

# **Between media and politics:**

Can government press officers hold the line in the age of ‘political spin’? The case of the UK after 1997

**Ruth Garland**

*The London School of Economics and Political Science  
Department of Media and Communications*

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## **Declaration**

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## Abstract

The aim of this study is to use the concept of ‘mediatization’ to inform a critical, grounded and fine-grained empirical analysis of the institutional dynamics that operate at the interface between government and the media in a liberal democracy. This thesis applies a novel theoretical and empirical approach to the familiar narrative of ‘political spin’, challenging the common assumption that government communications is either a neutral professional function, or an inherently unethical form of distorted communication. In May 1997, Labour came into power on a landslide, bringing into government its 24/7 strategic communications operation, determined to neutralise what it saw as the default right-wing bias of the national media. In the process, the rules of engagement between government and the media were transformed, undermining the resilience of government communications and unleashing a wave of resistance and response.

Much academic attention to date has focused on party political news management, while the larger but less visible civil service media operation remains relatively un-examined and under-theorised, although some northern European scholars are exploring mediatization from *within* public bureaucracies. This study takes a qualitative approach to analyzing change between 1997 and 2014, through 16 in-depth interviews with former, largely middle-ranking, departmental government communicators, most of whom had performed media relations roles. This was a group of civil servants that had spent their working lives in close proximity to ministers during a time of rapidly increasing media scrutiny. These witness accounts were augmented by interviews with six journalists and three politically-appointed special advisers, together with a systematic analysis of key contemporary and archival documents. The aim was to provide insights into change over time within a shared policy and representational space that is theorised here as the ‘cross-field’, where media act as a catalyst for the concentration of political power. What can and does government communication in its current form contribute to the democratic ideal of the informed citizen?

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## **Prologue: Government communications and the road to the 2003 Iraq war**

The publication by the UK government of the dossier, *Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction* on 24 September 2002, and everything that followed in the lead up to the death of the weapons expert Dr David Kelly on 17 July 2003, has been, and continues to be, widely scrutinised (Butler, 2004; Chilcot, 2016a; Hutton, 2004). What is less well-known is the role of the government information service in producing what turned out to be an inaccurate document in which "more weight was placed on the intelligence than it could bear", and which stretched available intelligence "to the outer limits"(Butler, 2004). The chain of events was unique; in his public statement at the launch of the Iraq Inquiry on 6 July 2016, Sir John Chilcot described the UK's actions in going to war as its first "invasion and full-scale occupation of a sovereign state" since the Second World War. It cannot be claimed, therefore, that this was typical of media operations within government (Chilcot, 2016b). What it does show, I would contend, is that a government with an unassailable parliamentary majority, in charge of a powerful narrative, in control of the official tools through which to disseminate the narrative, and without sufficient challenge, is capable of delivering a campaign which is, at best, partial, and at worst, deceptive (P. Taylor, 2013). The effect of the promotional campaign associated with the dossier of September 2002 was profound, resulting in lasting damage to the reputation of Tony Blair, and, according to the Chilcot report, providing a "damaging legacy, including undermining trust and confidence in Government statements" which "may make it more difficult to secure support for Government policy" (Executive Summary, Chilcot, 2016a, pp. 131, 116), see also (Seldon, 2005; Whiteley, Clarke, Sanders, & Stewart, 2016).

Herring and Robinson's analysis of the paper trail of documents leading up to the production of the dossier concluded that the "inaccurate picture" presented, and the publicity around it, formed "the core component of deceptive, organised political persuasion which involved communication officials working closely with politicians and intelligence officials" (Herring & Robinson, 2014, pp. 579-580). The most visible component of the campaign was the widely publicised claim, as stated by Tony Blair in the foreword to the dossier, that Saddam's "military planning allows for some of the WMD to be ready within 45 minutes of an order to use them" (HM Government, 2002, p. 4), a claim which arose a few weeks before the dossier was published but was "deemed unreliable" less than two years later (Herring & Robinson, 2014, p. 574).

The claim appeared as the second judgement in the executive summary of the dossier, was highlighted by Tony Blair in his statement to Parliament on 24 September, and appeared in newspaper headlines like ‘45 minutes from attack’ (*Evening Standard*, 24/9/2002), and ‘Brits 45mins from doom’ (*The Sun*, 25/9/2002)(HM Government, 2002, p. 5).

One little-known player was John Williams, the former journalist who succeeded Alastair Campbell as political editor at *The Daily Mirror* in 1994, and become Director of Communication at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in July 2000. His background was untypical for the Foreign Office, which usually appointed departmental civil servants into roles in the press office, but was not unusual for one of the new breed of press officer recruited into government following the departure of most of the Heads of Communication after 1997 (Kuhn, 2007; R Negrine, 2008). As is evident from Williams’ statement to the Chilcot Inquiry<sup>1</sup>, his experience as a journalist did not equip him to handle complex political crosswinds and spot the institutional pitfalls quickly enough to avoid them (*John Williams: Statement for the Iraq Inquiry*, 2010).

