public and appreciates that there has to be constant communication with the people, hence the development of public participation platforms such as *imbizo* and the presidential hotline which people can call to criticize the government and demand accountability. The quality of citizen participation in a democracy is enhanced when there is an engagement between the people and its government and this appears to be happening in South Africa even though there have been some autocratic moves to try to control the public broadcaster and to cut the advertising budget to media that are critical of the government.

## Note

- 1 The person's real name is not disclosed for fear of reprisals.

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# 12

## Incredible India and government communication

*Holli A. Semetko and Tarun Wadhwa*

‘Incredible India’ is the brand used by India’s Ministry of Tourism on the website [www.incredibleindia.org](http://www.incredibleindia.org). But the word ‘incredible’ can have both favourable and unfavourable connotations. Home to the world’s largest democracy with over 1.2 billion people, more than 200 vernacular languages of which some 20 are officially recognized, and 28 states plus 7 union territories, India’s government communication can be described as incredible in both senses of the word. Because of this enormous scale and diversity, the Indian government has struggled to communicate effectively with its many different populations, leading to uneven correspondence, inefficiencies and the need for innovative methods for disseminating information.

In 2004, when the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) came to power with Manmohan Singh as prime minister, expectations were high that government communications would undergo major reforms. Known for his administrative effectiveness, Singh was well respected for his work as Finance Minister in 1991–6 where he is credited with the transformational opening up of the country’s economy to trade and investment (see Ganguly & Mukherji, 2011). The story of the Singh-led government might have been one of a resounding re-election, economic forecasts of almost double-digit growth and a burgeoning middle class larger than the population of the United States. Instead, the reports of one man’s struggles have come to symbolize the state of relations and communication between India’s politicians and citizens. Anti-corruption crusader Anna Hazare’s fasting protests have propelled his demands for greater accountability, and the failure of India’s leaders, into the world’s news throughout 2011.



Government communication is defined in this volume as 'the *role, practice, aims and achievements* of communication as it takes place in and by *public* institution(s) whose primary end is *executive* in the service of a *political rationale*'; including 'prime ministerial or presidential communication as well as mayoral or local and regional government communication'. As this definition implies, governments communicate at a number of levels and through strategic channels.

In India, as in other democracies, government communication that emerges from these multiple sources may, or more likely may not, be in alignment. Apart from the left-right dimension to political communication that may lead to conflict when federal, state and local leaders are of opposing camps, India's linguistic, cultural and religious diversity within and among the country's many states make the communication process more complex and strategic than in any other democracy (Karan, 2009; Misra, 2011). Although India ranked 125 out of 190 countries on the United Nation's 2012 e-government survey, on the combined e-government development index (which is based on three components: online services, telecommunications infrastructure and human capital), there is a great deal of variation within and between cities, towns and rural villages. The government has made internet access and e-government a national priority. India's tech visionary Sam Pitroda, whose official title is Adviser to the Prime Minister Public Information Infrastructure & Innovations (PIII) can be seen on the government's PIII website discussing the country's ambitious plan to roll out wireless connectivity to the more than 250,000 *panchayats* or local administrations in villages (<http://iii.gov.in/>).

Ethnic strife and the country's colonial past also emerge in present day communication contexts in both expected and unexpected ways as in the following examples (Varshney, 2002). After the attacks in Mumbai in 2008, the Indian government intensified internet surveillance but restrictions on online freedom of expression had become the subject of much political controversy within a few years. Content posted on social media sites led India's government to pass new IT rules in 2011, as a supplement to the 2000 Information Technology Act (ITA), making companies responsible for content posted online, requiring them 'to remove any content that is deemed objectionable, particularly if its nature is "defamatory," "hateful," "harmful to minors," or "infringes copyright" within 36 hours of being notified by the authorities, or face prosecution' (Reporters without Borders, 2012, p. 51). Union Minister for Communications and Information Technology Kapil Sibal became the leading advocate for punishing companies that fail to block hate speech (Swami and Mehdudia, 2011). In September 2012, freedom of expression in India became world news again when anti-corruption cartoonist and free-speech activist Aseem Trivedi voluntarily surrendered to Mumbai police. He was charged with sedition on the grounds that his

cartoons were 'derogatory to the Indian constitution' (Rana, 2012). One of his cartoons replaced the national emblem's four Asiatic lions with wolves and rephrased the emblem's inscription of *Satyamev Jayate* (truth alone prevails) to read *Bhrashta Mev Jayate* (corruption alone prevails). Another one was a drawing of the Indian Parliament termed 'National Toilet' (Rana, 2012). *Wall Street Journal's India Real Time* noted that editorials in the *Times of India*, the *Indian Express*, and other leading newspapers were in agreement that the government, not the cartoonist, had gone too far. An editorial in the *Hindu* asked: 'Sedition? Seriously?' (Rana, 2012). The public outcry against the government was also against the archaic law of sedition that had been instituted under colonial rule. The Maharashtra state government responded by dropping the charge against Mr Trivedi for sedition, though he may still face prosecution for related violations.

In the following pages, we review India's large and growing media system, and the country's political institutions. We discuss the government's strategic communication resources, as well as a case study of a communications campaign surrounding a government-led technology initiative. In conclusion we discuss how technology is transforming the way citizens and all levels of government in India communicate with one another.

## India's media landscape and culture

India's vast media landscape offers a multitude of riches to those interested in news (Swami, 2007), although there are concerns that India's press is moving in the direction of highlighting sensational stories and entertainment, rather than focusing on providing people with the information they need (Sonwalkar, 2002). Despite this, the publishing industry is still vibrant, and the future of newspapers in India seems especially bright because, in contrast to the United States and the European Union (EU), the majority of India's literate young people prefer to get their news and current affairs information from newspapers. India's newspapers were named the most preferred source, over any other media, for news and current affairs by a representative survey of the nation's literate young people, according to the National Youth Readership Survey (NYRS) conducted by the National Book Trust–National Council of Applied Economic Research in 2009 (Indian Youth, 2010). With some 333 million literate young people out of a population of some 459 million young people in 2009, this demographic reality bodes well for both the prospect of a robust press and the profession of journalism in India.

This can offer a major opportunity to strengthen a channel for informative communications, but the quality of news and current affairs reporting remains an issue as India simply does not have enough well-trained journalists to meet

the public demand for current affairs and investigative reporting. With the rapid expansion of the journalism industry in the past two decades, the quality of journalism education has not been able to keep pace. Many universities and programs still lack professors with adequate industry experience and even after graduating, many students were not judged to be highly refined in their written or spoken communication skills by senior academics and industry professionals (Murthy, 2011).

India's wide variety of newspapers provides a rich array of local and regional options in Hindi and many vernacular languages, as well as English. Tourists arriving in India are likely to find more choice in English newspapers than in their home countries. The *Times of India*, founded in Mumbai in 1838, has a national circulation of 7.5 million in 2011 according to the Indian Readership Survey (Hansa Research, 2011), followed by the *Hindustan Times* (HT), founded in 1924, with a circulation of 3.7 million, that has wide readership in northern India. From its original home in Chennai (formerly known as Madras) the English language daily the *Hindu*, founded in 1878, is the third largest English daily newspaper following with a circulation of 2 million primarily in southern India according to the 2011 Indian Readership Survey, and the newspaper is now printed in 17 cities across the south with local news produced in each location. *Deccan Chronicle*, *Economic Times* and *New Indian Express* are just a few of the many English dailies. The fastest growing readership among the English language press is in the business sector, with the relative newcomer *Mint* launched in 2007 by HT Media Ltd and the *Wall Street Journal*. With a booming economy, the demand for in-depth business reporting is strong in native languages as well. For example, *Dainik Bhaskar*, the largest Hindi language newspaper was founded *Business Bhaskar* in 2008, and in just a few years has already become the largest Hindi language business newspaper.

The broadcasting sector has also exploded with choice in recent years in part due to the government's introduction in 2008 of the policy on Internet Protocol TV (IPTV) that led to the launch of almost 400 satellite television channels through telecom networks. Public television, known as *Doordarshan*, operates more than 20 services around the country, with its flagship channel DDI, reaching some 400 million people. India has one of the world's largest cable television markets. As in many EU countries, where the public service broadcaster is allegedly prone to influence by the government of the day, India's public service broadcaster *Doordarshan* has long been accused of biased reporting and manipulating information in favour of the political parties in power (Joseph, 2003). The launch of new privately owned satellite channels whose owners support political parties that are not in government, has permitted a wider range of voices to be heard.

The introduction of legislation in 2000 regarding the regulation of music and entertainment on FM radio has led to an increase in the number of radio stations in cities around the country, reaching 250 by 2009. With the introduction of policies in 2008 that made it possible for organizations other than education institutions to broadcast, community radio has experienced explosive growth. Now many civil society and non-governmental organizations host their own radio channels. The public channel, however, *All India Radio*, the only one licensed to broadcast news and AM radio, is a government monopoly, while FM and community radio are predominantly privately owned.

Freedom of speech and freedom of expression are enshrined in India's Constitution. Although a free press is not mentioned in the Constitution, it has been generally respected. There are examples of government bans of publications or news on the grounds that it may incite communal violence. In one well-known case in Gujarat, the state government in August 2009 aimed to ban *Jinnah: India-Partition-Independence*, due to language that defamed one of India's founding fathers, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, who is seen as a divisive figure in some Muslim communities. Officials worried the publication might have led to communal violence but by early September the ban was struck down by the Gujarat High Court in the name of freedom of expression.

## India's political and electoral systems

The Indian Congress Party, a centre-left party founded in 1885, is the leading party in the ruling national coalition called the UPA that presently includes 16 parties. The other major party is the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a comparatively recent alternative on the right or centre-right. Created in 1980 and claiming to represent the values of the India's Hindu majority, the BJP advocates conservative social policies and strong national defence. From 1998 to 2004, BJP led the government in coalition with several other parties called the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). At the time of the NDA's founding in 1998, it consisted of 13 parties in the coalition. India also has long-standing experience with Communists, who were primarily organized into coalitions as the *Third Front* in the 2009 election.

Over the past three decades, power at India's centre evolved and has become more diffuse. The centralized system has evolved from being dominated by the Indian National Congress Party, more recently known as the Congress I Party, to a much more fragmented party system. Regional parties heavily influence the current party system and governance is characterized by local unstable multiparty coalitions. With the liberalization of communication channels, Indians now have the choice to hear from many more perspectives

and political voices than at any time in the past, enhancing the ability of smaller parties to get their messages across.

India's elections are organized by the Election Commission of India (ECI) and held in multiple phases. Successfully carrying out regular elections requires enormous logistics and communication campaigns. From a national standpoint, election campaigns are complex in part because in most cases different parties are contesting in each State. In 2009, for example, only in 7 of 28 states did the two main national parties (Congress and BJP) face each other, and in all other states one of the two national parties faced a regional party. Corruption was also part of the campaign. The Fifteenth Lok Sabha saw 150 MPs with pending criminal charges. BJP (with 42) and Congress (with 41) were nearly equal in the number of MPs with criminal charges against them and 73 serious cases included rape and murder. The number of MPs with criminal cases was up in 2009 from 128 in 2004.

At the federal level, India has two houses. The Lok Sabha, the lower house, is modelled on the British House of Commons, and is limited by the Constitution to have no more than 552 members. The vast majority of members are elected from the states, with less than ten per cent elected from the territories members nominated from the Anglo-Indian community. Most represent single-member districts. The Lok Sabha is dissolved automatically every five years for elections, though the term can be extended if a state of emergency is declared, and that occurred from 1962 to 1968, 1971 and from 1975 to 1977. The Lok Sabha is more than twice as large as the Rajya Sabha, India's upper house. The Rajya Sabha has up to 250 members, elected for a period of six years, and one-third of the members are re-elected every two years. The Rajya Sabha is not subject to dissolution and meets continuously. Twelve of the members of the Rajya Sabha are selected by the president for their expertise in specific fields of art, literature, science and social services and known as nominated members. The Rajya Sabha currently comprises 238 members and apart from the aforementioned nominated members, the rest are indirectly elected by the state and territorial legislatures with a single transferable vote electoral system. The Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha share legislative powers, with the exception of the money supply where the lower house has authority, and in other areas, in the case of conflict, joint sessions are held to resolve the conflict.

India's president occupies a key role in times of crisis such as a hung parliament or when a state of emergency could be declared, but otherwise the president's role is largely ceremonial similar to the British monarch to advise, encourage and warn the government on constitutional matters. An electoral college with some 4,500 members including members of the Lok Sabha and state legislators are permitted to vote to elect the president. Pratibha Patil,

who was formerly governor of the northern Indian state of Rajasthan, was the country's first female president from 2007 to 2012. The vice-president is elected by both houses of parliament and chairs the upper house. The president appoints the prime minister (PM), the head of the government, based on his or her nomination by the majority party elected to the Lok Sabha. The president also appoints up to 26 members of India's Supreme Court, at the recommendation of the PM, who serve until age 65.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, of the ruling UPA, came into office after the 2004 elections. The PM recommends ministers who are appointed by the president. The ministers comprise the Council of Ministers.

At the state level, citizens elect the Chief Minister (CM) who is politically more powerful than the governor, appointed by the central government. CMs enjoy a large amount of executive power, and the duties of their role vary state by state. Officially, the governor represents and reports back to the central government if there appears to be any violation or abuse of constitutional authority by the CM. In practice, and especially at times when the CM's party is not in central government, this can result in allegations that are often perceived as political.

India's Constitution advocates justice, liberty and equality. Due to disputes between parliament and the Supreme Court over the extent to which parliamentary sovereignty overrides judicial review of legislation and constitutional amendments, India's Constitution has been amended no less than 80 times since it came into existence in 1950. The Supreme Court is the nation's highest judicial authority in constitutional, civil and criminal cases. Each arm of government, the executive, legislative and judicial, and each ministry, conducts public relations through press releases, websites and civil servants who communicate with members of the public online and in person.

## **India's government communication resources**

One of the leading chapters of the Public Relations Society of India (PRSI), launched nationally in 1958, is located in Chennai. The Chennai chapter's description of its members reflects the wide array of professionals involved, and includes public and private sector businesses, government, public utilities, NGOs, consultants, and advertising and education professionals ([www.prsichennai.org](http://www.prsichennai.org)). India's government communicators extend from the top of the federal and state political structures into the areas of basic services at the local level including education, health and infrastructure, including public utilities.

## ***Publicizing and communicating government information***

The Press Information Bureau, under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, is the nodal agency of the government that is responsible for disseminating information to 8,400 newspapers and media organizations on government policies, programmes, initiatives and achievements. It functions 'as an interface between the Government and the media and also serves to provide feedback to the Government on people's reaction as reflected in the media'. It communicates through press releases, press notes, feature articles, backgrounders, photographs and other information made public on their website (<http://pib.nic.in/>). Communications are primarily in English, Hindi and Urdu, but they are subsequently translated into many different languages. They are responsible for organizing press conferences, briefings and interviews of ministers, secretaries and other senior government officials with the media.

With headquarters in New Delhi, there are also eight regional offices and thirty-four branch offices and information centres responsible for communicating with regional press and other media. These regional offices share important information from the central government with specific areas or populations in their local languages. It is headed by the Principal Director General, who is assisted by a Director General and eight Additional Director Generals, stationed at their main offices.

In addition, the Bureau has Departmental Publicity Officers attached to different ministries, with Directors to Assistant Directors to Media and Communication varying in rank based on their ministry's size, importance and sensitivity. The Bureau published a list of names and contact numbers of all of these officials on the website. Overall, the Bureau's three main functions are divided into information, education and communication; feedback; as well as accreditation and special services.

In their Citizen Charter, available on their website, their vision is described as communicating important information about the policies and programmes of the government of India. Their stated goals are to: provide state-of-the-art information retrieval facilities on its website, develop an all electronic photo library, organize Public Information Campaigns as awareness programmes, and provide friendly and efficient media facilitation for the agencies it covers. Its mission also includes advising the government on its information and media strategy and providing explanation on government pronouncements to the media and public.

For the sake of transparency, the Charter also includes specific service standards, with information about the process, time limit and any fees involved. In addition, they lay out the specific functions and standards of

both headquarters and regional/branch offices, with a clear definition of what type of service a recipient can expect. There is also a grievance redressal mechanism, with the contact information of the Public Grievance Officer and a timeline for following up. In 2005, India passed a Right to Information Act – the Bureau's website includes a listing of requests and their current status, as well as their overall budget for the past few years.

### ***Civil service***

Apart from elected officials, much of government communication responsibilities are entrusted to civil servants. The Indian Administrative Service (IAS) is the civil service arm of the government's executive branch and an elite corps of civil servants who occupy top jobs at home and abroad. A select number enter each year after passing highly competitive exams and then undergo a long training process. India's current Ambassador to the United States, the eloquent Nirupama Rao, who was formerly Foreign Secretary, is one example of an IAS career diplomat. Rao's equally eloquent predecessor, Meera Shankar, India's former Ambassador to the United States along with her talented husband retired civil servant Ajay Shankar, were described in the *Washington Diplomat* as devoting their entire careers to the public service (Scott, 2011). Yet apart from the top jobs and ambassadorial positions (Rana, 2005), the civil service is seen as badly in need of reform.

As the voice of India's various departments, civil servants play an important role in communications, but there has long been controversy over their credibility, leading to issues of public trust. Repeatedly imprisoned by the British for civil disobedience in the 1920s and 1930s, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote letters from prison to his daughter Indira, born in 1917, in which he shared his thoughts on the world. Nehru had this to say of India's civil service:

I think it was Voltaire who defined the 'Holy Roman Empire' as something which was neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire. Just as someone else once defined the Indian Civil Service, with which we are unfortunately still afflicted in this country, as neither Indian, nor civil, nor a service. (Nehru, 1942, p. 94)

The size of India's civil service continues to be a political issue as is the path to reform. A 2003 article in the popular newspaper the *Indian Express* compared the size of India's civil service favourably with 1.4 per cent of the population, compared to 2.6 per cent in Asia and 7.7 per cent in OECD countries (World Bank, 2003). A total of about 3.4 million people were employed as civil servants by the central government at that time, with about 6 million in all the states taken together, along with an additional 4 million working as teachers



and health workers in government and grant-in-aid institutions India. All of these people, on some level, are responsible for communicating issues of relevance to the government to individual citizens.

## **Advertising**

The government has considerable power to communicate through print advertising and controls all aspects of the process through the Directorate of Audio-Visual Publicity (DAVP), which is the central government arm through which all central government advertising must be routed. DAVP places ads on behalf of the government. Over the past decade the government has claimed to want to increase the proportion of funding on advertising to small and medium size publications, in an effort to strategically communicate at the grassroots level. The reality in spending has been the subject of some attention that resulted in the publication of charts displaying the 2009–10 DAVP spending by MediaNama, a key source of information and analysis on the telecom digital media business in India (Sridhar, 2011).

MediaNama charts on DAVP spending revealed that in 2009–10, a large portion of the total went to English language newspapers, 40 per cent, and with Hindi added they together account for 73 per cent of total advertising expenditure. The bulk was for daily advertising in newspapers across the country. Of the English advertising, 21 per cent went to a government in-house weekly named *Employment Weekly*, and 24 per cent went to the *Times of India*. More than 2,363 Hindi publications receive funding for advertising from DAVP. Languages that followed English and Hindi were Bengali, Marathi, Gujarati, Urdu and Oriya. Three of these languages are native to states where the UPA has not formed a government, as indicated by MediaNama.

Government spending on advertising has been the subject of much political debate in the press, the blogs and on television news. The Nehru–Gandhi political legacy, the diffusion of power among and within the states, and government communication via advertising in the press – all came together in the commemoration of the birth and death anniversaries of Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi. Each year, government commemorative advertising appears in newspapers across the country on these iconic leaders.

One important example of this controversy was wrapped up with the compelling story of India's *safai karmacharis*, the manual scavengers who perform the degrading and illegal work of cleaning human excrement from roads and dry latrines with little more than a broom, plate and basket, a hereditary occupation reserved for members of the Dalit caste who are often discriminated against and prevented from taking any other job; the issue of government funds spent on commemorative advertising was

encapsulated in a blog post by Pritam Sengupta, on 6 December 2011, drawing on an Indian current affairs blog known as *san serif*. Sengupta deftly criticized the government in Uttar Pradesh (UPA), India's most populated state, for its (relative) underspending on commemorative advertising for Dr B. R. Ambedkar, a jurist, who was born Dalit and converted to Buddhism near the end of his life, known as the father of the nation's Constitution (see <http://wearethebest.wordpress.com/2011/12/06/6-pages-for-ambedkar-393-pages-for-the-family>).

