Sanders, Karen. "The strategic shift of UK government communication." *Government Communication: Cases and challenges*. Ed. Karen Sanders and María José Canel. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 79–98. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472544629.ch-005>>.

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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.¹ 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).²

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

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

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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