We can see from Williams’ statement that although he was close to the Foreign Secretary and travelled everywhere with him, his knowledge was “partial”; he had not been aware, for example, of important correspondence between 10 Downing Street and the White House, or of concerns among officials within his own department. This led him to believe that “the Foreign Office was playing a more important role in Iraq policy than I now believe to be the case,” a factor related to the centralization of communications activity and the ‘freezing out’ of the Foreign Office from No.10 policy-making on Iraq after 2001 (Meyer, 2006). Williams was aware of the FCO’s view that “the material available was weak on Iraq” so was “instinctively against the idea of a dossier” because the exercise “seemed to me to rest on uncertainties” but his lack of knowledge or involvement in key meetings made it difficult for him to challenge No.10’s request, in March 2002, to produce a note setting out ideas for a media campaign. The first he knew about the decision to publish a dossier was when he read about it in a newspaper<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The full statement is available at [www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/50500/JohnWilliams-witness-statement.pdf](http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/50500/JohnWilliams-witness-statement.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> On April 5, *The Independent* reported that “A dossier detailing alleged links between Iraq and international terrorists has been delayed, but Mr Blair's spokesman said the information will be released in the public domain ‘at the appropriate time’”. April 2002 was the month when Blair met Bush at his Crawford ranch and they discussed the international situation

Williams warned in a memo of 4 September 2002 that: “there is no ‘killer fact’ that proves that Saddam must be taken on now”. It appears that the 45-minute claim became the ‘killer fact’. At a meeting on 5 September he was asked by John Scarlett to be the ‘golden pen’; the person with the skills to produce a document fit for publication. The next day, Jack Straw and the Permanent Secretary at the FCO, Michael Jay, made clear that the document should be produced by the Foreign Office, not No.10, and agreed that Williams should be the ‘golden pen’. He did this “routine job” over the weekend, which involved “taking the strongest points and putting them in an executive summary” but felt that “the result was underwhelming”. At this stage, there was no reference to the 45-minute claim. Despite government claims that the first draft was produced by the Joint Intelligence Committee, Williams’ draft preceded it and bears a strong resemblance to it (Herring & Robinson, 2014).

He expresses regret at not consulting middle-ranking officials at the FCO who he now knows had had serious doubts about Iraq’s WMDs, and at not raising his own doubts “more robustly and directly with Alastair Campbell”. Although he accepts that his role as Director of Communication was to offer the “yes, but” challenge, he felt “it would have been improper for a spokesman to question the accuracy of intelligence”. He explains that “I followed the policy laid down by the elected Prime Minister, and had no objection to it *other than my own instincts*, which I felt were outweighed by his” (my emphasis). From his Chilcot submission, he appears to have been struggling to see the full picture, caught between No.10 and the Foreign Office over the Iraq agenda, and only intermittently involved in discussions about the communications plan leading up to the House of Commons debate on 24 September at which the Prime Minister made a persuasive case against Saddam Hussein. Williams appeared isolated from his peers in the Government Information and Communication Service (GICS), and the special advisers within the FCO, so had no obvious peer networks that could have helped him to piece together a fuller picture. In this sense, far from simply being part of a ‘political spin’ operation, he had become an accessory in a political battle being waged above him (Garnett, 2010; Kuhn, 2007).

The cautiously-worded yet critical official report into the quality of intelligence leading up to the Iraq War, the so-called Butler report, criticized the dossier for not including sufficient caveats as to the uncertainty behind some of the claims (Butler, 2004; Wring, 2005a). The report stated that the informal nature of decision-making

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over a barbecue. See <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/blair-meets-bush-to-discuss-peace-plan-prospects-9130462.html>

(so-called ‘sofa government’) “made it much more difficult for members of the cabinet outside the small circle directly involved to bring their political judgment and experience to bear on the major decisions for which the Cabinet as a whole must carry responsibility” (Butler, 2004)(paras 609-610). Twelve years later, the Chilcot Report agreed that there were a number of occasions when the Cabinet was not consulted when it should have been and that the dossier was presented “with a certainty that was not justified” (Chilcot, 2016a). In the House of Lords debate on 12 July 2016 in response to the Chilcot report’s publication, Lord Butler went further, describing the then government as “dysfunctional”, and its “disregard for the machinery of government” as irresponsible (Foster, 2016).

There is always the risk that a headline event such as the UK government dossier of September 2002 reveals and obscures in equal measure. Chilcot accepts that many of the lessons learned from this case are “context dependent” but that general lessons can and should be applied in relation to the decision-making process in government. The report agrees with Butler in calling for a clear distinction to be drawn between the political imperative to *argue for* particular policy actions, and the requirement on the part of officials to *present evidence* (Chilcot, 2016a). As this study will demonstrate, this distinction was a key underlying principle of the government communications service as established after WW2. The undermining of this distinction is considered by critics to be a root cause of the crisis in public trust and public communication “that is sapping the vitality of democratic political culture” (Blumler & Coleman, 2010, p. 140). This thesis provides an in-depth, empirically grounded study of the role of the government information service, from the point of view of those who had ‘situated agency’ within it, to find out how typical the type of marginalization described by John Williams might be, what principles determine public communication on the part of governing politicians and officials, and how both principle and practice in government communications have changed since 1997.

# Chapter 1: A critique of the narrative of ‘political spin’

## 1.1 Introduction

“Privileged access to the sources of relevant knowledge makes possible an inconspicuous domination over the colonized public of citizens cut off from these sources and placated with symbolic politics”(Habermas, 2008, p. 317).