The central government advertising became the focus of complaint by the newspaper industry in 2009, and continues to be an issue. Some newspaper publishers, including Shobna Bhartia the executive director of the *Hindustan Times*, claimed that DAVP rates were in effect 'subsidized' by commercial ads, and many print media threatened to stop carrying government ads as an election was due later in the year, given the expectation that there would be a run of politically motivated advertising by the government.

## India rising in spite of the State

In 2006, Gurcharan Das, former CEO of Procter and Gamble India, wrote a diagnosis and prescription for unshackling India's economy in *Foreign Affairs* magazine's special issue on the rise of India. Das noted that India's growth at 6 per cent a year since 1980 and over 7 per cent since 2002, and its anticipated rise from the world's fourth-largest economy to displace Japan for third place by 2015, is not due to the typical Asian export strategy of making low-priced goods for the West. Instead, India has grown its domestic market through a consumption-driven model based on rising productivity that has resulted in India having less income inequality than in the United States, China or Brazil. The Gini index, on a scale from 0 to 100, with the higher the number the greater the income inequality, was 33 for India in 2006, 41 for the United States, 45 for China and 59 for Brazil. India's growth has been entrepreneur-driven and absent an industrial revolution.

Das describes India as 'rising despite the state' (2006, p. 3). Government is seen as bureaucracy, and its public image is an obstacle to development. Bureaucrats are seen 'as self-serving, obstructive, and corrupt, protected by labor laws and lifetime contracts that render them completely unaccountable' (Das, 2006, p. 10). Das notes India has reached a general consensus that the government has failed in providing public education and that 'the same dismal story is being repeated in health and water services, which are also de facto privatized' (2006, p. 12).

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, India's chief architect of the liberal reforms started in 1991, and his National Congress Party returned to power in

2004 after the incumbent BJP led a period that failed to provide basic services despite leading a period of unprecedented growth. Das (2006) argues that the prime minister and the reformers in his administration should 'start appearing on television to conduct lessons in basic economics' (pp. 14–15).

In a series of 13 reports, the first in 2006 and the latest in 2009, issued by the Second Administrative Reforms Commission, India's government embarked upon significant reform of the public administration system. The Second Administrative Reforms Commission issued a far-reaching report in April 2009, the Thirteenth Report, that addressed the reorganization of ministries and departments, and noted at the outset: 'The commission will suggest measures to achieve a proactive, responsive, accountable, sustainable and efficient administration for the country at all levels of the government' (Second Administrative Reforms Commission, 2009, p. i). Gurcharan Das, however, remains unconvinced.<sup>1</sup>

## A success for government communications?

Derived from the Hindi word for sky, *Aakash* is the name of the revolutionary tablet computer launched in mid-2011 at the initiative of India's Ministry of Human Resource Development (HRD). Responsible for higher education, the HRD Ministry announced it would purchase 1 million that year at \$50 each and provide a subsidy to make the sales price Rs 1,500 or \$35 for public university students in India.

The tablet is an open-source solar-powered android computer that plays video. The campaign that rolled out the tablet was a remarkable and rare public relations coup for the Indian government. A year before the official launch, the *Times of India* showcased the Indian government as the driver of change in the education sector.<sup>2</sup>

The Indian government issued an open tender for firms to develop a low-cost tablet that could introduce radical change across the nation's public education sector from primary on up. The revolutionary new device was ultimately produced by Data Wind in partnership with an educational institution, IIT Rajasthan. According to Data Wind's CEO, it was the vision of then HRD Minister Kapil Sibal and the government's commitment to purchase these that drove the company to accept the challenge to come up with a tablet device at this remarkably low price.<sup>3</sup>

On 13 August 2011 with the newly launched tablet in hand, India's smiling HRD Minister Kapil Sibal sat comfortably in the NDTV studio flanked on either side by a prominent tech journalist. In most current affairs programmes, such a seating arrangement often portends a grilling for the politician in the middle, but not that day on the popular NDTV talk show 'Gadget Guru'. In chorus, the

journalists and the minister extolled the virtues of the tablet and described it as an initiative of the HRD Ministry. With smiles all around, the session concluded with the following seemingly humorous exchange:

Journalist: 'When we were discussing it before you came out here, we were (a), not really sure it existed, and (b), not sure it would be functional.'

Minister Kapil Sibal: 'May I offer some advice to the media? Never be skeptical of the government. There are times when the government really delivers.'

In late April 2012, however, a two-part investigative story by journalists Pamposh Raina and Heather Timmons, in *India Ink*, a blog on the *New York Times* online, revealed the obstacles presented by IIT Rajasthan in the run up to the seemingly happy launch of the tablet. The tablet project has since been moved to IIT Bombay's Affordable Solutions Lab. The two-part story and the readers' comments provide sharply different political interpretations of the evolution of the *Aakash* (Raina and Timmons, 2012). Contrary to the earlier media reports, what these articles revealed was a common failure in government communications. Despite bold promises, there is often little transparency on who is involved and what they are doing along each step of the process. While it remains to be seen whether *Aakash* will be deployed and live up to its potential as a transformative device, its development has highlighted the underlying problems of accountability and openness.

## Conclusion

India's government has a wealth of media resources available to communicate to the public. And both reach and potential will grow even further as the internet becomes readily available across the country in the next few years. As in every democracy, at every level of government, there is room for political contestation. India is rich with such examples – and with the increasing ability for citizens to access a multitude of political perspectives and viewpoints, this opportunity will only become larger.

In India's democracy, as in other democracies around the world, government communication is often met with scepticism. The rise of many social networking sites gives India's citizens, organizations and governments more opportunities to communicate and discuss these matters openly on a scale the country has never experienced before. As this chapter has shown, the government's power to communicate effectively through print advertising can no longer be taken for granted as it has become a political issue. With the rise of many new private television channels the national public broadcaster

*Doordarshan* is probably also a less effective channel for government communications than it had been in a less abundant media environment.

India's tech visionary Sam Pitroda used the example of the tablet to explain to an audience of university leaders what the technology really means – the promise of high quality internet access across the country could potentially transform traditional models of education. Speaking to hundreds gathered at Georgetown University for the historic US-India Higher Education Summit in October 2011, Pitroda said that because of this new affordable technology: 'We no longer need teachers. We need mentors.'<sup>4</sup> The Summit, described by Minister Kapil Sibal (2011) as a 'defining moment in Indo-US relations', can be seen as part of the government's international communications campaign on the tablet.

The government's communications campaign suggests that this new technology will offer a positive future for the millions of children living in poverty. If the product development is able to make it through the bureaucracy, infrastructure is put into place to enable wireless internet access across the country, and education and media sectors are prepared to deliver content online – then there may truly be a drastic change in how the government can help to empower and educate citizens. Mira Kamdar (2007) notes that India will have an estimated 550 million Indian teenagers by 2015. Internet reach was less than 10 per cent among youth in 2009 but for those who had it, nearly twice as much time was spent on the internet as on reading newspapers, according to NYRS. As the technology comes to reach more young people, India's newspapers, like those in the West, will need to also concentrate on building internet based business models.

Rapidly growing internet reach from only a small fraction of the country's youth in 2009 to the majority by 2014 may appear to be an audacious goal, but it is part of India's daily challenge of providing a sustainable future. India's government already has met with critical success in launching Aadhaar, the national identity program which aims to give a biometric-backed unique identity number to 1.2 billion people, another of India's staggering goals (Wadhwa 2011a, 2011b, 2012). When fully in place, Aadhaar will allow for new types of digital accountability trails, and the government will be able to improve service delivery at lower cost. In terms of communicating with government, the national identity system marks a major change: instead of communicating with a group of people, for the first time, government agencies will be able to identify and communicate with people on an individual level. No longer will a person be just a Dalit from a certain area, but instead an Indian resident represented by 12 digits, entitled (at least on paper) to all the same rights as others. As many people in the country will receive recognition from their national government for the first time through *Aadhaar*, this should have some type of effect on how they perceive themselves and their national identity as Indians.

Government communications in Incredible India continues, although it is undergoing major changes brought about by technology and the liberalization of communication methods. Access to information is becoming far more possible than at any time in history, yet enormous challenges remain in creating the structures and institutions to successfully support these functions. With 1.2 billion people, and as one of the most diverse countries in the world, it will be no easy task – but it has never been more important.

## Notes

- 1 'I am afraid my opinion of the capability of our government and leaders to teach people about the need for reforms has not changed', Das noted in correspondence with Semetko, 23 November 2011.
- 2 The *Times of India*, 23 July 2010, [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2010-07-23/india/28275221\\_1\\_hrd-ministry-device-solar-panel](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2010-07-23/india/28275221_1_hrd-ministry-device-solar-panel), last accessed on 2 May 2012.
- 3 Thanks to Jay Shah in Bangalore for his assistance with research on this case.
- 4 Semetko's notes from the India-US Higher Education Summit, October 2011.

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# 13

## Government communication in Mexican democracy<sup>1</sup>

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**F**or a period of 71 years, presidential elections in Mexico were consistently won by the candidates of the official party, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI). However, in July 2000 the candidate of the conservative *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN), Vicente Fox Quesada, took office and transformed the government's communication strategy in accordance with the new democratic demands. This chapter aims to provide an overview of the government's communication features during the 2000–12 democratization period in Mexico.

In this chapter, we will use the typology for the study of transitional processes proposed by O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead (1988). They define *liberalization* as the opening and transformation process of an authoritarian regime, and *democratization* as the birth of democratic practices and institutions. First, we will examine political and electoral systems in order to situate the institutional foundations of government communication.

### **Political and electoral systems**

Mexico has a presidential system with independent legislative, executive and judicial branches. It is a Federal Republic made up by 31 states and a

federal district. Each state elects its own governor and legislature; municipal authorities are chosen at the local level.

The Legislative is a General Congress, divided into two chambers: the Chamber of Deputies with 500 members, elected by popular vote for a three-year term; 300 by a simple majority in single-member districts and 200 by proportional representation. The Senate is made up by 128 members, elected by popular vote for a six-year term. Each state elects three senators; in addition, 32 are elected by proportional representation on a single nation list.

The Judicial Power is vested in the Supreme Court of Justice, the Electoral Tribunal, the Collegiate and Unitary Circuit Tribunal, as well as the District Courts. It is regulated by the Organic Act of the Judicial Power.

The president is elected directly by the citizens, as mandated by the electoral laws. He or she takes office on 1 December and governs for a six-year period. The mandatory principle of 'no re-election' is of paramount importance in Mexican politics and applies to all public officials at both federal and state levels.

Mexico has a multiparty system in which three main parties receive a large percentage of the vote: PAN [National Action Party], PRI [Institutional Revolutionary Party] and *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* [Party of the Democratic Revolution] (PRD). From 2000, several other small parties have obtained registration: *Partido Verde Ecologista de México* [Green Ecologist Party of Mexico] (PVEM), *Partido del Trabajo* [Labour Party] (PT), *Movimiento Ciudadano* [Citizen Movement] (MC) and *Partido Nueva Alianza* [New Alliance Party] (PNA).

In the following section we will deal with the political context, as well as with the new political codes and practices introduced by the democratization process. We will also describe an overview of the media landscape: the broadcasting system and the role the media play with regard to the government.

## The context of political change

During the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional's* (PRI) time in power (1929–2000), there was a close relationship between media owners and the political elite, the impact of the media on politics was pervasive and, above all, supportive of the regime. Private media consented in the framing of political communication as propaganda, supporting the regime's aim of mobilizing the audience in favour of the official PRI ideology. The business association at the top level,<sup>2</sup> as well as the political complicities between the government and Televisa,<sup>3</sup> impinged on the political information structure.

However, in the late 1960s, university students, aware of the information and values proclaimed by the left-wing movements in Europe (particularly the 1968 uprising in France), protested against the government; many of them were killed in a massive repression in October 1968 (Poniatowska, 1971).

In 1977, the waning support for PRI and its failure to open up to the opposition's demands for democratic political change, led to political reform aimed at minimizing the incidence of disruptive action for political ends, directing it into legal and institutional activities. The intention seemed to be to construct a political framework that – in the short run – could maintain the PRI hegemony and – in the long term – set the rules for the liberalization process towards democracy.

The reform, that began the liberalization process, relied on three crucial changes of the political system. The first was a Law of Amnesty aimed at political prisoners, outlaws and exiles who had not been involved in violent crimes. The second was electoral reform which allowed the registration of all political parties – regardless of their ideology – and extended their rights. The electoral reform also provided minority parties with 100 seats in Congress through the introduction of a proportional representation system. The third change was to guarantee society's right to information, provided by the article six amendment of the Constitution. The amendment meant the first step to a partial liberalization of the press. These changes enhanced freedom of speech and paved the way to a dialogue between government and society.

In the 1980s, key media owners and journalists took advantage of the political reform, playing an increasingly significant role in placing democratic demands in the public arena and participating in the debates that would bring about subsequent political reforms. Thus, the press expanded the informational content of their news reporting, adopting a new language that displayed the internal political conflicts within the country. In 1976, *Proceso* magazine provided a good example of adversarial journalism by denouncing government abuse of power; a year later, the daily *UnoMásUno* served as a vehicle for spreading left-wing opposition opinions; it also represented an important change in Mexican journalism. In 1984, a number of this newspaper's founders launched *La Jornada* with a similar left-wing ideological profile. In 1993, the newspaper *Reforma* introduced a new kind of political journalism – a forum for deliberation aimed at progressive reformers within the regime, as well as for representatives of moderate opposition groups.

Broadcast media also opened up a forum for the oppositions' points of view. The participation of academic experts in news programmes, where they expressed their ideas about the political situation and discussed the different scenarios that could lead to democratic change, was particularly relevant. Radio stations' transmission of programmes aimed at varied groups

of society who could pose their complaints and express their opinions about political affairs was also a significant development (Winocour, 2001).

One of the most important changes in the media landscape took place when two of three networks owned by the state *Instituto Mexicano de Televisión* [the Mexican Institute of Television] were auctioned off by the government: thus, in 1993 *Televisión Azteca* was born, breaking Televisa's monopoly and creating competition for audiences. The newcomer in the media market raised great hopes; it was thought that the monopoly was over at last. However, this new scenario brought along with it what in Mexico is known as 'the duopoly': two companies that control almost all the broadcasting business.

In the political arena, the 1988 presidential election represented the first serious threat to the ruling party in many years, due to a fracture within its own internal structure, brought about by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (a former member of the dominant coalition and son of one of the most important party mavericks and former president) and his decision to stand against the official candidate from the PRI, Carlos Salinas. Cárdenas was backed by a small coalition of left-wing parties, by the PRI's usual political followers and by many citizens with 31 per cent of the vote. Before the elections were held and when the official results were declared, public protests against the government clearly signalled the extent of authoritarian elite decay and of the level of prevailing dissatisfaction in society (Sánchez, 1999).

Once again, the political reforms meant a step forward on the path to democratization. Opposition parties called for fair competition in terms of media coverage during election campaigns. At the beginning of the democratization process, several provisions were introduced in the 1996 electoral reform to regulate the parties' access to radio and television broadcasting times during electoral campaigns including a more equitable distribution of time among the contenders. Furthermore, the broadcasting commission of the *Instituto Federal Electoral* (IFE) was authorized to monitor the transmission time assigned to political party campaigns by news programmes, as well as to report its findings to the IFE General Council. The prerogative of being granted access to free spots on radio and television was opened to all national political parties in order to give them the opportunity of widely publicizing their electoral platforms. This prerogative included regular monthly time slots and additional transmissions during electoral periods (articles 49 and 50, COFIPE).

PRI gradually yielded control over key political public posts at both federal and local levels. In 1989, PAN's candidate, Ernesto Ruffo, won *Baja California* state governor's race; it was the first time an opposition party had become head of a federal body. In 1997, PRD won the election to head the government in the Federal District, the most important federal entity and the headquarter of the state's main institutions. Furthermore, that same year PRI lost its long-held majority in the Chamber of Deputies; this meant the beginning of

a new period in which the opposition would play a definitive role in bringing about political change in the country. It was also a crucial step towards the consolidation of a plural and multiparty system.

The conservative party, PAN, won the presidential election twice: first, Vicente Fox won in 2000, with a 6.41 per cent lead over PRI's candidate, Francisco Labastida; and in 2006, Felipe Calderón won the election ahead of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, PRD's candidate, by only 0.56 per cent. In both presidential elections, the conservative party gained the largest number of seats in the Chamber of Deputies (210 out of 500 seats in 2000 and 206 seats in 2006). However, in the intermediate election for renewing the Deputy Chamber in 2009 the results were not so favourable for the party in office, weakening its ability to pass legislation required to enact the institutional reforms aimed at the consolidation of democracy.

### ***Legal provisions***

Most democratization processes are characterized by the free flow of information and by competition between public and commercial media. These characteristics are facilitated by a favourable regulatory environment that permits a variety of political viewpoints to be expressed, offering the public diverse political choices. Two media system principles make it possible for political journalism to play its role as government watchdog: first, constitutional guarantees or agreements to ensure citizens' free access to political information expressed in provisions in relation to freedom of the press, speech and assembly; second, the protection of the media from arbitrary government interference. A final requirement is the existence of all these legal frameworks that promote and sustain diverse media forms and outlets (Gunther & Mughan, 2000).

In Mexico, regulatory independence from the government is embodied in a set of provisions on freedom of speech and press, and in the right to information as established by the 1917 Constitution. The independent state organisms that protect these constitutional guarantees are the *Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nación* [Supreme Court of Justice] and the *Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos* [Human Rights Commission].

There are a number of legal provisions controlling the government–media relationship. Before the liberalization period, the media were ruled by a Radio and Television Federal Law, first passed in 1960 and later amended on a number of occasions. The law states that radio and television must fulfil a public interest activity, and that the State's duty is to protect and monitor them. Legislation is explicit in pointing out the social function played by broadcast media in contributing to the strengthening of 'national integration' and improving 'human coexistence' (Wallis, 2004). A decree issued by the president in 2002

(the Federal Radio and Television Regulations on Concessions, Permissions and Content of Radio and Television Transmissions) reversed a number of obligations that the political authorities had imposed 30 years prior to the media system, particularly regarding official broadcasting times allocated to the State (Carreño, 2007).<sup>4</sup>

Print media are primarily regulated by the 2011 Press Act and by the 1981 Rules on Illustrated Magazines and Publications. The agency in charge of sanctioning newspapers or magazines that violate the Press Act is the *Comisión Calificadora de Publicaciones y Revistas Ilustradas* [Illustrated Magazines and Publications Qualifier Commission], under the authority of the Secretary of the Interior. This agency issues title certificates to newspapers and magazines; in the event that a publication does not comply with the act, it can be rated unlawful, sanctioned, and its distribution can even be stopped. In television and radio broadcasting, content is primarily regulated by the 1960 Federal Radio and Television Act and regulations, added to this act in 2002. The agency in charge of implementing regulations in this sector, including sanctioning, is the *Dirección General de Radio, Televisión y Cinematografía* [Radio, Television and Cinematography General Directorate], a subordinate office to the Secretary of the Interior.

There is also a third different set of rules aimed at reinforcing the quality of democracy, specifically regarding issues of transparency, checks and balances, and political equity.

As far as transparency is concerned, the Transparency and Access to Government Information Act was passed in 2003 establishing the right of citizens' access to public information.

On the issues of checks and balances and political equity, article 42 of the electoral law of 2007 forbids political parties, pre-candidates, candidates, leaders or members of a political party (as well as any individual or corporation) to hire radio or television slots aimed at influencing citizens' electoral preferences. It also forbids the broadcasting of electoral spots produced in a foreign country. Political parties, pre-candidates and candidates are allowed to broadcast advertisements aimed at getting votes through radio and television, by means of free slots assigned only by the State through the Federal Electoral Institute.

In the specific area of government communication provisions, the electoral law defines the limits of official advertising related to policy announcements or in favour of a party candidate during elections. In order to avoid the advantage of any governmental promotion with electoral purposes; the law (article 347) prescribes that during federal and local electoral campaigns – and until the end of polling day – all government advertising in the media is off limits. The only exception is for spots related to education, or health and civil protection in case of a national emergency.

## ***The media during the liberalization and democratization periods***

The way the media adapted itself to political change and pluralism – especially in television – was a reaction to the market and a profit matter, rather than a political commitment to liberty or democracy.<sup>5</sup>

Until the late 1990s, the media had kept a respectful and subordinated attitude towards the presidential communication strategy and blindly accepted government's definition of the public agenda.<sup>6</sup> However, gradually the government began to yield to the media the monopoly on the definition of the public agenda it had held for so many years. In this sense, Mexico went from a situation where the media were subordinated to the government (during the 70 years of the PRI's time in power) to one of interest collusion during the democratic period. The partnership now showed a peculiar feature since government power began to be subservient to private media interests (Carreño, 2007). Furthermore, with its harsh criticism and severe judgement of the first achievements of democratization, the media contributed to public apathy and disenchantment regarding change.<sup>3</sup>

The media landscape changed with the years, in terms of budgets, audience and circulation, a considerable transformation that can be observed in the past two decades; ownership concentration continued to show almost the same features.

