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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 SARKOZY¹

From 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.² 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.³

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.⁴ 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,⁵ 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 drank?'), 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.⁶

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.⁷

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'*).⁸

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).⁹ 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,¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.¹² 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.¹³

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).¹⁴

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,¹⁵ a number of Saussez's main decisions had unexpected unhappy outcomes. To cite some of these mishaps,¹⁶ 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 Belcaceem, 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'¹⁷ 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, 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, 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, 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, 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, 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, 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, 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, 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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