National governments play a dominant role as both a source of news for journalists, and as co-creators of political narratives (Cook, 1998; Graber, 2003). We have seen how the case of the Iraq War provided a conspicuous example of government-led news management. Less visible is what goes on day-to-day inside the corridors of power, leading to the suspicion that high-profile controversies such as the Iraq War are the tip of the iceberg. This suspicion is manifested in the narrative of ‘political spin’, where ‘spin’ is a colloquial term that can be loosely defined here as the practice whereby governments routinely exploit their dominant position as news providers for partisan purposes. This suspicion has generated much academic and public attention since the term was first coined in the 1980s<sup>3</sup> but much of this attention is anecdotal, rather than empirically grounded, and focuses on party political news management. The much larger civil service-led communications operation has been “strangely neglected” (Strömbäck, 2011); attracting relatively little academic attention (Sanders, 2011, p. 11). According to two scholars who have conducted research into UK government communications, the subject “remains, as yet, chronically under-researched, despite its increasing centrality to democratic governance” (Moore, 2006, p. 11), while the wider issue of “the institutionalisation of PR as part of government has largely been ignored” (Macnamara, 2014, p. 30).

I will argue that the conventional narrative of political spin correctly identifies some troubling developments in the way governments communicate with the public through the media, but that it simplifies and demonises the process of strategic communications by governments while underplaying its importance in the exercise of political power. Rather than helping to explain recent changes in how governments

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<sup>3</sup> It is not clear when the use of the term ‘political spin’ began, but, according to one account, the first use of the term ‘spin doctor’ has been traced to *The New York Times* in 1984, in an article about the aftermath of the televised debate between the US presidential candidates Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale. See [www.theguardian.com/notesandqueries/query/0.5753.-1124.00.htm](http://www.theguardian.com/notesandqueries/query/0.5753.-1124.00.htm).

communicate through the media, the charge of political spin has a more symbolic purpose: as an indicator of public disquiet, and as a form of name-calling which holds certain agents responsible for manipulative and distorted public communication. In this chapter I will challenge some of the assumptions behind this narrative as it applies to the UK context, and explain how this will be explored theoretically and empirically in this thesis.

The conventional narrative is that political spin arrived with New Labour in 1997 and that it is “always dangerous” (King & Crewe, 2013, p. 301; Osborne, 1999). The issue is more nuanced. Indeed, Moore has argued from his archival study of the post-war development of UK government communications that ‘modern spin’ originated during the 1940s when the Labour government realised that it could not rely on either the BBC or the newspapers to deliver its messages as reliably as they had done during the war. In addition, when considering UK government communications as an institution, this period is also an important reference point since this is when the UK government’s information service was conceived in its current form (Moore, 2006).

Although the arrival of New Labour in May 1997 is suggested as a turning point, in order to establish what was new, if anything, about government’s relations with the media after 1997, we need to examine some more recent antecedents. Especially important is the period of far-reaching media transformation known as the “third age” of political communication from the late 1980s onwards, when 24/7 media became established and the ground was laid for the creation of the marketing-oriented party communication machines across the political spectrum (Blumler, 2001; Wring, 2001), not just in the UK but in other liberal democracies. This opens up the question of the extent to which the UK’s national governing executive, known as Whitehall, is distinctive or comparable with other liberal democracies.

It is no coincidence that the *narrative* of political spin took off after 1997. Although there were continuities, the changes that took place from May 1997 were not simply a continuation of what had gone before. As contemporary accounts have shown, Labour came into power on a landslide, determined to develop and exploit the resources of the civil service information machine in order to better arm themselves against what they saw as the default right-wing bias of the national media, especially the national press, which they believed had kept the party out of power for 18 years, especially through personal attacks on Neil Kinnock as party leader (Campbell, 2012; Macintyre, 1999). The nimble, aggressive, 24/7 strategic communications operation

that they brought into government with them had already encountered the Government Information Service (GIS), staffed by civil servants, while in opposition, and had formed a “poor opinion” of it, having “run rings around it while Major was still Prime Minister”(Negrine, 2008; Seldon, 2005, p. 301). Within two years of the election, the number of politically-appointed special advisers had doubled, virtually the entire leadership of the (renamed) GICS<sup>4</sup> had been replaced, a review hastily commissioned by the Cabinet Secretary had recommended improved standards while retaining impartiality, and the Public Administration Select Committee had published an inquiry which noted poor morale among government communicators and called for better co-operation between press offices, special advisers and ministers (Mountfield, 1997; Public Administration Select Committee, 1998).

Similar developments have been observed through comparative studies conducted in a wide range of jurisdictions within Europe, the United States, Australia and New Zealand (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2007; 2010; Esser, 2001; 2008; Esser & Pfetsch, 2004; Esser & Strömbäck, 2014). It has been claimed that the increase in resources devoted to specialist communications staff, the introduction of greater central coordination and a more proactive and planned approach to news management, led to ‘politicization’, that is, the exertion of greater power and control over the central bureaucracy by ruling politicians (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2008; Shaw & Eichbaum, 2014). In this thesis I argue that such changes did take place and they were profound and permanent, threatening the *resilience* of the post-war communications structure, which had been in place since 1946, and unleashing a wave of *resistance* and *response*.