Television has – by far – the largest media audience, and the vast majority of the population receives its political information from this source (Gómez & Sosa, 2011).

According to the figures provided by the *Comisión Federal de Telecomunicaciones* [Broadcasting Federal Commission], in 2009 Televisa had 257 concessions<sup>7</sup> across the country (55.7%); Televisión Azteca, 180 (39%). The remaining small media companies had 24 (5.3%) (Gómez & Sosa, 2011).

Mexican public service television plays only a marginal role in the country's television diet. The two main public stations, Once TV and Channel 22, reach less than 2 per cent of the nationwide audience. Both stations heavily emphasize cultural programming, which has a relatively small social impact (Gómez & Sosa, 2011).

In Mexico, newspaper readership figures are not high. However, the country still boasts an impressive number of print outlets: over 800, including 279 daily newspapers. According to the *Padrón Nacional de Medios Impresos* [National Registry of Print Media], subordinate to the Secretary of the Interior, there are 823 publications with a daily circulation of 6.16 million: 57.75 copies per 1,000 persons (Gómez & Sosa, 2011).



In 2008, 43 per cent of the population received information about political matters from reading newspapers; 50 per cent less than those whose main source of information was television (ENCUP, 2008). The national press adjusted to political change and some readers shifted to the emerging democratic press (Gómez & Sosa, 2011).

Radio broadcasting gradually lost its role as the main source of information for Mexicans from its peak in the 1960s. However, during the democratization process, radio underwent a significant rebirth as a news source and, above all, as a forum for political experts' analysis. It also featured more pluralism and less government bias than television.

Due to its mixture of private and public ownership, radio broadcasting has grown considerably in recent years, and nowadays 51 per cent of the population tunes in to radio stations as its main source for political information (Gómez & Sosa, 2011).

Although it almost tripled between 2005 and 2011, internet penetration has remained low in Mexico. In mid-2009, Mexico had 27.2 million internet users, just over 25 per cent of the population. By 2011, there were an estimated 34.9 million users and 20.9 million social network users (IBOPE, 2010).

The internet has emerged as a new tool for activism; civil society organizations, citizens, media, politicians and activists have taken advantage of its interactivity to make their voices heard. Social networks are becoming a powerful and effective political means to air civil society's demands and opinions. Internet campaigns are beginning to put pressure on traditional media to tackle topics that otherwise they would not cover. The movements *Internet Necesario* (internet necessary) of 2009 and *Voto Nulo* (void vote) of 2009 are examples of this kind of activism.

## Government communication in democratic times

Canel and Sanders define *government communication* in Chapter 1 as 'the public institution's role, practice, aims and achievements in communication. Its primary goal is executive in the service of a political rationale.' According to this definition, it can be said that during the first twelve years of Mexican democracy, there was not a pattern in government communication. We argue that two different approaches were taken to government communication: first, during President Fox's administration, the defence of political liberties and transparency was taken to be a cornerstone of the government-media relationship; second, a control-from-above strategy towards communication duties (including government's relationship with the press) characterized President Calderón's administration.<sup>8</sup>

## ***The organizational structure***

In the first three and a half years of President Fox's government (2001–4), the structure of the Social Communication Office (the key government communication office) was similar to that of previous administrations, with one exception: during the hegemonic PRI party regime this office managed the entire government agencies' budget; once the PAN took power, the amounts of money assigned to the government's advertising were decentralized. At the outset of his administration, President Fox decided to hand over budget responsibility to government agencies.

The Social Communication Office worked in seven areas:

- *Media monitoring and press clippings* was in charge of following the news about the president and his government, as well as issuing a daily summary of the most important news published in media across the country. It also provided analysis and recommendations and had the task of measuring the impact of the president's message in the media.
- *National press*. Divided into three areas, this unit had the following tasks: looking after journalists who covered the president's agenda, providing them with all the necessary resources (videos, recordings, speeches, etc.) to carry out their work; coordinating relationships with local media; and meeting the travelling requirements of the media staff during the president's national and international trips.
- *International press*. This unit was in charge of issuing a daily news summary of the most significant world media. It received information from Mexican embassies and acted as a public relations office whose main task was to assist in the foreign press correspondents' assignments.
- *Radio and television*. This area worked on the relationship with the electronic media and also managed the media requests for interviews with the president.
- *Interinstitutional relations*. This unit was set up in 2004 in order to unify government communication offices' outputs in a shared vision so as to transmit a consistent government message.
- *Speech*. This unit was responsible for presidential speeches and public statements such as lectures, addresses, as well as articles and books.

- *Spokesperson.* The office was set up in 2005 specifically to prepare all the information for the daily press conferences as well as the spokesperson's activities.

The Office was allowed a yearly budget of 139,488,771 pesos (US\$9,963,484) and had 110 employees on its payroll. The government expenses in advertising amounted to 733 million pesos (US\$56,384m) in 2005 and 860.2 million pesos (US\$66.54 million in 2006 (Fundar & 'Article 19', 2011).

During President Calderón's administration, the structure of the Social Communication Office remained almost untouched; nevertheless, the political rationale of communication and the relationship with the press drastically changed. In the formal structure, few changes were made: the president decided to eliminate the position of spokesperson, and the Speech-Writing Office was not part of the Social Communication Office as in Fox's presidency, but of the president's staff. Offices, such as the Interinstitutional Relations and Analysis, were given less relevance than they had during President Fox's administration.

The Social Communication Office of the Calderón's presidency regained control over the entire governmental budget assigned to advertising. Furthermore, the Regulation Office of the Secretary of the Interior, which controls government agencies' media expenditure, came under the orders of the president's Social Communication Office so that the presidency could manage directly the monetary resources that each secretary spent on their media advertising budget, as was the case during the PRI era. The Office had 140 employees and a budget of 125,465,131 pesos (US\$9,651,163) in 2011, which in 2012 increased to 155,515,837 pesos (US\$11,962,756). The government's advertising expenses are shown in Table 13.1.

## **Government advertising expenses in Calderón's administration**

### ***Vicente Fox's communication strategy for new political times***

President Fox decided to implement an open leadership in which freedom (including freedom of speech) became the hallmark of his administration. His communication strategy was aimed at meeting the information requests of the media and public opinion agendas; at the same time making it clear to the media the priorities set out in the government's agenda, such as housing, medical care, education and democracy.

During his first years in office, President Fox's media agency had four coordinators in charge. The first coordinator of social communication,

**TABLE 13.1** Government advertising expenses in Calderón's administration

Year	Million US dollars
2007	136,230
2008	266,238
2009	398,923
2010	350,962

Source: Fundar and "Article 19", (2011) *Estudio sobre el abuso del gasto gubernamental en publicidad* [Report on the Abuse of Government Advertising Expenditure].

Martha Sahagún, concentrated on working on public relations with media representatives at all levels. She also played the difficult task of reversing practices of the authoritarian regime such as control over the media and deals with the top hierarchy of the media duopoly.

The second coordinator of social communication was Francisco Ortiz, one of the presidential campaign strategists who contributed to Vicente Fox's victory in the 2000 elections. He focused mistakenly on government marketing, and was unable to get the expected results.<sup>9</sup> He was replaced by Rodolfo Elizondo (another presidential campaign consultant), whose task was to coordinate the communication strategy for the president's message as well as in all the executive branch agencies; this with the purpose of avoiding the risk of having a loose central coordination strategy.

Sahagún, Ortiz and Elizondo kept their former political campaign staffs, groups from different professional backgrounds, most of whom had no training in institutional communication.

In 2003, President Fox decided to appoint someone who could get across his political message and conduct a more substantial dialogue with both the media and the public. He appointed Alfonso Durazo, a lawyer and his private secretary, as Social Communication coordinator, he was also in charge of speech-writing and played the spokesman's role in exceptional cases. Durazo implemented a new staff recruitment criteria based on communication skills and professional credentials.

In July 2004, the president appointed Rubén Aguilar, a sociologist and the former president's private secretary chief of staff, as head of the Social Communication Office, and asked him to redesign the communication strategy with the aim of enhancing the presence of the government's agenda in the media. The new plan focused on increasing the flow of government

information and a permanent and fluent contact with the media. In other words, Aguilar clearly established as an aim of his office to present the president's stand on diverse issues in such a way as to help him advance his agenda.

The spokesman took care of two crucial functions in crafting the presidential message: the Social Communication Office and the Speech-Writing Area. His team was made up of communication experts in various media areas as well as a high-level group of social scientists who carried out the speech-writing and press analysis tasks.

Aguilar decided to follow the White House Press Office's practice of holding a daily press conference. Thus began a tradition of responsiveness to media requests to answer their questions regarding breaking news and crises. This practice turned out to be a very effective way to release information on government programmes and policies and to make an impact on the media agenda.

If at the beginning of his term President Fox's overexposure to the media badly damaged his image (since the press opted for a negative framing of the democratic change and there was no drive-belt in the president–press relationship), by sharing media exposure with his spokesman, he managed to obtain for the president a strong voice that spoke to the media at all levels – from reporters to owners of the press and opinion leaders, as well as leaders of social organizations.

### ***Felipe Calderón: Returning to the previous communication pattern***

When President Felipe Calderón won the elections in 2006 he took a different approach to communication. In contrast with President Fox's concern to build an efficient communication strategy giving relevance to a spokesperson and counting on communication specialists, Calderón relied on himself for strategy design as well as for message delivery. Also communication priorities and recruitment criteria differed from that of his predecessor: Calderón decided to focus his agenda on the war against crime and to change some rules in the relationship with the press.

His first coordinator of social communication, Max Cortázar, failed to devise a communications strategy to promote the president's agenda throughout the major media outlets.<sup>10</sup> He was the only authority vested by the president with power to interact at a senior level with media owners and managers; he also developed a hierarchical relationship with the reporters that covered the president's activities even arguing with them if he considered their coverage to be critical.

During Cortázar's time in office, loyalty was the central parameter for recruitment; thus, most of the staff in the Social Communication Office were young people who had worked with him during Felipe Calderón's presidential campaign but had no academic credentials or professional training to carry out the tasks demanded.

Up to 2010, the government used spokespeople only in exceptional situations. The persons assigned to these tasks were the responsible politician in each Secretary of State and not communication professionals. That same year, the president appointed Alejandro Poiré as spokesperson for Mexico's national security strategy against drug trafficking and organized crime, and Alejandra Sota as the Social Communication Coordinator. Once in office, the latter raised the academic level of her staff, although they had no professional background in the area of communication.

In November 2011, the then Secretary of the Interior died in an accident and the president replaced him with his security spokesman. Calderón also decided to revive the role of a permanent presidential spokesperson, and Alejandra Sota was his choice; from then on, press conferences were held only for the government's position on controversial issues (e.g. the first results of the investigation into the plane accident). However, communication's crucial aspects were not under Sota's control but Poire's (the new Secretary of the Interior); for all purposes, he was considered the real head of government communication. When Poire was appointed Secretary of the Interior, he maintained responsibility for all important government communication duties.

## Conclusion

In countries with a long-standing democratic tradition, government communication agencies are taken for granted, because they already have a long-standing record and only need to modify, *mutatis mutandi*, certain functions to meet the demands required by political change. In contrast, newly established democracies need a gradual institutional design, as well as new structures and functions, to assure accurate and efficient government communication.

Accountability (a primary requirement in any democracy) requires an institutional framework in order to communicate what the government stands for: its self-definition and rationale. When this is missing, the rules become murky and give place to misunderstandings in the messages conveyed. If these issues are not properly handled, non-democratic practices, such as biased reporting or inadequate coverage, will reappear.

In a communication strategy, the learning process turns out to be expensive, especially in the context of a government–adversarial relationship with the

media and powerful interest groups, as was the case in President Fox's administration. In spite of this, the strategy of publicizing the objectives and the reasons behind the government's actions worked well in the medium and long term. At the end of the administration – with regards to its relationship with the media – the government had advanced in establishing efficient practices more in line with democratic principles.<sup>11</sup>

President Calderón, however, decided to return to the old hierarchical relationship with the media and made important changes in his own communication strategy. Calderón focused his agenda on the war against crime; in doing so, he diminished the relevance of other really outstanding achievements of his administration such as, for example, the success in handling the economy, health-care programmes and the education budget. The president never relied on an official voice vis-à-vis the press; and when he came to rely on it, it was too late. There are costs of confining the Social Communication coordinator to a subordinate role and in this case the PAN lost the 2012 presidential election.

Mexico's democratic governments have so far been unable to deliver a communication strategy to manage efficiently the presidential message. This, we argue, is due to at least three main facts: one is the tense relationship with the media and the impact it had on the negative framing given by the press to the democratic change; the second, are the learning costs of building new institutions; and third, – and perhaps the most important one – is the inability to connect with the public and to develop a positive perception regarding the achievements of democracy.

## Notes

- 1 We wish to thank Bella Mischne for helping us with the review of the final English version of this chapter, and Marcela Pineda for reviewing the first English version and for her comments on this chapter.
- 2 President Alemán (1946–52) dealt personally with the supervision process of the introduction of television to the country. He was already O'Farril's (one of Televisa's owners) partner in the radio business and tried to centralize, unsuccessfully, in O'Farril's hands the control of this new media. Alemán worked quite closely with Telesistema Mexicano, the new broadcasting enterprise in which he was a non-official partner (Fernández Christlieb, 1991). As a family business, power is bequeathed from generation to generation and this was the case of Alemán's son, Miguel Jr, who combined his political career with his private administration duties. He was Televisa's CEO until 1998, when he left his senior management position to contend for the Veracruz state governorship.
- 3 It is the most important Latin American media monopoly; it was inaugurated as Telesistema Mexicano (Mexican Telesystem, and renamed 'Televisa' in 1973).

- 4 The addition to this decree authorizes the license holders a tax payment for the use of the air space for commercial purposes instead of granting the State 12 per cent of the daily transmission time it had before the reform.
- 5 A good example of the media approach is the coverage displayed during President Fox's administration. Not only was he severely criticized for his performance in office and his style of government, his personal life was also subject to unprecedented and relentless scrutiny.
- 6 For many decades, Mexico lived in a political system in which any major policy decision was not taken without the president's blessing: he (and it has always been 'he') had control over his party, over the leaders of the corporate power structure, over most opposition parties and over the media. He had control over the expressions of all relevant actors of the public sphere. Everyone knew the rules of the game and acted profitably within them.
- 7 Concessions refer to the licenses given by the State for the use the air space with commercial purposes.
- 8 President Calderón opted for a similar approach to PRI's relationship with the press, given that President Fox's liberalization practices had failed.
- 9 An example of this was the programme *Chambatel* in which the unemployed called a specific number provided by the government to get a job. The programme did not meet public expectations and this impacted negatively on the government's reputation.
- 10 It was more profitable for the media to cover crime issues, such as drug dealing and insecurity, because they were more attractive to the public than the other emblematic programmes of Calderón's administration.
- 11 The daily morning conference provided a forum for the secretaries and senior officials to announce the most relevant issues in their administration fields. In this task, the spokesperson worked as the coordinator of a comprehensive agenda on government communication.

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# 14

## Government communication in Singapore

*Terence Lee*

*Singapore has most of the trappings of democracy including a parliamentary system of government, an elected president, universal suffrage and regular, free and accurately counted elections. However, certain draconian laws, controls on political participation as well as measures limiting civil and political rights and freedom of the press, mean that Singapore is to some extent – critics vary on the degree – an authoritarian state.*

MAUZY & MILNE, 2002, p. 128

### **Introduction: Singapore media and its political context**

**O**n 1 November 2005, Singapore's Senior Minister (SM) and former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong defended criticisms over press freedom in Singapore in a speech to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the free metropolitan tabloid *Today*. In response to a report by Paris-based media watchdog Reporters without Borders (2005), which ranked Singapore 140 out of 167 countries in the 2005 Press Freedom Index, Goh's riposte was that the hypothesized correlation between a free press and democratic freedoms

and, by extension, the guarantee of good governance or economic prosperity, did not hold or cannot be proven. As he noted in his speech,

having our media play the role as the fourth state cannot be the starting point for building a stable, secure, incorrupt and prosperous Singapore. The starting point is how to put in place a good government to run a clean, just and efficient system [ . . . ] Even though Singapore is now more developed and our population better educated, it remains crucial for Singapore to maintain our unique and tested system of political governance and media model. They have worked well. (Goh Chok Tong, cited in Peh, 2005)

According to Goh, although the four original Association of South East Asian (ASEAN) countries – Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines – were all ranked ahead of Singapore in terms of press freedom, Singapore's economic and societal success proved that the government's media policy of control had worked well. While rejecting the 2005 Press Freedom Index – and indeed, all subsequent media indices – Goh cited Singapore's high rankings in economic freedom (by the Washington DC-based Heritage Foundation) and very low corruption measurement (by Berlin-based Transparency International) to make his point that press freedom did not necessarily translate to 'a clean and efficient government or economic freedom and prosperity' (Peh, 2005). Furthermore, he argued that 'press freedom must be practised with a larger sense of responsibility and the ability to understand what is in or not in [Singapore's] national interests' (Goh, cited in Peh, 2005). Although Singapore's ranking in the Press Freedom Index has since improved slightly to 136 in 2010, the Singapore government's rejection of its understanding of the subject of 'freedom' has had the effect of negating the influence of the Press Freedom Index and indeed, any other socio-cultural global indices.

As a former British Crown colony, the Parliamentary Republic of Singapore inherited much of the Westminster system of government, with citizens tasked with electing their members of parliament and a president with custodial powers over the finances of the state every five and six years respectively. Historically, general elections in Singapore have been non-events, with the incumbent People's Action Party (PAP) government typically returned to power before the polls are even conducted because the overwhelming majority of seats are not contested. As a result, unlike Great Britain, the small city-state of Singapore, inhabited by a mere 5 million strong population (as at 2010), has been ruled as a single-party nation since independence in 1965 by the PAP. Singapore has attracted much global attention since then because it is a shining economic beacon in the Asia-Pacific region and globally, with an unemployment rate of 2.1 per cent (as at June 2011), and an approximate

US\$45,000 per capita gross domestic product (GDP) (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2011).

Even John Kampfner, journalist, author and chief executive of 'Index on Censorship', one of the world's leading organizations that probes abuses of freedom of expression, acknowledges the tremendous success story of Singapore by calling it a 'comfortable model', where citizens seem contented to trade media cum communicative freedom with economic freedom (Kampfner, 2009, p. 17). While questioning Singapore's social and cultural vulnerabilities, especially in the increased clamour for greater cultural and political space from younger and more globally networked Singaporeans, Kampfner is troubled by the extent to which the Singapore model of media and cultural management has become accepted not just by Singaporeans who have grown accustomed to authoritarian rule, but also by others elsewhere. As he rhetoricizes:

Most people – Singapore citizens, international businesses, foreign governments – had a vested interest in preserving the status quo. [ . . . ] Even more horrifying is the thought that plenty more people around the world, irrespective of their political culture, have also been contentedly anaesthetised. Singapore may be the home of the trade-off in its purest form, but are we all more Singaporean than we realise? (Kampfner, 2009, p. 39)

While Kampfner's analysis is premised broadly on the notion and meaning of freedom and liberty in the postmodern world, his description of Singapore as 'the home of trade-offs in its purest form' provides a rather provocative point of departure for this chapter, which analyses government communication in Singapore.

## **An authoritarian premise for communication**

The view that the media should subscribe to what the government perceives as its national interests is an immediate consequence of what has been described by many observers as the authoritarian style of Singapore's founding father Lee Kuan Yew, who sagaciously consolidated various independent and political party-based press outlets into a single press conglomerate, the Singapore Press Holdings (SPH). SPH is listed on the Singapore Stock Exchange, but majority owned and controlled by the government's investment arm, Temasek Holdings. Lee Kuan Yew declared back in the 1960s that 'no one is free to use the Singapore press to sabotage or thwart the primacy of purpose of an elected government' (cited in Seow, 1998, p. 27). Convinced that a purely Western model of democracy would undermine ethnic and social

harmony in Singapore's fragile multicultural society, the principle of a tame and compliant media has largely been maintained since Singapore attained independence from British rule in 1965 (Lee & Willnat, 2009, p. 93).