Much of the blame for political spin has been laid at the door of politicians and their politically-appointed so-called ‘spin doctors’, special advisers of whom the Director of Communications at No.10, Alastair Campbell (1997-2003), is the best known. However, the voices of middle-ranking civil servants, those at Director level and below, based in the departments, where most policy and legislative development and communications take place, have barely been heard, and their particular contribution to government communication through the media since 1997 is little known. There are several reasons for this: convention holds that civil servants do not speak in public, they rarely publish memoirs and, as mentioned in the opening to this chapter,

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<sup>4</sup> As of November 1997, the GIS became the Government Information and Communication Service (GICS).



the academy rarely considers the bureaucratic dimension of government communications, either in its own right, or as part of the ecology of political communication.

This introductory chapter will critically review the conventional narrative that I am referring to as ‘the narrative of political spin’. I will analyze some of its key assumptions and claims, suggesting that if the issues are to be properly understood and investigated, the debate should be reframed as a tri-partite interaction, involving both cooperation and struggle between party politics and the public bureaucracy, and their relations with media. At the meso-level, it has been suggested that under the pressure of media change, the process of politicization mutually reinforces mediatization – the meta-process defined as the increasing institutionalization of media throughout society (Hepp, Hjarvard, & Lundby, 2015). Rather than apportioning blame to media and/or political actors, the mediatization approach examines higher order influences on both domains. I will argue that where the struggle for party political control over the public presentation, or *re*-presentation, of government actions and decisions, is seen to serve special interests over and above the public interest, there is a risk that, ultimately, public support for democratic institutions will be undermined. Furthermore, as Cappella and Jamieson have argued, when the mainstream media operate on the (in their view) false assumption that political leaders are inherently self-interested to the exclusion of the public good, citizens will increasingly accept “attributions that induce mistrust” leading to a corrosive ‘spiral of cynicism’ (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997, p. 142).

At the outset, it should be made clear what we mean by government communications. This study is concerned with changes over time in the ways in which the UK’s national governing executive managed its relations with media, and most particularly, its relations with the highly centralised, adversarial and partisan national press and the regulated broadcasting sector dominated by the public service broadcaster, the BBC (Sanders & Canel, 2013). This must take into account the extent to which the government as a whole, through ministers, special advisers and civil servants, serves the communications needs of the public, and whether the impartial principle is being overshadowed or even eclipsed, by party political interest.

Whitehall is defined here as the central public bureaucracy, the civil service, operating together with the party in power through the ministers who provide political leadership for the 20 or so departments of state. Excluded from this analysis are the

executive agencies and regulatory bodies associated with the national public sector, local government, the devolved administrations of Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, and other agencies such as the NHS and police. Also beyond the scope of this thesis are the media relations and public consultation activities of policy specialists within the civil service, which may be considerable and are also worthy of study. 'Westminster' refers to the legislature; most specifically the Houses of Commons and Lords, and the Select Committees that hold government departments to account. It has also given its name to a type of non-Presidential political system with unitary powers, such as those operating in the former British territories of New Zealand, Australia and Canada, where the Prime Minister is also the leader of the political party that commands the majority in parliament.

Our concern is most specifically with the officials who conduct media relations on behalf of the government, rather than the government communications service as a whole. Even Parliamentary select committees have found it almost impossible to establish the number of civil servants employed to manage the media, since they are categorised in different ways in different departments but one estimate puts the numbers of communications staff at 3,000 by 2013 (Hood & Dixon, 2015). At a crude estimate, around 30% are press officers, equivalent to about 750 FTE staff covering central government as a whole. However, although our focus is on officials who specialise in media relations, we need to consider the ecology of government communications as a whole, and most particularly, changes over time in the priority given to different types of communication, whether direct, such as advertising and other forms of paid for publicity, or mediated, as with the various ways in which government officials communicate with the public through the media. These officials are not simply the press officers officially designated as government spokespeople, but increasingly the politically appointed special advisers – temporary civil servants who are exempt from the requirement of impartiality - who manage the media on behalf of ministers.

## **1.2 The narrative of political spin**

In his evidence to the Leveson Inquiry, Alastair Campbell claimed that "the systematic undermining of Labour and its leader and policies...was a factor in Labour's inability properly to connect with the public and ultimate defeat"(Campbell, 2012). John Major told Leveson that his own "lack of a close relationship with any part of the

media may have been a contributory factor to the hostile media the 1990-97 governments often received” and that this had influenced “the very close relationship with the media sought by my immediate successors” (Major, 2012). The suggestion from both sides of the political spectrum is that British governments prior to 1997 had failed to prioritise news management; a state of affairs that was rapidly transformed after 1997.

Deploying the narrative of political spin, critics claimed that politicians increasingly interfered with the day to day work of government press officers, and employed politically-aligned special advisers to carry out media relations tasks that previously would have been carried out by impartial government press officers<sup>5</sup>. The use of the term ‘political spin’ by journalists to accuse special advisers of trading privileged government information in exchange for self-advantaging media coverage can be seen as a partial one since it ignores their own participation in what is a mutual process.

Conversely, the political strategists at the heart of New Labour argued that the form of ‘aggressive political PR’ (Moloney, 2001) which led to accusations that the government of 1997 had ushered in a new age of political spin, was born from the scars of the fourth successive election defeat in 1992 which threatened the very existence of Labour as an electoral force (Hyman, 2012; Mandelson, 2012). Philip Gould, one of the architects of New Labour, saw the task of overcoming the electoral weaknesses caused by a partisan right-wing press as a legitimate political battle fought using media management as a weapon (Gould, 1998; Hewitt & Gould, 1993).

In setting out the background to the questions posed by this study, this chapter will discuss the following three assumptions that lie behind the established narrative of political spin:

1. A continuing professed attachment to the ideal of impartiality together with persistent consequent claims of politicization
2. The use of ideas of demonization and corruption to explain the changing relationship between politicians and the media

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<sup>5</sup> A google scholar search of academic articles published between 1990 and 2016 using the terms ‘political spin’, ‘spin doctor’ or ‘special adviser/UK’ found 3,440, 4,920 and 6,280 references respectively. The most significant critiques from authors such as Gaber, Davis, McNair, Franklin, Macnamara, Moloney, Moore, Osborne, Jones, Sixsmith and many others, are referred to in detail elsewhere in this thesis.

3. The role of ethics and propriety in defending government communications against the charge of party political propaganda.

#### 1.2.1 Civil service impartiality and the threat of politicization

In its most basic sense, impartiality, defined as neutrality whereby a body of permanent officials serve successive governments, persists as an almost universally upheld ideal, not only among civil servants but also among politicians and commentators (Blair, 2004; Casalicchio & Foster, 2016). The current Civil Service Code defines impartiality as “acting solely according to the merits of the case and serving equally well governments of different political persuasions” (Civil Service, 2015). This interpretation conceives of the impartial official as a blank slate on which governments imprint their own ambitions and aspirations, and downplays the role of independence in delivering good government. In a speech given in 2014, one of the UK’s most respected senior civil servants, the then Permanent Secretary for Business Innovation and Skills, Martin Donnelly, broadened the interpretation to argue that impartial advice from permanent officials is key to *effective* decision-making and therefore *good* government (my emphasis):

Independence offers a promising starting point. It limits the attractions of telling Ministers what they might like to hear and provides a framework to offer a more objective assessment of options (Donnelly, 2014).

Donnelly warns of the risk of senior civil servants becoming “uncritical” through their close working relationships with ministerial teams, and considers the exercise of impartiality as being enacted in three main ways: through neutrality, as referred to above, through challenging what he refers to as a bias towards optimism on the part of ministers, and through the capacity to provide opposing viewpoints, however unwelcome. Ministers have the “last word” but the fundamental responsibility of the senior civil servant is the “honest management of public money”. This is a tacit acknowledgement that, far from delivering a blank sheet to ministers, impartiality is a public good, which takes effort and work to sustain and requires some autonomy on the part of officials to act in the public interest. According to this interpretation, the practice of impartiality requires the official to put public welfare above individual inclination to serve particular interest groups (Scott, 1996). This leaves open the question of who defines *effective* decision-making, *good* government, *public* welfare and *honest* management of public money but implies that such distinctions must be negotiated by political and administrative elites. This opens up the possibility that

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even subtle changes in common understandings over time of what constitutes impartiality can lead to changes in how it is exercised; in other words, impartiality is both a living practice and an abstract ideal.

In her definition of impartiality, Mendus considers that “impartiality is best made manifest through the concept of agreement” although it is not clear who is or should be party to this agreement and what role citizens might play as opposed to elites (Mendus, 2008). Part of this agreement, she argues, is the widespread, even unanimous, agreement that impartiality reflects a commitment to equality. This provides a moral and ethical charge to the ideal of impartiality based on the suggestion that citizens need assurance from those placed in positions of power over them that “the principles governing our society are such that they can be defended even to those who do least well under them”. This raises the issues of accountability and compliance and the question of to what extent *partial* concerns can be permitted to override *impartial* ones. This question has run like a thread through most of the critiques of government communications since 1997, and, however implicitly, through the narrative of political spin, as we shall see.

Critics of modern government, and especially of the role of special advisers in promoting ‘political spin’, argue that many of the government-led reforms since the 1980s aimed at speeding up ‘delivery’ in line with the aspirations of the government of the day have successively undermined the practice of impartiality, if not the ideal. This has led to charges of ‘seeping politicization’ (Hennessy, 1999) and see also (Foster, 2001; 2005; 2014; Gaber, 2004; Harris, 1990; Ingham, 2010; Jones, 2001; Lodge, 2007; Sixsmith, 2007; Wheeler, 2003). Diamond, however, refers to such critiques of the almost constant machinery of government reforms since the 1980s (Dunleavy & White, 2010) (Hood & Dixon, 2015) as the “end of Whitehall” thesis, which valorises the idea of civil service neutrality and impartiality without questioning it (Diamond, 2014b, p. 394). One critic, for example, went so far as to accuse Labour after 1997 of “sweeping away the notion of Civil Service impartiality and effectively ‘politicising’ all government communication” (Louw, 2005, p. 91).