Further drawing on Singapore's racial and religious diversity, the early leaders determined that the democratic rights and freedoms of Singaporeans must be restricted, especially during general elections, to avoid heightening political activity and emotion (Lee & Willnat, 2009, p. 93). After all, elections in Singapore are not held to determine who is to rule the country, but to bring together 'a body consisting of the most gifted, innovative, well-educated and experienced men and women, who can offer Singapore a good, achievement-oriented and efficient government' (Vasil, 2004, p. 110). The corollary is that those deemed irresponsible and adversarial, including politicians who have 'little compunction in inciting racial and religious hatred, confrontation and conflict for political gains are kept out of parliament as far as possible' (Vasil, 2004, p. 110).

Indeed, as Mauzy and Milne (2002) have alluded to (in the opening quote to this chapter), controls to limit political participation, even using a government-controlled media to limit civil and political rights, make Singapore a fascinating case study of government communication. On the one hand, government communication in Singapore could easily be branded as 'authoritarian', as many observers have done, because of the broad absence of alternative viewpoints available in public discourse. On the other hand, the broader Singapore media landscape appears as open as any other Western democratic society, with a plethora of global media choices ranging from broadcast channels to printed material (newspapers and magazines) to mostly open ultra high-speed broadband internet access. The advent of web 2.0 from the mid-2000s, captured most prominently by social media with the rise of the blogosphere and a series of online social networking sites, has further broadened the availability of alternatives and made it more difficult to describe Singapore's degree of media and political openness. While there are vagaries or subtleties to the appearance of openness (such as the structures of ownership of domestic media outlets and tacit controls of the internet space), the real illiberal twist lies in the fact that the Singapore government insists that only elected members of parliament, particularly those who form the government of the day, can be considered the embodiment of democratic expression. With the press neither granted the space nor the freedom to perform watchdog or independent commentary roles that relate to domestic politics, they are limited to reporting daily events and reproducing government messages. This is not just a firm rejection of the principle of the media as the fourth estate, but an endorsement of a government having the first and final word on all matters of national interest. Such is the status of politics – and indeed of political and government communication – in Singapore.

## (Re)defining government communication

While the term 'political communication' broadly refers to 'purposeful communication about politics' (McNair, 1995, p. 4), the term 'government communication' is more precise as it deals with the way(s) in which the executive arms of governments communicate with its people (Canel & Sanders, 2012). In the case of Singapore, government communication deals primarily with how the PAP government's core team – comprising the incumbent prime minister and his Cabinet – communicates its central messages to its people. Although the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA) is the official mouthpiece of the government by virtue of its name and mission to inform and communicate to all Singaporeans, central government communication often emanates directly from the prime minister's office, often via an official press release or sometimes via the prime minister's personal press secretary. Many other key messages are delegated to individual government ministries, departments and statutory bodies, to be announced to the media by full ministers or junior ministers, known as ministers of State in Singapore.

In this regard, government communication in Singapore is direct and straightforward, sticking largely to the standard transmission model of communication where messages are sent from sender to receiver via a medium (or the media). Noises or interruptions to message transfers are typically either absent or are obscured from the mainstream audience, which comprises the majority in Singapore. Where it gets hazy and problematic, however, is at the conceptual or ideological level. This is because the media system in Singapore is itself a function of political communication and cultural control with most, if not all, domestic media outlets controlled directly (or indirectly) by the political masters so that government communication is enhanced and enabled by mostly compliant or non-obstructive reporting of government messages (Lee, 2010). As this chapter will go on to elucidate, compliant and one-sided reporting was the order of the day during Singapore's 2006 and 2011 general elections, despite the growing influence and impact of online and social media. Government communication in Singapore is maintained and enhanced by the fact that the flagship daily newspaper in Singapore, the SPH-owned *Straits Times* (ST) English language daily, has dominated public discourse and carried the beacon of government messages in a top-down and tightly controlled manner since the 1960s. Messages from the PMO and the various ministries are largely delivered unfiltered or unadulterated as ST reporters, journalists and editors dutifully paraphrase and spin government press releases and ministerial comments without the presence of opposing voices. This same practice is emulated by the mainstream broadcast media led by Singapore's MediaCorp television and radio broadcaster. The fact that

Singapore's mainstream media outlets, led by the ST and the MediaCorp group, constantly and consistently echo the government's messages is no longer considered remarkable. Most Singaporeans have simply come to accept this as a fact of life (Lee, 2011, p. 134).

This chapter examines some of the contemporary mechanics of government communication in Singapore under the Lee Hsien Loong administration (from 2005 to the present). It looks not only at the contemporary tools utilised by the Singapore government to mediate its messages to the people via the use of feedback mechanisms such as its own in-house Feedback Unit,<sup>1</sup> it also considers recent challenges to its approaches brought about by the new media (such as the most popular social networking site Facebook as well as other citizen journalism blogs). While most previous studies on politics and the media in Singapore have centred on the tightness of the Singapore government's control over the flow of communication and its increasingly sophisticated and subtle way of controlling not just the media, but also broader public discourse, there is a need to reassess where governing communication in Singapore is headed following political changes, especially after the general election of May 2011.

## Great Singapore spin or substance?

As early as 2001, Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (elected prime minister in 2011) embarked on what could be seen as a 'charm offensive' strategy by fleshing out some of his ideas – and ideals – in public speeches. In doing so, he demonstrated an awareness that a new approach towards governmental communication was needed in Singapore. In a speech that argued for the importance of a global as well as a regional perspective on policy making, Lee articulated his admiration for the 'Great Communicator', late former US President Ronald Reagan who was well known for using one-liners to persuade the public instead of spelling out policy details (Gibbs, 2004, p. 39). Lee also echoed the former British PM Tony Blair's strategy of having 'a series of eye-catching initiatives' to keep him positively placed in the public eye (Blair cited in Stephens, 2004, p. 135). And, again in January 2004, several months before he took up the office of prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong gave a preview of his premiership by declaring that Singapore will 'open up further' by promoting 'further civic participation' (Lee, 2004a). This 'promise' of a more open Singapore was made at the Thirty-Fifth Anniversary Dinner of the Harvard Club in Singapore in January 2004 and arguably has a strong bearing on the subsequent shape and form of government communication in Singapore. At the time, Lee's speech seemed long on rhetoric but short on content, highlighting the paradox between building a dynamic society and

the state's desire to micromanage citizen participation on a broad range of issues. However, with the benefit of hindsight, especially following the 2011 general election, Lee's promise could be said to have gradually materialized over the course of seven years up to 2011 during his prime ministership. This process of change, however, was by no means a smooth path, with twists and turns along the way and with technological shifts playing a major role in the rethinking of how communication can and should be governed in Singapore.

The early period of Lee's premiership from August 2004 was typified by the employment of spin, or the use creative or propagandistic styles of communication, in Singapore's government–people relations. This emphasis on style over substance can be observed by the increased use of rhetoric during the early years of his premiership. The Harvard Club speech itself, littered with phrases such as 'open up further' and 'further civic participation', was itself a case in point. As I have elucidated in an earlier analysis of the space and discourse of civil society in Singapore, Lee employed 'gestural politics' in his early premiership years to paint an enlightened and democratic picture of Singapore to appeal to its two key constituents, the Singaporean voter and global foreign investors (Lee, T., 2005). Gestural politics is characterized by the use of populist terms like 'openness' and 'inclusiveness' to display the 'liberal' gestures of an otherwise illiberal regime (Lee, T., 2005, p. 135). Not unlike the 'catchy' slogans of Blairite's 'New Labour', Lee's reign and his approach to government communication up until the 2006 general election were characterized by gestural politics and 'spin'. His further talk of engendering an 'open and inclusive Singapore' during his 'swearing in' as prime minister on 12 August 2004 (Lee, 2004b), the entitling of his 2005 Budget speech as 'Singapore, a land of opportunity' (2005 Budget speech) and his 2005 National Rally speech, 'A Vibrant Global City Called Home', became the early hallmarks of his premiership (see Lee, H. L., 2004b, 2005a and 2005b). By marrying his oratorical skills with spin via the repetition of key political buzz-words, PM Lee was able to finesse political rhetoric into everyday public discourse (Lee, T., 2005, p. 150). The *Straits Times*' columnist, Ignatius Low, observed this same phenomenon when he pondered:

Every now and then, a new buzzword seizes Singapore. In true Singapore fashion, ministers' speeches become peppered with it, it starts appearing in newspaper headlines and the civil service organizes entire workshops to discuss it. (Low, 2005)

By normalizing such words in everyday discourse, PM Lee's premiership between 2004 to 2006 provided Singaporeans with the sense and perception that there was indeed a new message, with a new style of leadership and



communication to come. Whether or not there was something new was often moot.

The first battle between spin and substance in government communication occurred during this period when the whole of Singapore embarked on what became known as the 'Great Casino Debate' between March 2004 and April 2005 (although one could argue that the flow-on discussions, especially for those opposing the opening of casinos in Singapore, continue). The national debate on whether Singapore should lift a long-standing ban on casinos became the major point of contention during Lee's first year as prime minister, and showcased his thinking on how government communication would be conducted. The possibility of a casino was first raised in March 2004 by former Trade and Industry Minister, George Yeo, as a proposal to boost Singapore's lacklustre economy. The debate entered into public discourse after PM Lee's maiden National Day Rally Speech in August 2004. Acknowledging the controversy a casino decision would cause, PM Lee called for Singaporeans to speak up and make their thoughts on the issue known via the government's official Feedback Unit (now known as REACH). He used his speech on the subject to urge a 'mindset change' among Singaporeans and to be more 'forward-looking' (Lee, 2004c). While remaining non-committal about the eventual decision, PM Lee announced the government's 'Request-For-Concepts' invitation to interested parties in December 2004 (Lee, H. L., 2005b). In the same month, an anti-casino civic group, Families Against the Casino Threat in Singapore (FACTS), launched its website and announced that more than 20,000 people had signed an online petition against having a casino in Singapore (Lee, 2008, p. 178).

On 18 April 2005, despite the fact that the casino debate had become deeply polarizing with an almost even split between those for and against, PM Lee announced his government's approval for building not one casino, but two mega-size 'Integrated Resorts' in Singapore, lifting the ban on casinos in an unexpectedly emphatic manner (Lee, 2008, p. 179). The first and larger resort would be built in Marina Bay, and the second on the southern resort island of Sentosa. Measures introduced include a high entrance fee of S\$100 per day or \$2,000 per year for Singaporeans and a ban on gambling on credit (Lee, 2008, p. 179). The announcement of a decision – that many believed to have been determined prior to the consultation process – was well calibrated and designed to extract maximum media coverage and political mileage (see da Cunha 2010). It would demonstrate the PM's decisiveness and resoluteness in decision making while generating a feel-good outcome for Singapore's economy and boost the city-state's global image (Lee, 2008, p. 180). But more significantly, it was an excellent demonstration of the effects – and indeed, the defects – of government communication in Singapore in that the final decision would be one without any real consensus (and therefore seen as

'authoritarian'), but one that has been derived from some degree of open debate and consultation (and therefore presented as 'democratic'). The positive 'spin' to the 'Great Casino Debate' was PM Lee's conclusion that Singaporeans were able to have a rational and constructive public debate on controversial and serious issues (Lee, H. L., 2005b). The 'Great Casino Debate' – described as 'the mother of all consultations' by the Feedback Unit (2005, p. 65) – thus became the new showpiece for government communication as it began to lay claims about how it communicated, initiated and facilitated an open forum on a major national issue. The Feedback Unit's 2005 Year Book, titled *Shaping Our Home: Turning Ideas into Reality* commended Singaporeans for participating in the debate in a rational and constructive fashion, declaring 'the fact that so many Singaporeans had responded so actively to the idea of a casino was perhaps more significant than the final result' (Feedback Unit, 2005, p. 65). While this may be true, nowhere was it highlighted that the final decision was ultimately made on 'gut feeling' rather than on rationality. As the prime minister himself admitted: 'This is a judgement, not a mathematical calculation. We see the trends and feel the need to move' (Lee, H. L., 2005b cited in Lee, 2008, p. 181).

The 'Great Casino Debate' exposed major contradictions between Lee's call for greater consultation and the role that public feedback actually had in the final decision-making process. The government did not disclose how much weight public opinion was given in the final decision. If so, it would have shown how the government mediated between the competing tensions of a citizenry deeply polarized over the decision. It would have been difficult, if not downright impossible, to qualify or quantify how much of the feedback factored into the decision-making process. In addition, the rejection of various other approaches that might involve the increased participation of the citizenry – for instance, a referendum – precludes any form of government communication that would embody 'active citizenship' or genuine feedback (see da Cunha, 2010). In short, such contradictions reveal the government's reluctance to genuinely build consensus with the community. One could even argue that government communication actually means the imposition of the predetermined government point of view that goes through the organized gestures of a public debate.

The government sought to move on from the year-long casino debate by focusing only on the economic positives that would supposedly emerge from it and by indulging in 'self-triumphalism'. As the Feedback Unit's report concluded, 'the casino debate had demonstrated how the nation-building process and Asian values had combined to give rise to Singaporeans' desire to protect their society' (2005, p. 66). This bewildering statement alone points to the surfacing and widening gap between spin and substance or rhetoric and reality in government communication in Singapore. According to well-known

Singaporean social activist Alex Au, 'the "open and inclusive" promise, which is closely related to the "city-with-buzz" slogan that Singapore has adopted, is beginning to reach a point when it tips into ridicule' (Au cited in Chua, 2005). Instead of moving Singapore forward, the Great Casino Debate of 2004 to 2005 sparked the rise of a new cynicism which I would argue is a 'natural' outcome of going through the spin process. Similarly, Singaporean columnist, Warren Fernandez, observed an increase in public cynicism over what he refers to as growing 'feedback fatigue', exacerbated by the feeling that the government is merely paying 'lip service' to public comments and views (Fernandez, 2004). Yet, it was not until the general election of May 2011 that Singaporeans found their voices to generate sufficient noise to 'shout down the PAP government' (George, 2011, p. 145), and thus began the process of dismantling and recalibrating the hubristic and top-down approach to government communication in Singapore.

## **Recalibrating government communication: General election 2011 and beyond**

On 7 May 2011, politics in Singapore surprisingly came of age when a record number of 6 opposition members – out of a total of 97 seats – were elected into parliament at Singapore's twelfth general election since it attained independence in 1965. A 60.1 per cent of voters remained loyal to the PAP government and were happy to see the ruling party maintain its unbroken dominance. However, 39.9 per cent of voters, a record showing for the Opposition, desired alternative voices in parliament (Tan & Lee, 2011). These percentages are not reflected in the eventual parliamentary make-up since the simple plurality or 'first-past-the-post' electoral system – comprising an eclectic mix of multimember candidates known as Group Representation Constituencies (or GRCs) and the basic Single Member Constituencies (SMCs) – allowed the incumbent PAP to capture an overwhelming 81 out of 87 seats. A further three opposition candidates (comprising the best 'losers') enter parliament via Singapore's unique Non-Constituency MP (NCMP) scheme (Lam, 2011, p. 174; Tan, 2011). While the records registered by the Opposition at the election would be deemed irrelevant and unremarkable in any liberal democracy, what was significant at this event was that the Singaporean electorate – known variously until then as an apathetic, frightened and socio-politically disengaged group – 'spoke up' and made their voices heard in virtually all mediated channels possible (see Lee, 2010).

The 2011 election saw record circulation of mainstream newspapers, with the *Straits Times* registering an increase in daily sales of 5.1 per cent

or 17,500 copies over the campaign period (Lee, 2011, p. 141). The websites of the SPH group performed remarkably well with a total of 116 million page views and about 7.9 million video views on its key sites: *straitstimes.com*, *Stomp*, *AsiaOne*, *The Straits Times RazorTV*, *Zaobao.com* and *omy.sg* (Lee, 2011, p. 141). The internet went up another notch at the election with video uploads, more 'tweets' (via Twitter), more Facebook profiles and 'likes', more citizen journalism reports, blog entries, posts and comments and, by the same token, more online vitriol on new candidates (George, 2011). Not only were Singaporeans using, consuming and 'prodUsing' both the traditional and online media in greater depth and degree (George, 2011); they were also attending on-site election rallies in droves (Chong, 2011, pp. 116–17), and publicly articulating their thoughts on a range of personal and national issues.

Unlike previous elections where municipal issues and self-interests – led most prominently by upgrading and refurbishment of public housing estates that would translate to asset-enhancing benefits for home-owners – dominated, the 2011 election had a more nationalistic agenda where government mistakes and mishandling of national issues were top of the list. These were made manifest in issues such as the cost of living and an expanding income gap, housing affordability, inadequate national infrastructure and overcrowded public transport, ministerial budget overruns, the escape of a terrorist, immigration (mainly the increase in foreign population), all of which were topped off by highly paid ministers' lack of accountability (Tan, 2011; Barr, 2011). While most of these issues have existed in the past – particularly during the elections of 2001 and 2006 – the government could easily sidestep these issues via pork-barrelling tactics and promises of discounted or free estate upgrades. In addition, the government could employ communication strategies that involved the assiduous management and control of information such that most Singaporeans would never receive the full picture. This was the same strategy employed during the 'Great Casino Debate', although the sensitivity of the casino debate left a somewhat bitter after-taste that possibly was not quelled. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the fact that virtually all mainstream media outlets in Singapore could be relied upon to toe the official line or foreground government achievements, communicating the government's message verbatim, whether rightly or wrongly, was more than assured.

In 2011, however, government communication in Singapore came under unprecedented pressure with the flow of communication disrupted as soon as the election campaign started. Although the mainstream media led by the *Straits Times* continued to echo partisan biases and prescribed agendas in favour of the ruling PAP right up to the Nomination Day (Lee, 2011, p. 142), many Singaporeans diligently sought their versions of 'truth' via the internet and by

communicating about politics at the community/grassroots level. The internet was thus a major factor, not so much in actually transmitting new information, but rather in facilitating the search for corroborating facts and information, and also signifying that there can be an alternative (or alternatives).<sup>2</sup> This marked a certain shift in political consciousness among the Singapore populace. The general election of 2011 was a 'watershed', paving the way for Singapore to become a 'normal' democracy in which the ruling PAP is forced to heed the people's choices for genuine political consultation and participation, and with genuine alternative voices in parliament (Lam, 2011, p. 175).

The impact of the election on government communication in Singapore was seismic by both Singaporean and global standards. Barely one week after the polls, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, aged 87 and 70 respectively, resigned from the Cabinet. MM Lee, recognized as the founding father of modern Singapore stepped down after 52 years in Cabinet. Often compared to a towering Banyan Tree in Singapore politics, and known for his decisive, uncompromising and authoritarian brand of leadership which underpinned the country's rapid economic development and affluence, his retirement marked a new dawn in Singapore politics (Lam, 2011, p. 177). Shortly after the resignation of MM Lee and SM Goh, PM Lee retired three of the most unpopular ministers from his Cabinet: Raymond Lim, Mah Bow Tan and Wong Kan Seng who were responsible for missteps over public transportation, public housing and home security respectively. All three polled less than the PAP's national average of 60.1 per cent in their constituencies. Acknowledging that the weaker poll results were the motivating factor, PM Lee acted decisively in heeding the voters' voice by boldly getting rid of the weakest links in his Cabinet, and giving it a complete overhaul by bringing in two fresh faces: Heng Swee Kiat as Education Minister; and, Major-General Chan Chun Sing as Acting Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports (CDYS) and Minister of State for Information, Communication and the Arts.

As Lam Peng Er, a Singaporean political scientist, argues cogently in his analysis of the implications of the May 2011 election:

General Elections 2011 are significant for our understanding of political theory and practice beyond Singapore's shores. Social science literature on political change anticipates the democratization of a country after it attains affluence and has built up a burgeoning middle class. Right up till GE2011, Singapore has been considered an anomaly because it is a de-facto one-party state with uncompetitive elections and few opposition members of Parliament. GE2011 may pave the way to a more 'normal' democracy in Singapore in which there is greater representation of alternative voices in Parliament, and where the people fearlessly articulate and assert their preferences in policy formulation and implementation. (Lam, 2011, p. 178)

I would add that the social, cultural and political shifts that the 2011 election wrought have kick-started a recalibration of government communication in Singapore. In the preceding weeks of the polls, newly minted ministers were reported to be actively, even desperately, seeking feedback on issues ranging from construction of new housing apartments (housing), stresses and pressures of school-going children (education) to a prospective revision of ministerial salaries, among others. The new transport minister Lui Tuck Yew, for instance, was featured on mainstream, online and mobile media taking public buses and trains to better understand commuters' woes.<sup>3</sup> While the PAP government has clearly set in motion new strategies to recalibrate its approach to government communication into one that is able to connect and relay key messages to Singaporeans while demonstrating its ability to take on board criticisms and feedback, it needs to ensure that it does not buy (back) into privileging spin over substance. The overexposure of transport minister Lui and extensive blogging by PAP leaders could easily tip the balance and negate attempts by the government to claw back electoral support via a more organized mode of government communication. The government would do well to improve, recalibrate and manage its communication more consistently and sagaciously. This would mean consulting with an open mind as well as responding sincerely to public feedback.

## Conclusion

Just about every scholar who has analysed the state of the media, culture and politics in Singapore concludes that the nation will come under pressure to liberalize and embrace more democratic practices in the future. The reasons typically range from increased globalization to advances in communication technologies to the porous nature of the internet, all of which effectively weaken the grip of paternalism and authoritarianism in a society that is ironically one of the most economically and socially open in the world (Lee & Willnat, 2009, pp. 107–8). The advent of mass public internet access in the mid-1990s started the ball rolling, and the arrival of personal blogs and social networks in the mid-2000s has hastened this process far more quickly than these scholars, and the government, could have imagined.

This chapter effectively extends analyses of the state of Singapore media, communication and politics into the realm of government communication, an area so extensive and of such importance yet not many have sought to examine it. This is ironic in itself, but even more so in the case of Singapore where just about every facet of life revolves around the government to the extent that it has been described as a 'government-made' country (see Low, 2001). More so than many other contexts, the Singaporean public will never

lose its reliance on government communication and information because of this dependency (Graber, 2003, p. 5). While it is impossible to do justice to an entire nation's approach towards government communication, this chapter has sought to detail the shifts in the broader discourse in Singapore in recent times, particularly under the premiership of Lee Hsien Loong. As I have argued here, the problem in Singapore stems from a government that has gradually lost touch with the needs and aspirations of the people. This, I would venture to add, is caused to a large extent by the government's failure to communicate with the people.

The recalibration of Singapore's government communication approach(es) that relies less on spin, tokenism and a docile domestic media has started and is likely to gain momentum in the years ahead (post-2011). The signs of a communication style that speaks to the individual citizen as a thinking being and one with the rights of a citizen, instead of as a pure political subject, are already starting to show. During the week of 17 October 2011, government MPs took turns to address the subject of government–people relations in Singapore during a parliamentary sitting, with the general consensus a concession that the government had failed to communicate. One MP suggested that 'the Government has over the last few decades managed to leach all emotions out of public communications' (Indranee Rajah, cited in Ong, 2011). Indeed, the Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts, Yaacob Ibrahim, declared at the conclusion of the week-long debate in no uncertain terms: 'The Government will make a concerted effort to communicate better and reach out to a more diverse populace; it must evolve its communication approach and style' (cited in Ong, 2011). While acknowledging the need for the government to engage with social media platforms and listen to ground sentiments, the minister also emphasized that the key was not about increasing media access, but to enhance the quality of engagement. This message was echoed by the PAP chairman and Housing Minister Khaw Boon Wan at the party's annual convention on 27 November 2011 when he highlighted the need for the government to 'communicate and connect' with the people as one of the urgent issues to address (Khaw, 2011). The prime minister himself weighed in with a promise of a 'new PAP for a new era', one that would improve its 'outreach strategy' and 'consult Singaporeans more actively' (cited in Li, 2011).

In effect, the prime minister, various ministers and backbencher MPs have only recently enunciated what many concerned Singaporeans and Singapore-watchers have criticized and angst over for many years. It has become accepted wisdom that Singaporean authorities will have to change its government communication approach and style into a genuine two-way praxis, simply because an increasingly sophisticated citizenry and the coming-of-age of a new generation will demand it. The government can no

longer seek shelter from the relative safety of compliant citizens who are informed solely by a state-controlled media.

## Notes

- 1 In October 2006, the Singapore Government's Feedback Unit was rebranded 'REACH', which stands for 'reaching everyone for active citizenry@ home'. This coincided with the restructuring of the Feedback Unit to move beyond gathering public feedback. REACH is now the lead agency for engaging and connecting with citizens. REACH was also appointed as the Singapore government's e-engagement platform in January 2009. Available at [www.reach.gov.sg/](http://www.reach.gov.sg/) or on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/REACHSingapore](http://www.facebook.com/REACHSingapore).
- 2 The potential of the internet to offer alternative views in a Singapore election was first unveiled by a long-time gay activist and social commentator on his citizen journalism blog, [www.yawningbread.org](http://www.yawningbread.org). His news-breaking pictures of the massive hordes of Singaporeans participating in opposition election rallies during the 2006 general election became Singapore's equivalent of 'Wikileaks', and caught the blatantly pro-government mainstream media off-guard. The mainstream dailies were subsequently forced to publish more accurate reports on opposition activities. For more details of this episode, see Lee and Kan (2009).
- 3 See, for instance, a Yahoo report/blog post (dated 30 May 2011) on 'Transport Minister Lui Tuck Yew seen taking public transport'. (<http://sg.news.yahoo.com/blogs/singaporescene/transport-minister-lui-tuck-yew-seen-taking-public-074642807.html>). Since then, there have been several other reports on the minister's journeys on public transport at various times of the day.

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# 15

## The evolution of Chinese government communication: Towards transparent governance

*Steven Guanpeng Dong, Lina Yoon Park  
and Judy Chia-Wen Chang*

### Introduction

In 2001, China achieved what Jiang Zemin, president of the People's Republic of China from 1993 to 2003, referred to as key milestones in the country's pursuit of prosperity: winning the bid to host the 2008 Olympics and becoming a World Trade Organization member. These steps became crucial to China's integration in both the international community and the world economy, but also raised new social and political challenges. China's flourishing economy transformed all levels of Chinese society, including how it communicates, by impelling the government to accept changes it was reluctant to face.

China's government communication system is evolving along with an economic development that, by 2011, made China the second largest economy in the world. Just 30 years ago, China, considered a secretive, mysterious country, was the poster child of the Western idea of authoritarian communism. Soviet-style governance, where the government had absolute control over all aspects of life, and especially the flow of information, dominated the Middle

Kingdom and isolated it from the rest of the world. In the first three decades of Communist Party rule, before Deng Xiaoping, president between 1978 and 1992 and the reformer of China's economy, took power, China's economy was hobbled by the chaos of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, a decade of political upheaval led by Mao Zedong's Red Guards (Pan, 2008).<sup>1</sup>

China compromised control for a more profitable and open economy. In doing so, it is slowly and cautiously adapting to internationally accepted standards, not only in business, but also in media practices. As a result, the government faces new challenges from a public space exposed to a new media and social environment, where control of information is no longer feasible.

With one-third of China's 1.3 billion people having access to the internet and more than 1 billion using cell phones (China Internet Network Information Center, 2010), China faces new technologies that, for the first time, created a bridge between the government, the people and the outside world (Tai, 2006). Technology has become a vital source of information and a place for unprecedented public expression for those that can access it. These new forms of media remain closely monitored and censored by the Chinese government, based on the fear that an uncontrolled internet could become a danger for the long-term stability of the state (Dickie, 2007).

The rise of not only active information consumers, but also information creators, brought changes in China's party politics and influenced its communication strategies. These changes come from experimentation, as means to reach China's ultimate goal of maintaining the power of the existing system through economic development. In order to maintain such power in an environment in which no information can be hidden, the Chinese government is cautiously taking steps towards a model of openness and transparent governance, while maintaining a strong grip on media content.

While the development model of the West based on free capitalism, which leads to democracy, has been shaken by the financial crisis, the Chinese communist leadership provides an alternative version of how the world could work. China's new experimental economic model seems to show economic success is possible while monitoring and censoring media content.

## **Interplay of politics, government and media**

An observation of China's governance style and its impact on the media landscape is vital to understanding China's government communication and media. This chapter provides an overview of the interplay between politics, government and media, by looking at the Chinese political system, its media landscape and government communication system.

## ***China's political system and the media***

As a state where one single party has unchallengeable power, few, if any, issues affect China's present and future more than the nature of the ruling party and its government (Shambaugh, 2008). The Chinese Communist Party (CCP or Party), and the government are vertically integrated and extensively interlocked.

The core of the CCP is the Central Committee and at its centre, the Politburo Standing Committee, is China's most powerful policy and decision-making entity, comprised of the Party's nine most senior officials. The nine elected members have the power to recommend the leaders of the most influential bodies of the government – the National People's Congress (NPC), the State Council and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). The members of the Politburo Standing Committee, responsible for the country's macroeconomic development and political stability, generally simultaneously hold positions within the government.

At the time of writing, the structures of the Party and the government, which are expected to change by 2012, are as follows: at the top of the Party, and standing first in rank in the Politburo Standing Committee, is the General Secretary Hu Jintao, who also stands at the top of the government structure as the president or head of state (see Figure 15.1). His role as the president is to establish general policy and direction for the state. Meanwhile, the head of the administrative government and third in rank in the Politburo Standing Committee, Premier of the State Council, Wen Jiabao, executes implementation of policy and direction.

In terms of communication, in 2011 the Chinese Communication Chief, Li Changchun, ranks number five in the Politburo Standing Committee, but has *de facto* power surpassing his ranking (see Figure 15.1). Li can appoint the ministers responsible for the most important communication organs in the country (Martin, 2010). Therefore, the Politburo Standing Committee of the CPP is the highest body in charge of China's media and communication strategies.

Below the Politburo Standing Committee, the Party operates in a pyramidal power structure organized at state, provincial, municipality, county, town and village levels. The Party has 66.4 million members; on its bottom layer, there is a network of 3.51 million 'primary Party organizations' based in villages (Yin, 2010). The government also answers to the hierarchical pattern of a pyramid, in the order of president, premier, vice-premier, state council and its ministries, provincial, municipal and county governance.

Within the pyramidal structure, China's government is effectively divided into two parts – one central system and one local (Yin, 2010). The central administration of the government is composed of 49 state-level leaders, who

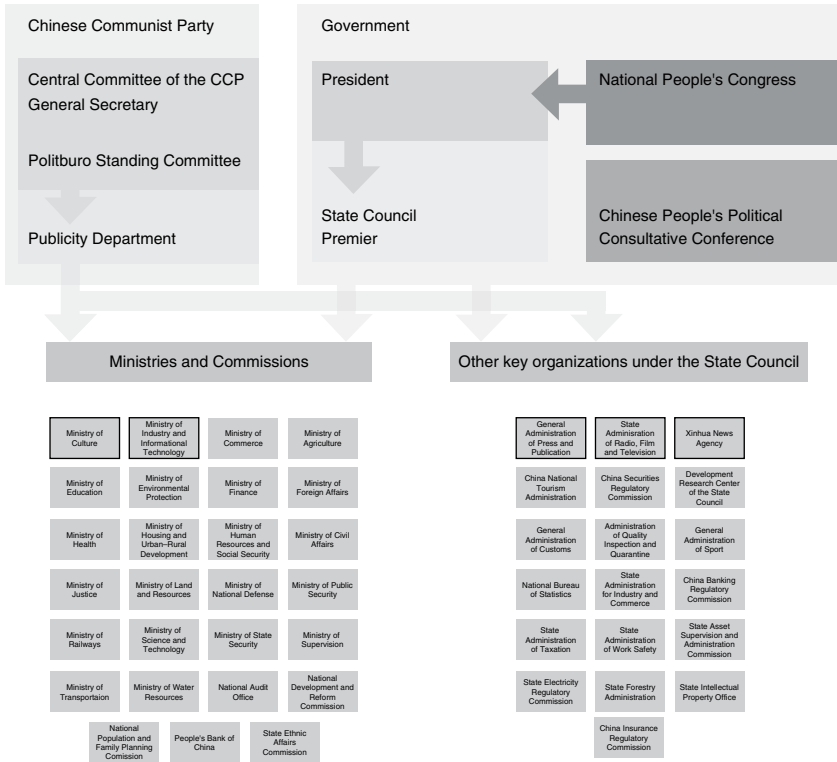


FIGURE 15.1 China's government structure and media entities

form the CCP Politburo, the NPC, the State Council and the CPPCC. The highest administrative body, the State Council, is a cabinet of about 50 people in charge of ministries and other key organizations led by the premier (Martin, 2010) (see Figure 15.1). Under the umbrella of the State Council, there are ministries and institutions,<sup>2</sup> which interpret and implement Chinese policy goals and are hierarchical at provincial and local levels (Yin, 2010). The NPC, the highest state body and the sole legislative house in China, has power over the State Council, because it can reject or accept proposed bills from the State Council and also elects the president, premier and cabinet-level officials selected by the Party (Martin, 2010). The NPC and the CPPCC, the most influential political advisory bodies, are the two organizations in China that make national level political decisions (Saich, 2004).

The Party and government structures remain closely paralleled (Mirsky, Guerrero & Wood, 2008). Party committees and representatives are present in government agencies as well as most organizations, including universities and foreign-owned enterprises (Saich, 2004). Although being a member of

the Party is not a requirement by law, most senior government officials are (Saich, 2004). However, non-Party members taking high-ranking positions in the government have been rising, including the Health Minister, the Science and Technology Minister and almost 50 per cent of the NPC's Vice Chairmen. There are eight other political parties<sup>3</sup> recognized in the system, but ultimately no other party approximates the power of the Communist Party in China (Martin, 2010).

### ***China's media landscape***

Adjusting to a more patent interconnection with the world, experimentation in government communication, as in all spheres of Chinese society, is prominent. It is considered the biggest and most successful experimentation of authoritarianism in the world (Pan, 2008). China often takes three steps forward and two steps back, in line with Deng's economic policy of experimentation with caution by crossing the river by feeling the stones (Kitissou, 2007).

In this experimentation process, China is moving towards transparency, forced by a revision of media governance and the emergence of new media. These first steps were triggered by the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, or SARS, in 2003, which led to the creation of a new system of government spokespeople (see Table 15.1). The dissemination of accurate information to the public became a priority, and SARS, a milestone of change in the government's approach to media management.

### ***Birth of China's government communication system and a 'new' journalism***

The spread of this international epidemic changed how the Chinese government approached communication with its 1.3 billion citizens (see Table 15.1). During the SARS outbreak, China's communication strategy of 'thought work',<sup>4</sup> based on information control and silence, was strained to deal with an increasingly open and global domestic audience with access to the internet. Instructions to suppress information at national and local levels and a lack of information from the government instigated a new network in the public sphere to provide information outside of the government-media framework. Mobile technology, informal channels of communication (e.g. email, chat rooms, social networks), in combination with sources outside of mainland China had made information control impossible (Dillon, 2009).



**TABLE 15.1** Overview of recent history of media in China

1949–78:	Media as ‘thought work’
1978:	Economic reform and opening up
1978–2003:	Commercialization, globalization and professionalization of the media
2003:	SARS outbreak
2003–6:	Post-SARS media revisions: government communication system with spokespeople and birth of ‘new’ journalism
2007:	Preparation for the 2008 Olympic Games: revisions towards transparent governance
2008–present (2012):	Adaptation in an internet age

SARS was a crude awakening for the Chinese government. Traditional ways of propaganda and information control were no longer feasible, and disclosure became necessary to tame public unrest. China’s first forced experiment of communication became a debacle, and China’s image worsened domestically and internationally (Tai & Sun, 2007).

Attempting to overcome the SARS’s communication fiasco, effort was put into establishing a spokespeople system across all levels of the government and into communicating with the media (Wang, 2011). Before 2003, the Chinese government had a handful of government officials that reluctantly talked to the media. By 2011, every department of all levels of the government had officials in charge of communicating with journalists (Yoon Park, 2011). The SARS outbreak not only triggered the creation of channels of communication, but also shook off the existing media system and brought to life a role for critical journalism new to China (see Table 15.1).

### ***Chinese media in an internet age***

As in the rest of the world, the internet is transforming how people share and access information. SARS ‘shed light on the prospect of new communication technologies spearheaded by the internet as an empowerment tool for individuals to bypass official control and create alternative communication resources in Chinese society, where the authoritarian state controls vital channels of information’ (Tai & Sun, 2007, p. 1004).

These new voices created a bridge between the Party, the people and the world. Adapting to it, China uses new media to get public feedback, but also carefully supervises it and explores ways to overcome new political challenges – and even, in some cases, to turn these technologies into content

management tools for social monitoring. In 2007, President Hu Jintao said that an uncontrolled internet was a serious threat, and that 'whether or not (China) can actively use and effectively manage the internet will affect national, cultural information security and long-term stability of the state' (Dickie, 2007, para. 2).

The internet is pivotal in changing the way Chinese government communication functions, but in rural areas, where only less than one-third have internet access, traditional media outlets, such as the *People's Daily* or the 7 o'clock evening news of China Central Television, or CCTV, broadcast by every provincial television station, are still more influential. The relationship of Chinese media organizations with the government is still strongly marked by their nature and role at their time of birth.

China's traditional media were born under tight control of the Party as an instrument of 'thought work', under the People's Republic of China in 1949. China had taken its governing style from the Soviet Union, in which media was controlled by the government and existed merely to fulfil the agenda of the single ruling party (Lynch, 1999). Media was used to control information and for the transmission of economic and political messages of the government and surveillance; only trustees of the party had access to media.

For decades, the idea of being a journalist in China was different from that in the Western countries. Traditionally, a press conference in Chinese used to be literally translated as 'reception for reporters' and reporters were members of Party cadres. Competitive and harsh, journalism was a political career, as journalists were considered elites, especially if they worked at large national media organizations. Chinese journalists were more like 'publicists', who distributed information to mass audiences under the supervision of the Party. The entire system was tightly controlled on every level by the Propaganda Department of the Party, or PD, currently known as Publicity Department<sup>5</sup> (Lynch, 1999).

From 1978, when China's marketization was set in motion, contradictions difficult to deal with by the intertwining party control and market forces were created (Zhao, 2000); 'Thought work' became globalized, pluralized and commercialized (Lynch, 1999); and new media technology from simple live radio and television, to the internet gradually entered the scene. The existing system was strongly challenged and China's media entered a period of dramatic revision, still ongoing.

Although Chinese domestic media organizations still hold a role as transmitters of the government's message, there is a diversification to the extent to which they represent China's voice. While the output of state-owned media outlets such as Xinhua News Agency or CCTV is considered to have almost official status, there are more independent and private publications, *Caijing* for example, and others that, influenced by China's media market, are more commercial (Yoon Park, 2011).

## ***Governance in government communication***

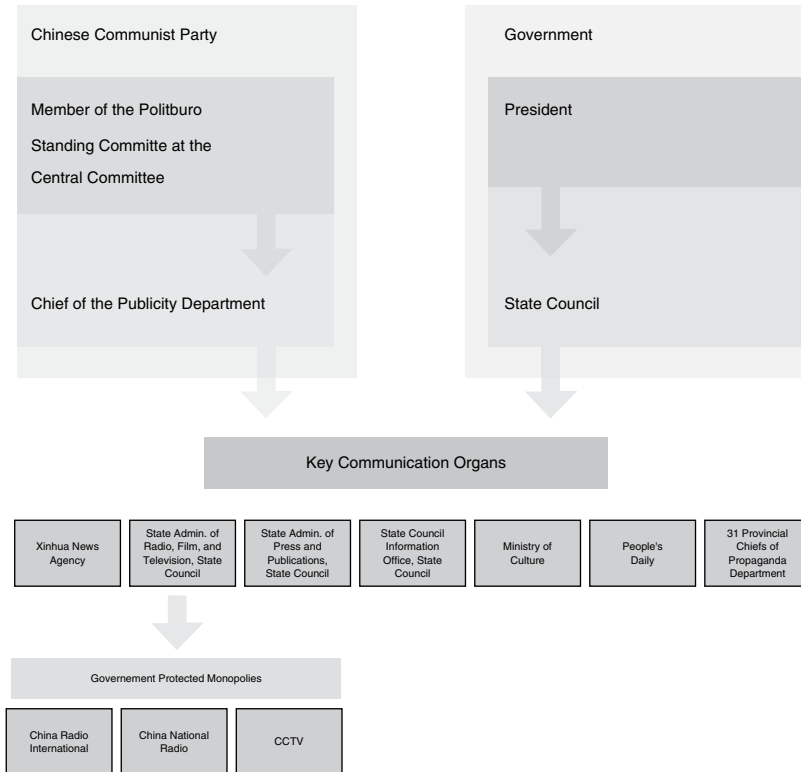
The main governing body that oversees the media and maintains the authority of the Party is the PD (see Figures 15.1 and 15.2). Its primary function is to provide licensing to media outlets, and most importantly, give instructions to the media on what can and cannot be said through guidelines and self-censorship. Its ultimate aim is to protect state interests, including security, and ruling party legitimacy through ideology-related work. The PD has the power to nominate presidents and CEOs of all national level state-owned media organizations and appoint ministers of media and information related ministries, as well as the government officers under the State Council. Although the PD is not formally considered to be part of the government, it is the actual enforcer of media censorship and guidance (Brady, 2008).