As might be expected, Britain’s former and serving senior civil servants refer to a politically impartial Civil Service as “fundamental” (Phillips, 2005); as “the greatest bequest of Northcote Trevelyan”<sup>6</sup>(O'Donnell, 2005); supported by “a strong political

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<sup>6</sup> The Northcote Trevelyan report of 1854 established a merit-based, permanent bureaucracy for the first time (Northcote & Trevelyan, 1854).

consensus” (Turnbull, 2005); and potentially at risk from “recent reforms (that) might erode the traditional values of the civil service” (Prashar, 2005). But it is not just civil servants who regularly reiterate their support. Political leaders on all sides continue to publicly uphold the values of the British civil service in principle, while criticising them in practice. In a speech to civil servants in 2004,<sup>7</sup> Tony Blair stated that the “enduring values (...) of integrity, impartiality and merit have proved timeless”, before going on to criticize the service for failing to adapt to changing times (Blair, 2004). In a speech<sup>8</sup> given in September 2012 the Conservative government minister Oliver Letwin described the civil service as “one of the great bulwarks against tyranny” because it “provides a continuing safeguard that ministers of any persuasion will not be able to use the machinery of the state to personal or party political advantage”(Letwin, 2012). Yet, at the same time, both David Cameron and the Cabinet Office minister, Francis Maude, delivered unprecedented public criticism of the obstructiveness of civil servants (Cameron, 2012; Mason, 2012). Maude accused permanent secretaries of having “blocked agreed Government policy from going ahead or advised other officials not to implement ministerial decisions – that is unacceptable” (Mason, 2012)<sup>9</sup>. Similarly, in “one of the most stinging attacks launched by a Prime Minister”, David Cameron told activists at the 2011 Conservative Spring Forum that Whitehall “bureaucrats in government departments” were “the enemies of enterprise” (Adetunji, 2011). This contrasts with his outgoing speech as he left office on 13 July 2016 when he praised civil servants, “whose professionalism and impartiality is one of our country’s greatest strengths” (Casalicchio & Foster, 2016).

Many arguments about change in Whitehall after 1997 deploy the notion of ‘politicization’, defined as a dynamic process whereby public service becomes more compatible with the partisan and policy preferences of elected politicians (Peters & Pierre, 2004b), thereby constraining the public servant’s capacity to “speak truth to power” (Wildavsky, 1979). Eichbaum defines politicization more specifically as “substantive administrative politicization”; the increasingly partisan, or party

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<sup>7</sup> Read the full speech at <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2004/feb/24/Whitehall.uk1>

<sup>8</sup> For the full speech see <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/events/why-mandarins-matter-keynote-speech-rt-hon-oliver-letwin-mp>.

<sup>9</sup> The former Conservative Cabinet Minister, William Waldegrave, who served between 1990 and 1997, after an early career as a political adviser at No 10 (1971-75), told Peter Hennessy in a recent interview that: “I never for a moment accepted the idea that civil servants were obstructive. It is the definition of a feeble minister if he starts to blame the civil service for not getting his way or not delivering his policies.” His officials had doubts about the poll tax, and told him so. (Civil Service World, 5/8/2015).

political, influence over *the substance* of officials' advice or outputs, whether White Papers, policy briefings, Parliamentary answers, PR campaigns or press releases. He claims that this presents "a clear and persistent threat to civil service impartiality"(Eichbaum & Shaw, 2008, p. 357) which, by "blurring boundaries of what is deemed appropriate," has a "ratchet effect...where tasks which once civil servants would have refused to do, over time become standard"(Dowding, 1995, p. 120).

Central to the argument relating to politicization is Britain's historic uncodified constitution, and the role of ministers in co-ordinating and prioritising government communications. The UK remains a political system with the greatest 'executive dominance' (Lijphart, 1999), despite the devolved regional governments and assemblies of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Within this majoritarian and still largely unitary structure, "the Prime Minister's powers are very extensive" although limited "largely by political constraints" (Hazell, Young, Waller, & Walker, 2012). Illustrating the "fusion of powers" within the UK parliament, as at March 2011, 20% of Coalition government MPs were on the executive payroll, either as ministers or parliamentary aides, and were therefore obliged to vote with the Government (Benwell & Gay, 2011; Public Administration Select Committee, 2011). In spite of the retrospective scrutiny of the select committee system, a strong leader, like Tony Blair, with a large Parliamentary majority, had the political capital to exploit the use of prerogative powers (in other countries, such as the US, known as executive powers), and, by making use of a "highly advanced, sophisticated and influential politics of national leadership" (Foley, 2013), to command the government's communications agenda. Chilcot makes clear that this was the case in relation to the release of the 2002 Iraq dossier, for example (Chilcot, 2016a). However, one of the constraints on any Prime Minister is Whitehall departmentalism and the doctrine of ministerial responsibility, which confer "considerable influence and leverage on ministers" (Diamond, 2014b, p. 279). This does not deny the powers of the Prime Minister but suggests that, in seeking to identify political sources of power of government communications, it would be fruitful to look to the departments, as well as No.10.

### 1.2.2 Politicians and the media: a narrative of demonization and corruption

Emotive language and the demonization of politically-appointed special advisers as mere 'spin doctors', typify political and journalistic discourse about the negative

impacts of political spin. These hybrid officials<sup>10</sup>, who are employed as temporary civil servants but exempted from the requirement of impartiality and answerable only to ministers and ultimately the Prime Minister, largely work in the shadow of their political masters, and attract a particular kind of dislike from politicians, journalists, civil servants and even members of the public. Tony Wright, the former Labour Chair of the Public Administration Select Committee, noted that special advisers are “ranked somewhere alongside paedophiles in the lexicon of media opprobrium” (Wright, 2002). The reasons for this are not clear but it may have something to do with their new and ambivalent position. Special advisers originated during the Labour government of Harold Wilson in 1974, they perform ill-defined roles for particular political masters; and their influence appears to be growing in apparently unaccountable ways, ensuring that their institutional position remains fluid and contested. Yet despite the condemnation, their numbers continue to rise, they increasingly perform media relations roles, and they continue to attract controversy (Blick & Jones, 2013; Foster, 2014; Gay, 1992, 2013; Hillman, 2014; 2013b; Yong & Hazell, 2014).