Under the supervision of the PD and the State Council, Xinhua News Agency, or Xinhua, is the top official news agency of the government (see Figure 15.2). No other media organization is given better access to the decision-making circles than Xinhua, whose official coverage other media organizations routinely wait for to report important events. At the national level, the 'ministerial level' media organizations – government-protected monopolies – collaborate to maintain and manage a collective voice of the Party and government.

Because of the nature of its government, China's media regulatory system is unlike any other. Regulation of media content is not through law but through daily practices that depend on the basic structure of the media and the Party. China's communication related bodies, such as the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT), State Administration of Press and Publications (SAPP), the State Council Information Office (SCIO) and the Ministry of Culture (see Figures 15.1 and 15.2), act as departments under the directives of the PD. Each body controls a specific aspect of the media. For example, SARFT oversees the editorial content of CCTV, China Radio International and China National Radio (see Figure 15.2); SAPP regulates news, print periodicals and internet publications; and the SCIO is the chief administrative information office of the government under the State Council.

In addition, there are different ethical codes of conduct created by independent associations, such as the All-China Journalist Association at the national level and other provincial level journalist associations. These ethical codes guide journalists in their way of communicating and reporting. Although these codes do not have definite bounding power, most association members are Party members and have the power to prevent those not following the codes from getting influential jobs.

There is no specific media law in China, but there is a structural media content management system through legal courts, specialized government



**FIGURE 15.2** *Chinese government communication structure*

agencies and independent associations developed because of the fast expansion of the media industry (Zhao, 1998). New clauses related to business journalism, as well as business and sports coverage, were added to the general law. Also, significant departments of the government were given authority to develop and legitimate media structures by means of administrative 'regulations' (Zhao, 2008, p. 27).

This lax policy on media management allowed the media to become a platform and watchdog for lobbying and for stimulating public discussion. The NPC and the CPPCC annual meetings are now heavily covered, turning these gatherings into a lobbying festival, making NPC and CPPCC members some of the most-talked-about political celebrities. This process of creation of regulations and laws to rule the economy also affected companies, that once only were affected by the five-year plan and how they fitted into it. Because of it, business lobbying also became widespread, directed to influencing economic policies and, thus, the life chances of companies (Kennedy, 2005).

These developments occur in an improvised manner, as the media regulations and laws regarding the 2008 Beijing Olympics show. This process

of media legitimization and rule of 'law' is based in experimentation, aligned with the country's 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'.

### ***Transparent governance towards the Beijing Olympics***

The 2008 Olympics were not only China's coming out party to the world, they were also what shaped China's current model of more transparent governance. Although the arrival of the Games was thoroughly prepared since Beijing won its bid in 2001, the process tested the central government's ability to manage information, crises and foreign media in a new China, and brought along policy and regulatory changes.

As part of its bid to host the 2008 Olympics, China promised to relax constraints and 'be open in every aspect of the country and the whole world' (Beijing Organizing Committee for the 2008 Olympic Games, 2002, para. 3). In efforts to uphold this promise, the 'Regulations on Reporting Activities in China by Foreign Journalists during the Beijing Olympic Games and the Preparatory Period' were passed by the State Council. These measures, effective since January 2007 and set to expire two months after the Olympics on October 2008, gave more freedom to foreign correspondents and simplified processes to get interviews only requiring the interviewee's consent (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2006). On 17 October 2008, they became permanent (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2008). In parallel, in November 2007, the NPC adopted the 'Emergency Response Law of the PRC', that dropped the requirement for Chinese reporters to get permission before reporting a crisis (NPC, 2009).

The adoption of these changes motivated the Chinese government to consider seriously its freedom of information regulations. In 2007, the State Council promulgated the Open Government Information Regulation, China's first national directive designed to make government information more accessible to the public (Horsley, 2007). This regulation, adopted in April 2007 and effective since 1 May 2008, took a dual approach to greater transparency by requiring government agencies to disseminate certain information on their own initiative and to make disclosures in response to requested information within 15 to 30 days (Shaw, 2011). These regulations marked a break away from a long tradition, and a still ingrained culture of government secrecy (Xinhua, 2007).

### ***Spokespeople system in the Chinese government***

After the Olympics, every department in the government was required to establish the position of spokesperson and start training programs in media

relations for its officials (Dong & Muhariwa, 2011). A network of spokespeople was created in charge of administering the government's communication goals; supervising the communication regarding policy implementation; and acting as the voice of the government.

This spokespeople system may vary but it has a standard hierarchical structure with officials at all levels of the government. The vice-minister of each ministry has the role of chief communication officer or main spokesperson on special occasions. The usual contact with the media on a day-to-day basis is the chief of the communication department, who is the routine spokesperson for the ministry. For ministries, which are more relevant to international media, such as the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of Commerce, a new post, positioned between the vice-minister and the chief of the communication department, exists as ministry spokesperson, whose role is specifically to communicate with the press.

The training program, supervised by the Party, is centrally provided by the government's chief administrative information office, the SCIO. The training programs are organized according to the hierarchical structure of the levels of government. For example, a ministry level spokesperson of the Health Ministry will participate in the training program organized by the SCIO at the ministerial level; however a local level spokesperson will participate in the training program organized by the local government.

Newly recruited communication specialists are required to attend an intensive five-day seminar centrally organized by the SCIO. A selection of trainers, including officials, university professors, communication trainers, or former journalists and editors, is appointed by the SCIO for these seminars. The workshops include a variety of different topics, usually related to communication strategy and the individual expertise of the ministry the spokesperson serves (interview with communications advisor to several ministries, 2011).

Programmes at academic institutions, such as the spokespeople training programme at Tsinghua University, play an important role in the development of China's efforts towards transparent governance. Since 2003, the Tsinghua spokespeople programmes assisted in the training of a total of 30,000 ministry and office level spokespeople.

Unlike the organization of the training programmes, official spokespeople are not centrally appointed; they are recruited through individual ministries and government offices. The recruitment process is left for each ministry to design and execute. Most spokespeople come from communications or journalistic backgrounds, information departments of the ministries, or are organically grown within each ministry or government office. Key state-level communicators, however, are usually positions reserved for highly ranked

officials within the close circle of the government. Given the nature of the government, most spokespeople are Party members.

This spokespeople system is mainly funded by the government. Individual ministries finance government communication activities from their administrative budget as communication is part of their daily operations. Since government-protected media organizations have to provide services to government communication projects, the government has access to free communication platforms. Some international companies, like Thomson Reuters, provide training overseas for government officials, but not on a regular basis. There are other government communication projects also run by NGOs or individual citizens (interview with communication advisor, 2011).

In recent years, the Chinese government also adopted advertising as a type of endorsement in promoting China's image abroad. Commercials shown on CNN and New York Times in 2010 (Shanghai 2010 World Expo Organizing Committee, 2007) and an advertisement shown in Time Square in early 2011 (Chao, 2011) are examples of such efforts subsidized by government agencies.

The communication departments can be called information or research offices because they also research data, policy implementation and stakeholders' expectations. As governance became more complex, there was an increasing need of professional expertise. Many government entities started hiring independent marketing companies to get public feedback or running their own for-profit research centres. This led to a proliferation of think tanks and other research institutions sponsored and linked to the government.

For instance, academic institutions, such as Peking University, and non-governmental agencies, like the Horizon Research Consultancy, established their own research centres. These institutes, along with government think tanks, like the Chinese Academy of Social Science, chaired by the vice chairman of the NPC, or the State Council's Development Research Center, are gaining importance in the policy-making process.

In contrast to other government bodies, the think-tank world in China is accessible and active. Scholars from these institutions emphasize research, attend international conferences, publish papers and journal articles, and can be reached by the government, businesses and other organizations alike. This emphasis on research has made the government susceptible to public feedback, and led to a significant rise in open polls through different channels of media, online and in print.

For instance, the Health Ministry conducted a health policy survey on sina.com and sohu.com to understand public sentiment. Based on the response that the public had little understanding of the new policies, it revised its

communication strategy and also produced a 30-episode television series called 'The Doctors', modelled after the popular American television series 'Grey's Anatomy' to improve the ministry's image. Based on public feedback, new ideas are adopted and policies revised.

## Conclusion

Confucius said 'silence is a true friend who never betrays', but to China in the twenty-first century silence is no longer a friend. Forced by an environment in flux, the government is impelled to accept changes that are crucial to maintain its legitimacy but which it has been reluctant to face.

Therefore, China's government communication is making steps towards transparency by relaxing information control, and increasing willingness to work with the media. In 2001, China won the bid to host the Olympics and became more exposed to the world. After the SARS outbreak, China established a crisis management system to respond to communicating emergencies, and new regulations were set in motion with the Olympic Games in 2008.

The new media expansion led by the internet and mobile technology created a new public space where ordinary citizens were empowered to create their own information. With the largest number of internet users in the world, the Party realizes news can no longer be controlled and that the fastest person to cover any emergency can be anyone among the nearly 1 billion mobile phone users. New media made information control more difficult by transforming the relationship between the Chinese authorities, its people and the international community, and pressured the government to open up. And adjusting to this, the government adopted new technologies as a source of public feedback, which is increasingly influential in the policy decision-making process.

China's integration with the rest of the world has prompted a new discipline of government communication. The PD once had absolute control of all media content and had stringent control on 'thought work' in China, but this has given way to a less restrained communication structure headed by government spokespeople. The structuring of the spokespeople system is part of the government's effort to modernize government communication and add accountability and transparency to its communication strategy.

As of now, Chinese government experimentation in communication is trying to bring more transparency and openness, along with more participation of the people in decision making about the country. However, it is important to note that all communication efforts and branches of the Communist Party have the ultimate goal of maintaining the status quo of the Party state and that China walks three steps forward and two backwards. Questions remain



on where the next step of governmental experimentation will head and whether the government can find a way to continue adding accountability and transparency to communication strategy while keeping the Party's overall control of the message.

As the global financial crisis assailed the Western governing system, the world is watching for alternative models of media, economics and politics. Therefore, China's quest for its own government communication strategy has implications far beyond the world's most populous nation. It may offer an alternative model that combines a capitalist approach to market reforms with a new style of transparent governance in a new 'political system with Chinese characteristics' (Wang & Cheng, 2010). It is still too early to see what the future holds but the ability to maintain political control and interventionism, while delivering successful economic growth in a China with freer flow of information and a stronger voice, will be worth watching as an alternative form of governance.

## Nomenclature

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	China Central Television
CPPCC	Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
NPC	National People's Congress
PD	Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party
SAPP	State Administration of Press and Publications
SARFT	State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television
SARS	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
SCIO	State Council Information Office
Xinhua	Xinhua News Agency

## Notes

- 1 The Great Leap Forward was a failed attempt to transform the agrarian nation into an industrial powerhouse affecting Chinese policy planning from 1958 to 1961. The Cultural Revolution, or the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, was a socio-political movement to enforce socialism by removing capitalist, traditional and cultural elements from the Chinese society, and impose Maoist orthodoxy within the Party that took place between 1966 and 1976. The Red Guards were a civilian mass movement of young students during the Cultural Revolution.
- 2 This includes media-related organizations like Xinhua News Agency and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

- 3 The eight registered minor parties under CPC direction are Revolutionary Committee of the Kuomintang. China Democratic League. China Democratic National Construction Association. China Association for Promoting Democracy. Chinese Peasants' and Workers' Democratic Party. Zhigongdang of China. Jiusan Society and Taiwan Democratic Self-Government League.
- 4 'Thought work' is the control of communication flows and the structuralization of the worldviews, values and action strategies of a government's subjects.
- 5 The PD is still known in Chinese as the Propaganda Department, but the name in English was changed to Publicity Department after the government learned the word 'propaganda' had negative connotations.

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# 16

## Government communication in 15 countries: Themes and challenges

*Karen Sanders and María José Canel*

### Introduction

**T**his study has provided accounts of developments in national, executive-level government communication in 15 sovereign states, positioning the analysis partially within a political communication system framework where actors and structures are related to each other and their environment but also employing theory and concepts developed within the public relations, corporate and strategic communication fields.

As explained in Chapter 1, we categorized the 15 countries analysed using democracy indicators taken from Freedom House's rankings of political and press freedom. These rankings assess systemic features of countries' legal, media and political regimes (electoral process, political plurality, freedom of expression, etc.) and provide broad-brush indicators that are given more flesh in individual country chapters. The 15 countries fall into 3 broadly defined groups (see Table 16.1). Group 1 countries have established democratic institutions and practices, although in the cases of Spain and Poland, recent democratic government dates only to 1977 and 1991 respectively. Group 2 countries have, in the case of Chile and South Africa, recent democratic pasts, with elected governments replacing authoritarian regimes in 1989 and 1999 respectively; India's first democratic elections took place in 1952 after British

colonial rule. Group 3 countries have a tradition of more authoritarian forms of government that compromise civil and political liberties and a lack of media freedom. Mexico's first internationally recognized, truly democratic elections took place in 2000 while Zimbabwe, despite 2008 elections, remains in the grip of Robert Mugabe. China and Singapore do not permit competitive elections and place numerous restrictions on media freedom.

**TABLE 16.1** Freedom House indices, 2012

Countries	Political freedom rating <sup>a</sup>	Press freedom rating <sup>b</sup>	Group
Sweden	1 (F)	10 (F)	1
Germany	1 (F)	17 (F)	
United States	1 (F)	18 (F)	
United Kingdom	1 (F)	21 (F)	
Australia	1 (F)	21 (F)	
France	1 (F)	24 (F)	
Spain	1 (F)	24 (F)	
Poland	1 (F)	25 (F)	
Chile	1 (F)	31 (PF)	2
South Africa	2 (F)	34 (PF)	
India	2.5 (F)	37 (PF)	
Mexico	3 (PF)	62 (NF)	3
Singapore	4 (PF)	67 (NF)	
China	6.5 (NF)	85 (NF)	
Zimbabwe	6.5 (NF)	80 (NF)	

Sources: Freedom House (2012). *Freedom in the World*. Freedom House: Washington, DC. Freedom House (2012). *Freedom of the Press*. Freedom House: Washington, DC.

<sup>a</sup> Countries are assessed on the average of the political rights and civil liberties ratings, the political freedom rating: Free (F) (1.0 to 2.5), Partly Free (PF) (3.0 to 5.0) or Not Free (NF) (5.5 to 7.0).

<sup>b</sup> Each country receives a numerical rating from 0 (the most free) to 100 (the least free). Countries considered Free (F) are rated from 0–30; Partly Free (PF) 31–60 and Not Free (NF) 61–97.

Full details of methodology can be found at [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org)

Using an assessment framework explained below (see Table 16.3), we examine differences and similarities within and between the three groups of countries with regards to the mesolevel data collected, examining whether the structure and activity of government communication bears some relation to systemic conditions. Finally, we explore some common themes and challenges for government communication research.

## **Developing an assessment framework for government communication**

Chapter authors present vivid accounts of the increasing importance governments give to communicating with diverse constituents, chief among them the media and citizens. They invest significant resources in attempting to inform, understand, control, manage and/or engage with constituencies. They seek to develop 'effective communication' which depends on a number of factors including adequate *communicational structure and processes* guided by *communicational purposes* that take the citizen into account.

### ***Communication structure and processes***

Public relations and management scholars have identified two broad categories of communication structure (see Chapter 1) that describe the position occupied and the resources assigned to the communication function in an organization: a primarily tactical or technical structure or a primarily strategic one. Tactics and strategies are well-worn terms often used in the political communication lexicon to describe the activities executed by political actors to maintain power and/or seek control. Governments attempt to manage news and public opinion; parties and candidates want to win elections. As we saw in Chapter 1, political communication research usefully focuses attention on these questions of power and control which are, of course, at the heart of politics.

However, drawing on public relations, corporate and strategic communication literature, strategic communication can be characterized as a driver towards more effective communication. Typically it is coordinated and planned at senior management level with substantial development of specialized units that permit proactive dialogue with stakeholders to help shape organizational goals. A strategic communication structure has defined functions that facilitate an organized and integrated communication activity undertaken by skilled and knowledgeable professionals who occupy positions at every level of the organizational chart. Strategic communication encompasses mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of the communication effort in terms of measurable



outcomes and employs digital technology to facilitate citizen interaction with government.

Tactical communication structures position communication at a lower organizational level oriented to the pursuit of short- or medium-term goals. Usually there is no overarching communication structure but a dispersal and fragmentation of communication activities throughout the organization with little or no internal coordination or definition of communication functions. Consequently communication is more fragmented and less aligned to the organization's long-term goals.

### ***Communication purpose***

Public relations theory can help scholars conceptualize strategic government communication in ways that position it not as part of a battle to win hearts and minds for solely party political motives (although politicians will surely hope this is a by-product of their activities) but also as a way of building fruitful relations with citizens that have longer-term beneficial effects including the generation of institutional credibility. Strategy becomes linked to communication purpose which, we argue below, in a citizen-centred model of government communication, seeks to inform and communicate in a way which also seeks to encourage dialogue or public conversation.

We suggest here that communication that attends to citizens' rather than political party interests, will be characterized by elements that make it more rather than less transparent, provide participatory mechanisms and put in place rules to ensure its non-partisanship. Of course, government communication is always in some way political. However, we argue that a conceptual distinction can be drawn between partisan government communication, which takes advantage of incumbency to campaign for party goals, and government communication which is necessarily political, yet places the emphasis on explanation to achieve public understanding. Holtz-Bacha and Young provide examples in their chapters of cases where governing parties have been judged to have misused government resources for party political goals suggesting that, while difficult, a line can be drawn between unacceptable partisan government communication and appropriate political government communication.

### ***Assessing communication structure and purpose***

We realize that the framework set out below does not contain a complete list of the elements by which communication can be identified as showing more

tactical and/or strategic capacity or as being more party or citizen oriented. For example, assessing participation in communication processes only by the UN e-participation index is clearly too limited. The framework is, then, proposed as a modest, exploratory starting point, using data from chapters and surveys.

To assess government communication structure in terms of its strategic development, we identify eight elements each of which refers to a characteristic of strategic capacity (see Table 16.3). We have assessed these elements along a continuum that we have denominated 'A' which runs from tactical to strategic communication. For example, examining organizational structure (element A-1), the location of a country where there is limited or no development would be placed at one end of the continuum as most tactical and where there is extensive development as most strategic at the other end. Countries with some development of organizational structure would be placed at the midpoint of the continuum.

In order to assess communication purpose in terms of its orientation to more party political or to citizen-centred communication, we identified six elements, assessing them along a continuum we have called 'B' (see Table 16.3 Axis B), that indicate the presence or not of rules and processes encouraging the values of non-partisanship, transparency and participation in government communication. We assess the extent to which any given element has limited or no presence or development, has some presence or development or is extensively present or developed. In some cases (the e-participation index or the existence of transparency laws), the classifications are clear-cut. In others (the degree of communication specialization, for example), judgements are based on chapter data presented in disparate ways suggesting the need for further refinement of the questions asked of our authors.

In order to provide a first broad, rough and ready categorization of government communication, we have attached a numerical value to the limited presence or absence = 1, partial development or presence = 2 and extensive development or presence of each element = 3. Adding up these scores for every element in each country allows us to position its government communication in relation to categories along two continuous dimensions with one axis running from mainly tactical to mainly strategic communication and the second, running from party-oriented communication to citizen-oriented communication. We discuss the results and their implications later in the chapter.

Next, we examine in detail the data provided by the chapters (see Table 16.2) in order to situate countries as regards the strategic development of government communication and its orientation to citizens.