Their impact has been considered so toxic that the convention since the 1970s that each Secretary of State can have no more than two special advisers was only seriously challenged from 2012 onwards by the proposal for Extended Ministerial Offices (EMOs) which allowed ministers the option of taking direct and full responsibility for appointments and management of staff, albeit in consultation with the departmental Permanent Secretary (*Civil Service Reform Plan*, 2012; Cabinet Office, 2013a). At the time of writing this development appears to have been halted and the five existing pilot EMOs are currently being dismantled<sup>11</sup>. If implemented across government, this would have dramatically increased the number of ministerial personal appointees at the top of the civil service, bringing Whitehall closer to most other civil services in the level of political support offered to ministers. For critics, the proposal for EMOs raised the spectre of French-style ‘cabinetization’ by stealth (Gouglas & Brans, 2016) and it was subject to sustained opposition from the House of Lords, retired civil

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<sup>10</sup> In their analysis of the working practices of more than 100 special advisers, Yong and Hazell concluded that “almost all ministers now regard them as indispensable” and that 60-70 hour working weeks were not uncommon (Yong & Hazell, 2014, p. 3).

<sup>11</sup> The reversal of the programme was confirmed by the Cabinet Office minister Ben Gummer in *Civil Service World*, Existing EMOs to be “dismantled”, 17 January 2017. See also recent commentary from the Institute for Government on the latest reiteration of the Ministerial Code (2016) <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/scrapping-extended-ministerial-offices-mistake>



servants and various Parliamentary Committees (Lodge, Kalitowski, Pearce, & Muir, 2013; Maude, 2013; Paun, 2013). The on-off implementation of the EMO illustrates an ongoing internal struggle taking place within Whitehall which will probably continue, between those who argue that more political appointments at departmental level would improve policy deliberation and implementation, and those who believe it would disrupt and ‘politicize’ the smooth running of government.

Opposition politicians frequently criticize ministerial aides but remain silent about them while in government. The opposition leader for the Conservatives, Michael Howard, had a famously proactive and combative approach to media management when he was Home Secretary<sup>12</sup> (Jones, 2010; Silverman, 2012) but in opposition accused Tony Blair of “being prepared to sell his soul to this political devil” (Sands, 2007). He called on the Prime Minister to take “responsibility for the activities of Alastair Campbell, who has lied and bullied his way across our political life and done more than anyone else to lower the tone of British politics in the past ten years”. John Major condemned Labour’s “slick presentation”, describing it as “the pornography of politics. It perverts. It is deceit licensed by the government” (Major, 2003, p. 12). Yet one journalist at the time recalled how, as Prime Minister, John Major was not only “obsessed” with what journalists were saying about him, but was frequently given to briefing them off the record, against the advice of his own press secretaries, often with disastrous results (Price, 2010).

Journalists are just as judgmental and ready to contrast their own “utopian and fantasized view of the media” with the cynical behaviour of politicians (Savage & Riffen, 2007, p. 92). By attributing spin to others, journalists “lionise themselves as protectors of the audience’s interests” (Atkinson, 2005). The journalist Mark Day, for example, referred to “the tentacles of spin” which “reach into every part of news gathering, clouding or corrupting the facts” (Day, 2013). The most extreme name-calling was reserved for Peter Mandelson, the Labour Director of Communications-turned Minister, who although never a special adviser, continued to advise Tony Blair on strategy and communication after he became an MP in 1992. He was frequently referred to as Dracula (Knight, 2011) and the Prince of Darkness<sup>13</sup>. Following his 1998

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<sup>12</sup> His special adviser was the future Prime Minister, David Cameron.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Prince of Darkness Returns’, BBC News, 12/10/1999. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/404194.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/404194.stm), and ‘Peter Mandelson: Prince of Darkness who travels the world spreading the gospel of New Labour’, Andrew Grice, the Independent, 20/04/2003. [http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/peter-](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/peter-25)

resignation, the myth developed that Mandelson, “having hairy arms, shaved the hair on the back of his hands”, and advised other MPs to do the same (Macintyre, 1999, p. 344). When he resigned in 2001 for the second time, he was described by the *Sun* newspaper as “a lying, manipulative, oily, two-faced, nasty piece of work who should never have been allowed back into Government” (25 January 2001). The broadsheet journalist, Andrew Rawnsley, describes “the trade of spin-doctoring” as “notorious for its flexible interpretation of the truth” (Rawnsley, 2000, p. 97) while the stalwart critic of New Labour’s approach to media relations, the former BBC journalist Nicholas Jones, referred to Alastair Campbell as “a masterly propagandist” (Jones, 2001, p. 185). Other journalists recalling their days in or close to the political lobby speak in similar terms (Osborne, 1999, 2005; Robinson, 2012; Sixsmith, 2007).