**TABLE 16.2** Government communication data for 15 countries

		<b>GROUP 1</b>			
		1. Sweden	2. Germany	3. United States	4. United Kingdom
<b>HUMAN RESOURCES</b>	Number of government communicators	140 in central government (2010) (out of a total of 4,800 employees)	470 (2012) in the Federal Press and Information Office excluding ministry communication employees (370 in Berlin, 90 in Bonn)	No figures are given for federal government 15,540 (2010) in all local government communication categories	3,158 (2008) working for all central government ministries
	Spokespeoples' profile	Political appointees	Political appointees	Public servants Political appointees	Public servants
	Principal government communication structure	Non-ministerial Information and Communication Department (Information Rosenbad)	Federal Press and Information Office	Office of Communication Press Office Office of Public Engagement	Communication Delivery Board Government Communication Network

5. France	6. Australia	7. Spain	8. Poland
<p>The Prime Minister’s Communication office (SIG) includes 24 senior managers. Each ministry has its own communication department (2011)</p>	<p>Estimates of 3,000 communicators employed by federal and state governments (2010)</p>	<p>400 in central government communication office and ministries (out of 131,954 government employees)</p>	<p>32 employees at the Government Information Centre 200 employees at the ministries</p>
<p>Political appointees</p>	<p>Public servants Political appointees</p>	<p>Political appointees But members of the civil service and members of political cabinets take part in government communication</p>	<p>The government spokesperson is political appointee. The spokespersons of ministers and governors could be members of the civil service or members of political cabinets</p>
<p>Government Information Service</p>	<p>Press Office Communication Advice Branch Department of Finance and Deregulation Ministerial Liaison, Communications and Governance Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet Community Engagement Section Department of the Prime Minister</p>	<p>Communication State Office with the rank of a Secretariat of State (below a ministry)</p>	<p>Government Communication and Information System</p>

TABLE 16.2 Continued

		GROUP 1			
		1. Sweden	2. Germany	3. United States	4. United Kingdom
HUMAN RESOURCES	Professional backgrounds	Journalists	Journalists	Diverse and varied backgrounds	Journalists Public relations/ Marketing
	Specialized training for civil servant communicators	No	No	Some programmes at federal level	Yes (from 2006)
	Designated chief executive spokesperson	No	No	Yes: political appointee	Yes: public servant
	Designated government spokesperson	No	Yes: junior minister	No	No
FINANCIAL RESOURCES	Advertising campaigns	Not available	Not available	Not available	US\$862m (2010)
	Other communication costs	Budget for Non-ministerial Information and Communication Department US\$3.42m (2010)	In 2010 the Federal Press and Information Office budget of US\$20.6m for public relations. The ministries have communication budget; data on expenses are published	Not available	Staff costs: US\$525.5m (2010)

5. France	6. Australia	7. Spain	8. Poland
Diverse and varied backgrounds	Journalists Public relations/ Marketing	Journalists Increasingly from corporate communication and public relations	Social Science Political Science Journalism Sociology Law Economics
No	No	Some courses began in 2008	No
Yes	No	No	Yes
Usually yes	No	Yes: senior minister	Yes
Not available	Federal government advertising in 2009–10 financial year was US\$119.3m	US\$104.3m (2010)	No systematic data available
Altogether, including polling, SIG budget was US\$34.4m (2011)	Estimates of staff costs across federal, state and local governments of US\$260m annually	Data not available	Only some data available. The costs of outsourcing of Government Information Centre in the Chancellery of the Prime Minister US\$858,730

TABLE 16.2 Continued

		GROUP 1			
		1. Sweden	2. Germany	3. United States	4. United Kingdom
<b>REGULATORY AND NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK</b>	Communication, advertising, public relations legislation/policies regarding non-partisanship	Policies and unwritten code of civil service neutrality	Court decisions (1977) (1983): right of the government to active public relations but communication must not be used for electoral purposes	The Hatch Act (1938): preventing partisan activities by government communicators	Civil Service Code (1996 and revised in 2006) and Propriety Guidance for government communicators. Code for Special Advisors (in 2010 it was established that they cannot instruct permanent civil servants) Communications Act (2003) includes provisions regarding government information campaigns that seek to maintain their non-political aims. Propriety and Ethics Team at the Cabinet Office (can be consulted about the interpretation of the guidance on communication matters)
	Access to information/transparency legislation	Yes: Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) (1766)	Yes: FOIA (2005)	Yes: FOIA and the Government Sunshine Act 1976	Yes: FOIA (2005)

5. France	6. Australia	7. Spain	8. Poland
<p>Various government decrees on expenditures and mandatory competition for contracting pollsters</p>	<p>Guidelines on Information and Advertising Campaigns (2010)</p>	<p>Law of Advertising and Institutional Communication (2005) to disassociate accurate and neutral information on public policies from political opinion and partisan messages</p>	<p>The Act on Civil Service (2008), introducing the system of neutral members of the civil service corps adopted in 1996                      The Act on employees of state offices (1982).                      The Ordinance of the Council of Ministers on the Organization and Tasks of Spokespersons in Offices of Government Administration Organs (2002)</p>
<p>Yes: Administrative Transparency Law (1978)</p>	<p>Yes: FOIA (1982)</p>	<p>Proposed Transparency Law 2012</p>	<p>Yes: the Act on the Access to Public Information (2002)</p>



TABLE 16.2 Continued

		GROUP 2		
		9. Chile	10. South Africa	11. India
<b>HUMAN RESOURCES</b>	Number of government communicators	About 600: 114 (2006) people employed in the Secretariat of Communication and estimated 500 employed in ministries and other government agencies in jobs related to communication activities	483 in Government Information Service (GIS)	Data not available
	Spokespeoples' profile	Political appointees	Public servants Political appointees	Political appointees and civil servants
	Principal government communication structure	Ministry General Secretariat of Government Secretariat of Communication President's Press Office	Government Communication and Information System	Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting
	Professional backgrounds	Mainly journalists, sociologists and political scientists	Journalism Development studies Economics Marketing Political Science	Journalism Public Relations
	Specialized training for civil servant communicators	No	Yes	No
	Designated chief executive spokesperson	No	No	Yes
	Designated government spokesperson	Yes: political appointee	Yes: senior official with political ties to government	Yes: the same chief executive spokesperson

<b>GROUP 3</b>			
12. Mexico	13. Singapore	14. China	15. Zimbabwe
140 employees (2012)	Data not available	Data not available	90 in Information Ministry
Political appointees	Political appointees	Political appointees	Public servants Political appointees
The Social Communication Office	Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts Prime Minister's Office	Politburo Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Propaganda Department of the CCP	Ministry of Media, Information and Publicity
Journalism Sociology Political Science Communication	No information available	Journalists and communication specialists	Mix of backgrounds but chiefly war veterans and military and intelligence backgrounds
No	No	Yes	No
Yes	No	No	No
Yes: the same chief executive spokesperson	Yes: minister or political appointee	Yes: senior minister and Communist Party member	Yes: senior minister appointed from ruling Zanu PF Party

**TABLE 16.2** Continued

		GROUP 2		
		9. Chile	10. South Africa	11. India
<b>FINANCIAL RESOURCES</b>	Advertising campaigns	US\$42m (2006)	Data not available	Data not available
	Other communication costs	Ministry Secretariat of the Government: US\$22.5m (2006) Secretariat of Communication: US\$1.5m (2006)	Department Communication and Information System staff costs US\$49.3m (2011)	Annual budget published
<b>REGULATORY FRAMEWORK</b>	Communication, advertising, public relations legislation/policies regarding non-partisanship	Non-partisanship in communication is hardly regulated. There is no formal regulation in terms of its definition and mechanisms of control.	No legislation, etc.	Citizen Charter
	Access to information/transparency legislation	Yes: Law on Access to Publication (2009)	Yes: Promotion of Access to Information Act (2000)	Yes: Right to Information Act (2005)

## **Tactical and strategic communication**

The chapter case studies provide abundant information about the structures of government communication including their legal, historical and regulatory context, financial and human resources, organizational structures and the roles and responsibilities of communicators which we next explore in relation to the presence of elements suggesting more strategic or more tactical communication capacities for each of the 15 countries (see Table 16.3).

### ***Organizational structure and chart***

As communication channels and objectives have become more complex, including – for example – the development of social media and citizen

<b>GROUP 3</b>			
12. Mexico	13. Singapore	14. China	15. Zimbabwe
US\$350.9m (2010)	Data not available	Data not available	Data not available
US\$11.9m (2010)	Data not available	Data not available	Data not available
Federal Code of Political Institutions and electoral procedures reformed in 2007	No legislation, etc.	No legislation, etc.	No legislation, etc.
Yes: Transparency Law (2003)	No	Yes: FOIA (2007)	Yes: Access to Information and Privacy Act (2002) but used more to suppress information in the name of privacy

engagement goals, so governments’ organizational structure has become more specialized in a number of countries. This organizational specialization is especially apparent in the United States, Britain and Australia, Group 1 countries, and South Africa: communication activity is not circumscribed to developing messaging but includes carrying out citizen insight research for engagement (see Table 16.3, element A-1). Activities are distributed in various secretariats or offices headed by mid-ranking ministers or senior public officials. The units tend to be centrally located within government with communicators assigned specific tasks; for areas such as media relations and public information campaigns, their functions may be distributed throughout ministries. In Britain, for example, a communication delivery board located in the central coordinating ministry, headed by a civil servant executive director, organizes communicators transversally across ministries in themed clusters to work on communication campaigns.

**TABLE 16.3** Assessment of government communication in 15 countries

<b>AXIS A</b>				
TACTICAL ←————→ STRATEGIC				
<b>STRUCTURE</b>				
<b>Human resources</b>				
<b>A-1</b>	<b>Organizational structure</b>	<b>Limited development of specialized communication units (mainly media briefing and information publication)</b>	<b>Some development of specialized communication units (e.g. social media, corporate relations, opinion research)</b>	<b>Extensive development of specialized communication units (e.g. public/digital engagement, citizens' insight research)</b>
		Zimbabwe	Sweden, Germany, France, Spain, Poland Chile, India Mexico, Singapore China	United States, United Kingdom, Australia South Africa
<b>A-2</b>	<b>Organizational chart: chief executive or government spokesperson position</b>	<b>Position is not defined in organizational chart</b>	<b>Position is defined in organizational chart but its status changes</b>	<b>Position is defined and fixed in organizational chart</b>
		Sweden, Australia	France, Spain Chile Mexico, Singapore	Germany, United States, United Kingdom, Poland South Africa, India China, Zimbabwe

<b>A-3</b>	<b>Recruitment</b>	<b>Recruitment profiles mainly of those with journalism backgrounds</b>	<b>Broader range of recruitment profiles including those with social science/communication backgrounds</b>	<b>Specialized recruitment profiles from broad range of communication backgrounds (public relations, marketing, digital, IT, journalism, etc.)</b>
		Sweden, Germany, Spain Zimbabwe	France, Poland Chile, South Africa, India Mexico, Singapore	United States, United Kingdom, Australia China
<b>A-4</b>	<b>Training</b>	<b>No development of specific/specialized training</b>	<b>Some development of specific/specialized training</b>	<b>More development of specific/specialized training</b>
		Sweden, Germany, France, Australia, Poland Chile, India Mexico, Singapore, Zimbabwe	Spain South Africa China	United States, United Kingdom
<b>Rules regarding government communication functions</b>				
<b>A-5</b>	<b>Legislation, policies and conventions regarding government communication functions</b>	<b>No legislation, policies and conventions</b>	<b>Limited legislation, policies and conventions</b>	<b>Extensive legislation, policies and conventions</b>
		Singapore, China, Zimbabwe	Chile, South Africa, India Mexico	Sweden, Germany, United States, United Kingdom, France, Australia, Spain Poland

<b>AXIS A</b>				
TACTICAL ←		→ STRATEGIC		
<b>Technical infrastructure</b>				
<b>A-6</b>	<b>E-government development<sup>a</sup></b>	Limited development (Ranked from 101 –184)	Some development (Ranked from 31–100)	High degree of development (Ranked from 1–30)
		India (125) Zimbabwe (129)	Poland (45) Chile (34), South Africa (97) Mexico (56), China (72)	Sweden (12), Germany (15), United States (2), United Kingdom (4), France (10), Australia (8), Spain (9) Singapore (11)
<b>PROCESS</b>				
<b>A-7</b>	<b>Practices</b>	<b>Tactical tasks, mainly limited to media relations</b>	<b>Some strategic planning at managerial level including media relations, public relations and campaigns</b>	<b>Managerial tasks are developed including strategic planning, research and assessment</b>
		Zimbabwe	Sweden, Germany, France, Spain, Poland Chile, South Africa, India Mexico, Singapore, China	United States, United Kingdom, Australia

A-8	Coordination of government communication	No coordination function or structure	Coordination is defined as a function/role/task	There is a coordination structure(s)
			Sweden, Germany, France, Spain, Poland Chile, India Mexico, Singapore Zimbabwe	United States, United Kingdom, Australia South Africa China

<sup>a</sup> This element is based on the rankings for e-government development provided by the United Nations' Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2010) *United Nations E-Government Survey*. New York: United Nations. See main text for details of the survey methodology. A total of 184 countries were surveyed. Those ranked from 1 to 30 are considered highly developed, 31 to 100 somewhat developed and 101 to 184 are considered to have limited development.



<b>AXIS B</b>				
PARTY-CENTRED ←—————→ CITIZEN-CENTRED				
<b>Non-partisanship</b>				
<b>B-1</b>	<b>Legislation, policies and conventions specifically regarding non-partisanship in government communication<sup>a</sup></b>	No legislation, policies and conventions	Legislation, policies and conventions limited to specific issues, e.g. the use of public resources for electoral campaign activities	Wide-ranging legislation, policies and conventions, e.g. the UK Propriety Guidance for government communicators
		India Singapore, China, Zimbabwe	United States, France, Australia, Spain, Poland, Chile, South Africa Mexico	Sweden, Germany, United Kingdom,
<b>B-2</b>	<b>Profile of government spokespeople</b>	<b>Political appointees</b>	<b>Both political appointees and civil servants</b>	<b>Only civil servants</b>
		Sweden, Germany, France, Australia, Spain Chile, Mexico, Singapore, China, Zimbabwe	United States, Poland South Africa, India	United Kingdom

<b>Transparency</b>				
<b>B-3</b>	<b>Reporting of financial resources dedicated to communication activities</b>	<b>No or very limited information</b>	<b>Some systematic information</b>	<b>Extensive systematic information</b>
		United States Singapore, China, Zimbabwe	Sweden, France, Spain, Poland Chile, India Mexico	Germany, United Kingdom, Australia South Africa
<b>B-4</b>	<b>Reporting of staff numbers</b>	<b>No information available</b>	<b>Some data available and staff categories defined</b>	<b>Data available and staff categories defined</b>
		China	Sweden, Germany, United States, France, Spain, Poland Chile, South Africa, India Mexico, Singapore, Zimbabwe	United Kingdom, Australia
<b>B-5</b>	<b>Transparency laws and evidence of effectiveness<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>Little or no documented commitment and evidence of transparency</b>	<b>Documented commitment and evidence of transparency</b>	<b>Extensive documented commitment and evidence of transparency</b>
		Singapore, Zimbabwe	Germany, France, Australia, Spain, Poland Chile, South Africa, India Mexico, China	Sweden, United States, United Kingdom

Participation				
B-6	E-participation <sup>c</sup>	Government has very limited mechanisms to seek feedback from citizens/society (Ranked from 101–184)	Government has some mechanisms to seek feedback from citizens/society (Ranked from 31–100)	Government has extensive mechanisms to seek feedback from citizens/society (Ranked from 1–30)
		Zimbabwe (144)	Poland (51) Chile (34), South Africa (64), India (58) Mexico (32), China (32)	Sweden (23), Germany (14), United States (6), United Kingdom (4), France (15), Australia (2), Spain (3) Singapore (9)

Sources: Chapters' data for elements 1–5, 7 and 8 on axis A and 1–5 for axis B; United Nations' Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2010) *United Nations E-Government Survey*, New York: United Nations for element 6 on axis A and element 6 on axis B; also for element 5 on axis B, Banisar, D. (2006) *Freedom of Information around the world*, London: Privacy International and United States Department of State (2010) *2010 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, retrieved on 10 September 2012 from [www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4da56d8ba5.html](http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4da56d8ba5.html); United States Department of State (2011) *2011 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – Chile*, 24 May 2012, retrieved on 6 October 2012 from [www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4fc75aaec.html](http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4fc75aaec.html)

<sup>a</sup> Most countries have statutory regulation regarding the requirement for public servants to observe neutrality and/or non-partisanship in the execution of their duties. However, this factor refers to specific regulation, policies and/or guidance regarding the requirement to observe neutrality and/or non-partisanship in government communication.

<sup>b</sup> This element is assessed by (1) whether the country has access to information or transparency legislation and (2) reports on its effectiveness by the *Freedom of Information Survey* (2006) and the US Department of State's (2010, 2011) *Country Human Rights Reports*.

<sup>c</sup> This element is assessed by the United Nations' e-participation index, provided by the United Nations' Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2010). See main text for details of the survey methodology. A total of 184 countries were surveyed. Those ranked from 1 to 30 are considered highly developed, 31 to 100 somewhat developed and 101 to 184 are considered to have limited development. The index assesses the following three factors: Does the national government facilitate information for citizens (e-information sharing)? Are there ways for the public to engage in consultations with policy makers, government officials and one another (e-consultation)? Can citizens directly influence decisions, for example, by voting online or using a mobile telephone (e-decision making)? See United Nations' Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2010, pp. 83, 113).

All other countries, except Zimbabwe, have gone some way along the path of organizational specialization, reflected in the creation of centralized units for social media, corporate relations, opinion research, thus showing some development of strategic capacity.

The stability and location of communication roles and functions in the organizational chart can provide evidence for their strategic institutional weight. Looking at element A-2, the definition and fixity of the chief executive or government spokesperson position, in Sweden and Australia, for example, it is a position held by ministers who act as ministerial spokespeople by virtue of their office with no specific chief executive or government spokesperson position fixed in the organizational chart. In other Group 1 countries – Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom and Poland – together with South Africa and India from Group 2 and China and Zimbabwe from Group 3, on the other hand, there is a fixed and defined position. France and Spain from Group 1 and Chile (Group 2), Mexico and Singapore (Group 3) have a government or chief executive spokesperson position but, in the periods charted by chapter authors, the position has moved around the organizational chart. In France, for example, the government spokesperson has shifted from being a presidential to a prime ministerial appointee, representing power battles within government. The same lack of definition and fixity of position is also found in Mexico. In Spain, on the other hand, there is a tendency for the position to be held by one of the deputy prime ministers.

### ***Recruitment and training of communicators***

We wished to examine the background and training of government communicators (see Table 16.3, elements A-3 and A-4). We found that some Group 1 countries (the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia) recruit government communicators from a broad mix of communication backgrounds including journalism, marketing and public relations. Sweden, Germany and Spain however, have tended to recruit government communicators from a journalism background, although public relations and advertising are also increasingly considered acceptable fields for government communicators. The journalism background of many government communicators appears to reflect a long-held presumption that government communication is equivalent to media relations and, as argued earlier, more linked to a tactical communication approach. Chile employs communication staff from a broader range of communication and social science backgrounds as do France, Poland, Chile, South Africa, India, Mexico and Singapore, reflecting a growing tendency to recruit from a wider pool of communication specializations. At the left end of the continuum, Zimbabwe's chief criterion for recruitment is loyalty

to the Mugabe regime so that its communication staff is composed chiefly of war veterans and personnel with a military or intelligence background.

In most countries, systematic training is not provided for communication staff. The exceptions are the United States and Britain from Group 1 countries. South Africa's communication body has a section in charge of training and development that runs short skills' courses and plans to develop a more comprehensive programme for the future. Spain began short communication training courses for generalist staff in 2008 but provides no systematic and comprehensive programme. China also introduced training courses for its communication staff, run under the supervision of the Communist Party, in mid-2000. These results suggest there is much still to be done by governments in developing the communication skillsets of their staff and in recognizing, as the corporate world has done, the increasingly specialized nature of communication knowledge and expertise.

### ***Rules regarding government communication functions***

We asked researchers to identify specific legislation, policy or conventions regarding the functions of government communication (Table 16.3, element A-5). The lack of clear, publicly known rules about what communication is for, the situation in all Group 3 countries except Mexico could result in a discontinuity in purpose suggesting a deficient understanding of the strategic significance of communication. In all Group 1 countries, extensive rules have been developed, expressed either in legislation (Spain and Poland, for example) or policy and guidance documents (the United Kingdom). To take Poland, for instance, a number of government communication functions are legislatively mandated and include the obligation to provide the media with information. In Germany, government communication functions include informing the public and the media about the political activities and objectives of the government, providing information about Germany to other countries and monitoring public opinion as a basis for government decisions. In Group 2 countries, Chile, South Africa and India as well as the Group 3 country, Mexico, there has been more limited development of rules regarding government communication functions.

### ***Technological infrastructure: E-government resources***

Developing e-government resources requires considerable investment in technology and human resources to develop services for the public. In order to chart progress in implementing e-government, the United Nations carries out a periodic survey rating all governments in relation to the scope and quality

of online services, telecommunications infrastructure and human capacity. They use this to establish an E-Government Development Index (EDGI) which is a weighted average of three normalized scores of these three dimensions, each of which is a composite measure (see United Nations, 2010, p. 123). Online services are rated according to a four-stage model where services are considered emerging, enhanced, transactional and connected where, in the last case, there is a 'web of integrated functions, widespread data sharing, and routine consultation with citizens using social networking and related tools' (United Nations, 2010, p. 95). Telecommunications connectivity is ranked according to five indicators: the number of personal computers per 100 persons, number of internet users per 100 persons, number of telephone lines per 100 persons, number of mobile subscriptions per 100 persons and number of fixed broadband subscribers per 100 persons (United Nations, 2010, p. 113). Human capital is a composite of adult literacy rates and educational enrolment.

This ranking is used to assess element A-6 (see Table 16.3). Apart from Poland, all Group 1 countries are ranked in the top 30 for e-government development together with Singapore and are thus found at the right end of the continuum. The remaining countries have some e-government development with India and Zimbabwe having the most limited development. E-government development is obviously contingent on broader macrolevel factors such as the prevailing economic conditions. However, it also provides an indication of the strategic capacity of governments in being able effectively to inform, deliver services and communicate with citizens.

### ***Communication processes: Communication practices and coordination***

Assessing processes – understood as structured activities designed to produce a specific goal – in relation to communication practices can provide a picture of the extent to which government communication is carried out with a strategic perspective. If practices are geared more to short-term media relations, for example, we would consider government communication to be more tactical. Where evidence can be found for longer-term coordination and planning based on research and assessment, we would consider government communication practice to be more strategic in character.

We found that most countries have developed some degree of strategic planning of communication as evidenced by the development of systematically managed communication planning, research and assessment. This is most developed in some Group 1 countries, the United States, Britain and Australia, and least in Zimbabwe (see Table 16.3, element A-7).

The way in which coordination processes are structured (or not) also indicates whether communication is considered to be a strategic function of government. The United States, Britain, Australia, South Africa and China have developed formal coordination structures for communication (see Table 16.3, element A-8). All the remaining countries contemplate coordination as a function, role or task without giving it structural expression and chapters show that this is one of the most difficult challenges for developing strategic communication.

## **Communication purposes**

Assessing the presence or not of specific communication values permits us to evaluate government communication in relation to the question of what purposes it seeks to achieve.

Identifying the extent to which governments have developed processes and rules that safeguard the communication values of impartiality, transparency and participation is not straightforward. There are no commonly agreed standards in these areas even though initiatives such as the Open Government Partnership established in 2011 and the United Nations E-government survey are working to establish internationally shared indicators. The 'insider' case studies in this book provide useful complements to the information available in global ratings.

## ***Non-partisanship***

Having rules regarding non-partisanship suggests a public service orientation of government communication where communication is understood as being directed to serve the public rather than the political party in power. We asked researchers to identify specific legislation, policy or conventions regarding the impartiality of government communication (see Table 16.3, element B-1). The non-partisanship of government communication receives the most comprehensive underpinning in Sweden, Germany and the United Kingdom. These Group 1 countries have developed extensive policy and/or guidance regarding the requirement for non-partisanship in government communication. Together with the United States, France, Australia, Spain and Poland from Group 1, Chile and South Africa from Group 2 and Mexico from Group 3 countries, they also have legislation or policy but limited to specific issues such as the use of public resources for electoral campaign activities. Countries which appear to have no legislation or policy regarding impartiality in government communication include India and Group 3 countries, Singapore, China and Zimbabwe.

Regarding the rules for government spokespeople (see Table 16.3, element B-2), spokespeople are assigned their tasks on the basis of two and sometimes overlapping criteria: first, they are public servants employed to work on government business and second, they are political appointments, designated to fulfil communication tasks because of their political affinity or position with the governing party. The role of government spokesperson is one in which the political criterion comes powerfully into play in countries from each group. In Sweden, Germany, France, Australia and Spain from Group 1, Chile from Group 2 and Mexico, Singapore, China and Zimbabwe from Group 3, political appointees are designated as government spokespeople so they are at the left of the continuum. In the United States, Poland, South Africa and India, a mixture of political appointees and public officials serve as government spokespeople. The United Kingdom is unique in that official government spokespeople are civil servants, although an informal system of political government spokespeople functions through the network of special advisers.

### ***Transparency. Reporting practices and effective legislation***

To examine transparency, we examine three lines of evidence: reporting practices regarding (1) the financial and (2) the human resources dedicated to government communication and (3) evidence of effective transparency legislation.

Reliable statistics about the costs of government communication are key in order to monitor and assess performance, review the appropriateness of goals and means and hold governments to account and are an indicator of its degree of transparency. We asked whether data about government communication costs were available and, if they were, how much money governments spend on communication see (Table 16.3, element B-3). This is the area in which researchers had most difficulty in obtaining data. In the United States and Group 3 countries, Zimbabwe, China and Singapore, no figures were available. Partial figures, mainly regarding the costs of government advertising campaigns, were available in Sweden, Germany, France, Spain, Poland, Chile, India and Mexico. The most complete and systematic statistics, covering advertising and staff costs, were those found for Germany, Britain, Australia, Group 1 countries, and South Africa, a Group 2 country. Group 1 countries produced the most complete financial data while Group 3 countries, apart from Mexico, provided no publicly available figures at all.

We also asked about the reporting of the number of those employed in central executive government communication work (see Table 16.3, element



B-4). We were able to obtain some data from all countries except China. Group 1 countries were most likely to provide data for clearly defined categories. The most systematic data was available in the United Kingdom and Australia. No other country had complete data about all those working on communication tasks. The United States could not provide data for federal communicators but only for those working in local government. In the case of Germany, for example, 470 employees work in media relations but no information was available about the numbers of those working in other communication tasks. One common theme was the rising number of those employed in communication tasks by governments across the world. However, this trend was reversed in Germany where numbers employed in the Federal Press and Information Office fell by around 30 per cent between 2010 and 2012 and in the United Kingdom where in the same period the government reduced communication staff by nearly 40 per cent. In sum, data regarding numbers of government communicators is more accessible in Group 1 countries and least available in Group 3 countries, although in nearly every case information is incomplete.

Finally, all countries except Singapore and Spain (although in the latter case legislation was proposed in 2012) have an access to information or transparency law (see Table 16.3, element B-5). However, having legislation does not guarantee delivery as the example of Zimbabwe shows where the law is used to clamp down on media freedom. Thus, we assess governments' degree of communicational transparency using documentary sources such as the Freedom of Information (FOI) Survey published by the non-profit organization, Privacy International and the US government's country reports on human rights which qualitatively examine government transparency. Using these additional sources together with chapter data, Singapore and Zimbabwe are found to be least transparent while Sweden, the United States and the United Kingdom rank most highly in attempting to ensure transparent government.

### ***E-participation***

To examine an aspect of citizen participation (see Table 16.3, element B-6), we used the UN's e-government survey's (2010) e-participation index which posits 'the relevance of three factors in citizen engagement: electronic information dissemination, electronic consultation and electronic participation in decision-making' (United Nations, 2010, p. 110). Governments are assessed, for instance, on whether they allow the public to engage in consultations with policy makers, government officials and one another. According to the United Nations, Sweden, Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Australia, Spain and Singapore are in the top 30 countries in terms of their

development of e-participation; Poland, Chile, South Africa, India, Mexico and China appear in the rankings between 30 and 100 while Zimbabwe is in position 144 out of 157 countries. Chapter data, however, suggests that in the case of Singapore the appearance of participation and reciprocity should be treated with caution since the reality is rather more controlled.

## Categorizing government communication

The overall assessment of countries is shown in Figure 16.1.

The results suggest a number of interesting relationships between macrosystemic elements and mesolevel ones. Taking first those countries situated highest in the top right-hand quadrant and therefore considered most strategic and citizen oriented, in descending order, the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States are all Group 1 countries with high levels of media and political freedom. Communication is generally organized and planned at a senior level and accorded an autonomous organizational status that positions it as a strategic function of government not exclusively bound by party political considerations. As Sanders, Young and Liu and Levenshus make clear in their chapters, these are countries where some of the most vigorous debates have taken place about the alleged politicization of government communication or the legitimacy of political public relations per se. The strategic development of communication in these countries has been accompanied, according to our analysis, by the high development of citizen-centred communication in the United Kingdom and Australia and quite high

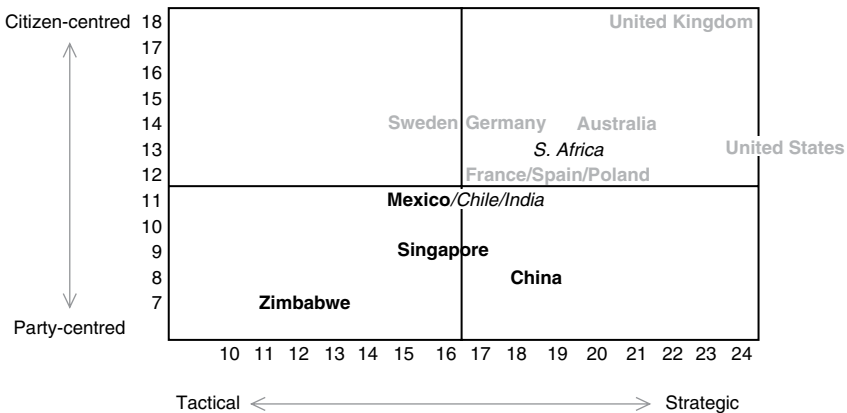


FIGURE 16.1 Categorization of government communication

in the United States. Strategic communication in these countries appears not to be synonymous with an exclusive party political focus but looks towards citizens' interests. The existence of political and media freedom may be strong drivers for ensuring government communication is more citizen focused.

Looking at the other extreme of the figure, the lower left-hand quadrant, the Group 3 country, Zimbabwe, is found to be the most party politically oriented and least strategic. As Maqeda puts it in Chapter 11, 'Zimbabwe's government communication is intrinsically linked to the partisan political agenda of Zanu PF' and could be said to be considered to be a party political function serving party political goals. This is also true to some extent for Singapore, which also appears in the lower left-hand quadrant and is a Group 3 country. However, Singapore is more strategically orientated and is somewhat more citizen focused than Zimbabwe, reflecting perhaps Lee's guarded optimism that the 2011 elections marked a watershed for Singaporean politics in moving the country towards a less controlling political environment.

China, also a Group 3 country, is the only country considered more strategically than tactically oriented and more party than citizen oriented and is found in the lower right-hand quadrant. Dong, Yoon and Chia-Wen consider that technological development and external drivers such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2003 SARS crisis have contributed to moves towards more strategic government communication. However, China's citizen-centred focus is limited and without change in political and media freedoms, the professionalization of government communication is likely to remain stymied in the near future.

There is one country, Sweden, a Group 1 country, found in the upper left-hand quadrant. This is a case of the country with a strong citizen focus, scoring highly on the citizen-oriented axis, reflecting a distinctive political culture exemplified in its 1766 Freedom of Information Law. At the same time, it has not developed a high strategic capacity: the changes reported by Falasca and Nord have produced a government communication structure that is flat, decentralized and rather fragmented. As Falasca and Nord argue, these developments will require further research to see how government communication in Sweden could gain more strategic capacity.

A number of countries can be found towards the midpoint of the two axes. On the one hand, Germany, France, Spain and Poland, Group 1 countries, are all situated towards the lower part of the upper right-hand quadrant with middling scores for strategic and citizen-centred development (although Germany is somewhat higher). In each case, institutional designs and practices continue to reflect particular historical imprints for good or ill. Looking at Spain, for example, its corporatist history has often made state control of information a default position as evidenced by the absence of transparency legislation.

Indeed, despite its strong position in e-government development, Spain's strategic development of government communication is still hampered, according to Canel, by structures and approaches inherited from the previous regime. Political systemic features of France and Germany also leave their mark on the strategic development of government communication: in France due to the tensions of the presidential/prime ministerial relationship and in Germany due to the multilayered complexities of the federal *Länder* system.

The case of South Africa is interesting: a Group 2 country, scores high in strategic development and relatively high in citizen orientation compared to other Group 2 countries and is found in the upper, right-hand quadrant. It is clear that the country has made notable attempts to establish more participatory and strategically organized government communication. However, in Makombe's account, it is also clear that there have been some government attempts to indulge in strong-arm tactics in relation to the media, threatening, for example, to direct advertising revenue exclusively to government supporting media. If these trends were to continue, they would undoubtedly impact negatively on the development of professional government communication in South Africa.

The remaining Group 2 countries, Chile and India, are located in the top part of the lower, left-hand quadrant. In other words, they have developed a limited strategic and citizen-centred capacity. In both cases, structural and systemic constraints condition the development of effective communication, restricting the establishment of communication strategy as a management function coordinated across government. As Uribe explains in the case of Chile, communication structures are not optimally designed for achieving their purpose. Their redundancy and lack of synergy reflect the competing demands of Chile's political system and effective communication can lose out. In the case of Mexico, a Group 3 country, modifications introduced in recent years show that governments' attempts to control the media are accompanied by an inability to craft a consistent communication strategy. As Meyenberg and Aguilar argue, governments have been unable to connect well with citizens and to develop positive perceptions of the achievements of democracy.

In sum, all Group 3 countries are located in the lower and most on the left-side of the quadrant while the reverse is true for Group 1 countries. Notwithstanding all the limitations of the analysis, it does appear that media and political freedoms are associated with the development of strategic and citizen-focused government communication. However, in all cases the interplay of systems and structures points to the particular complexity of establishing government communication within professional parameters as we shall see below.

## Challenges for government communication research

Across the world, governments are adopting new formulae and expending more resources on communication, implicitly recognizing the centrality of communication to their work. The internet and the myriad possibilities it offers for speedier service delivery, public interactivity and engagement, as well as for citizen surveillance and control, have changed the nature of government communication. These developments open up a range of questions for researchers that we summarize in three challenges

### *Nailing the data and improving practice*

A major challenge for researchers, policy makers and government officials is to define and collect relevant data related to government communication. When Britain's House of Lords' Communication Committee examined the country's government communication structure, one of the main obstacles to completion of its task was the difficulty in obtaining data. In response to criticism, the United Kingdom's senior civil servant replied that the failure arose from the fact that it is 'very difficult to specify . . . what constitutes "communications" civil servants' and because 'different departments will organise their business in different ways. Not all the communications functions in a department will be part of a single communications directorate with a single budget for communications' (HOLSCC, 2009, p. 33).

This study shows that this is not only a British problem. All our researchers had difficulty in obtaining the material needed to respond to our mesolevel questions regarding government communication structures partly because of the unavailability of the data but also because of the lack of precise definition on the part of governments about what constitutes communication activity.

Defining who works in these areas and the resources dedicated to them, charting their projects and tasks would allow a more realistic assessment of future needs. Governments would be able to establish richer and more accurate measures of communication value, allowing them to benchmark practice and measure outputs (the goods and services produced for society) and outcomes (the impact on citizens), answering public and media concerns about efficient and appropriate use of limited resources. Governments would be in a position to develop appropriate and coherent guidance, monitoring and enforcement instruments to help ensure that communication is in accordance with declared values. On present evidence, few countries are able to do this in a systematic way and this is where the research community should work to provide cross-national measures that are robust for future comparative and benchmarking studies.

## ***Defining professional government communication***

In this chapter we have assessed the communication strategic capacity and citizen orientation of government communication. Drawing on public relations and corporate communication literature, we have assumed that countries need to score high in both these areas for their government communication to be considered professional. We are aware that this approach is debatable, as a number of authors in this volume have suggested, and as we discuss below.

A common trend in all countries is a move towards giving more relevance and importance to communication in terms of capacity – structures, processes and knowledge. Practically every author charts a significant shift of institutional and human resources into government communication although, in several countries, the 2008 economic crisis has prompted budget and staff cuts.

The reasons for this change vary from country to country. In Sweden and China, controversy about inadequate communication at times of crisis (the 2004 tsunami in the first case and the 2003 outbreak of SARS in the second) has been a spur to the expansion of capacity. Spain, Poland and Chile place the development of more professionalized government communication in the context of democratic emergence from authoritarian pasts. Singapore, on the other hand, appears to have considered it as a means for ensuring a compliant population although, as Lee points out, there are some hopeful signs since the 2011 elections that the government realizes that ‘it must evolve its communication approach and style’. With the exception of Zimbabwe, in every country studied, there are new developments in government communication giving relevance and responding to changing demands of media and/or citizens.

This shift, however, has not been assessed by authors in a similar way. In a number of countries (Germany, the United States, United Kingdom and Australia), this increase of resources and the development of strategic approaches have been associated with a debate about the ‘professionalization of government communication’: chapters report controversies about governments using their communication resources to pursue partisan goals and employing ‘spin’ to manipulate the public and media. Debates about the politicization of government communication have been particularly lively in countries with high levels of media freedom, suggesting that they are a healthy indicator of a press sector prepared to hold politicians to account. However, the understanding here of professionalization – more strategic and resourced government communication – leading to more manipulative communication suggests to us that more thought needs to be given the definition of professionalization and professionalism being used in political communication scholarship.

Maarek, for example, suggests that politicization is the natural condition of government communication and that the notion of impartial 'communication publique' is an impractical one. It is certainly true that the communication advantages and imperatives of incumbency are considerable: governments command huge resources and the governing party wants to maintain public approval and has political communication objectives. However, it is also clear that the controversies and growing distrust of politicians in Western democracies have prompted moves to put in place measures to ensure citizen-oriented communication. Germany and the United States, for example, have introduced legislation and Britain developed policy to safeguard the non-partisanship or impartiality of government communication.

The challenge is, then, to define more clearly professionalism and its component elements. There is little research, for instance, about the definition of non-partisanship for government communication and whether, in fact, it contributes to its professional practice. The same can be said with regard to transparent, accountable and participative government communication. Developing commonly shared measures, drawing on work already being done for other sectors, would provide a useful contribution to building professional government communication capacity that truly serves the citizen.

Finally, there is little microlevel research on the professional values and attitudes of government communicators. Systematic work in this area would assist in understanding the shared and divergent interpretations of professional government communication found across different cultures.

### ***Digital technology and the empowering and/or controlling of citizens***

One of the key developments in government communication, reflected in this study, is the uptake of new technology. With the exception of Zimbabwe, governments everywhere are using the internet to deliver more efficiently government services and messages. Social media are used across the world to interact with citizens and mainstream media. Digital engagement including e-information, e-consultation and e-participation, are the buzz-words of this brave, new digital world.

However, developing e-government capacity as defined by the United Nations' study (2010), is no guarantee of increased citizen empowerment. In Lee's account, Singapore is an example of the development of digital participation where citizens are regularly and frequently consulted about government policy initiatives. However, the lack of mechanisms to ensure transparent and accountable processes, key values for citizen empowerment,

has led to what Lee refers to as 'feedback fatigue'. Singaporeans no longer believe these consultations have any real impact and are instead mere window-dressing exercises to give the appearance of open government communication.

However, Lee also points out that the digital environment can provide the venue for citizens' communicational interaction in ways that can undermine governments' attempts to control, misinform or not inform at all. Semetko and Wadhwa point to a similar phenomenon in India with the rise of social networking sites and China too, albeit in a controlled environment, is experiencing the dissolving effects of internet technology on governments' attempts to control public opinion.

These are exciting developments found at different speeds and intensities across divergent media and political systems. However, they also have a flip side. The internet is also the home of special interests, rumour and disinformation. Powerful groups, and there is none more powerful than big government, can capture and manipulate its specific dynamics and it is clear that a Panglossian view of the democratizing effects of digital media is naïve (see Mozorov, 2012). But nor should we, as these chapters suggest, be hopelessly pessimistic. The internet is opening up new possibilities, in engagement, in gaining citizen insight, in transparency. The challenge, we believe, is to understand how digital media can in fact be employed in government communication in ways that can encourage grown-up conversations about policies, priorities and social goods. This will require thinking about suitable oversight structures and cultures.

## Conclusions

This book brings together research on central government communication in 15 countries incorporating concepts and perspectives from public relations, corporate and strategic communication studies to the political communication tradition. It has been a challenging endeavour first because our research subject, central government communication, can be said to have inhabited for some time a kind of empirical and theoretical no-man's land in which, furthermore, the raw data is neither easily identifiable nor collectable. For this reason, we are specially grateful to our fellow authors for having brought together, against the odds, the material necessary to build a collection of case studies and data covering a wide set of parameters. We hope that the work will constitute a first step towards the systematization of dispersed and fragmented data on government communication from different countries. However, there is still much to do. The second part of the challenge is its interdisciplinary character. Interdisciplinary research requires multiple efforts



by scholars from different areas so that, as we have attempted, advances can be made in the definition, understanding and practice of government communication.

As we stated in Chapter 1, in this book we have sought to respond to both challenges. We hope that it will be taken as a modest starting point for future research that will bring together multiple theoretical perspectives and richer and commonly defined data sets. In turn, these will allow researchers to better understand the role and practice of government communication in the development of communities.

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