This form of political meta-coverage serves the purposes of both journalists and politicians by using the narrative of political spin to create “pantomime villains” as “the ones we love to hate, and then to blame them for what we perceive to be the excesses of contemporary political communication” (McNair, 2007b, p. 94). The Labour strategist, Philip Gould, saw the term “spin doctor” as a construct used by the media “without thought or understanding”. For him, “spin” was a neutral process, “a completely unexceptional activity” and that “putting the best progressive case to the media should not be a reason for criticism but a cause for pride” (Hewitt & Gould, 1993, p. 33). For politicians, deflecting blame in the name of spin conceals their own roles in manipulation, and even deceit, in order to gain advantage on the political battlefield. Critics, including academics, who pin the blame for deceptive communication on the ‘spin doctors,’ and frame the activity as mere PR, are in danger of downplaying the role of spin as a force in politics (Kuhn & Neveu, 2002). Esser argues that the term ‘spin doctor’ is used by journalists “indiscriminately to demonize any kind of professional PR” and to discredit a perfectly legitimate process – the strategic communication of policy by politicians, parties and governments “in the face of an autonomous and powerful journalism that pursues an agenda of its own and whose mechanisms and motives are not always exclusively oriented toward the public welfare” (Esser, 2001, pp. 40, 39).

The indiscriminate use of the term ‘spin’ and ‘spin doctor’ to describe *any* form of promotional activity forecloses the possibility that there could be a distinction

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[mandelson-prince-of-darkness-who-travels-the-world-spreading-the-gospel-for-new-labour-115966.html](http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-115966)

between legitimate and illegitimate, or proper and improper, political communication. According to the PR theorist, Jim Macnamara, who has carried out comparative research into government communications, the so-called “discourse of spin” does not stand up to scrutiny and serves only to “misrepresent reality in order to maintain power relations and the status quo” (Macnamara, 2014, p. 143). Others argue that the “dismissive labelling” of strategic PR as ‘spin’ “fails to accurately reflect how it might actually comprise part of the legitimate information management machinery of democratic societies” (L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006, p. 7). Equally, this also fails to consider how and in what circumstances strategic communications, or ‘spin,’ might become *illegitimate*. PR professionals themselves, the so-called spin doctors, whether government press officers or special advisers who “do the media”, to quote Gus O'Donnell (2013b), rarely speak up in their own defence or offer critiques of their practices.

#### 1.2.4 Propriety and ethics in government communications

The conduct of Whitehall ministers, special advisers and civil servants is regulated internally according to a series of propriety codes that hold government press officers responsible for providing a check on the politically-motivated news management operation favoured by ministers. Press officers are expected to provide “positive presentation of government policies and achievements, not misleading spin” but this makes the assumption that information-giving is quite separate from persuasion (Phillis, 2004). McNair argues that this unthinking demonization of persuasive communications in government is “echoed in the academy, where the critical traditions in media studies and political science have tended to view the modern practice of government communication as a perversion of what normative theory decrees the public sphere to be for”. What is required is a far more critical form of analysis, namely, the “demystification and deconstruction of a potentially undemocratic communication practice” which takes place “behind the closed doors of power” (McNair, 2007b, p. 95). This thesis addresses this concern by examining the witness accounts of those who not only observed the changes in government communications post-1997, but were held responsible for implementing and policing them.

The problematic distinction between information and spin carries through into more theoretical understandings of the relations between the media and deliberative democracy. Habermas' influential critique of “personally represented authority”, or

“re-feudalisation” was set against the ideal of deliberative democracy, and scholars tend to condemn outright what they see as the trend towards “more professionally managed structures of government communications” (McNair, 2007, p95). Historically, Habermas considered the link between the public and private spheres to be a mediated one, as “manifested in the clubs and organizational forms of a reading public composed of bourgeois private persons and crystallizing around newspapers and journals”. Yet he shows a particular distaste for the modern mediatized reality of “a public sphere dominated by mass media and large agencies, observed by market and opinion research, and inundated by the public relations work, propaganda, and advertising of political parties and groups”(Habermas, 2008, pp. 366, 367) .

The tendency to throw all the evils of promotional culture into a disreputable black box is also seen in King and Crew’s otherwise thorough investigation into disastrous policy-making, *The Blunders of Our Governments*, in which they claim that “all governments spin in some degree. All of them engage from time to time in symbolic politics, whether pure or otherwise. But *symbolism and spin are always dangerous*, including to the symbolists and the spinners” (my emphasis). This implies that well-marshalled, targeted and persuasive messaging is essentially corrupting, leading to the illogical conclusion that poorly-executed PR is more acceptable than good quality PR, and that symbolism has no place in politics (King & Crewe, 2013, p. 304). Marsh too, flatly condemns political promotional culture with his claim that “a rampant populism abetted by focus group politics, the marketing model and a 24-hour media cycle is surely profoundly corrupted” (Marsh, 2013). This fails to disaggregate the substance of strategic forms of communication or to acknowledge the quite legitimate and indeed essential role of rhetoric and persuasion in mainstream politics as a means of engaging the public, creating political consensus, and establishing a collective identity. As Manin states, “Only persuasive discourse seeking to change the opinion of others is in fact capable of eliciting the consent of a majority where, at the outset, there is nothing but a large number of divergent opinions” (Manin, 1997, p. 198). From the standpoint of political representation, the theorist Michael Saward considers “the active making of symbols or images of what is to be represented” as being of central importance in politics (Saward, 2010, p. 15).

Little is known about the mechanics of how politicians and civil servants work together at departmental level to craft government messages for public consumption. One of the few academics to have carried out ethnographic observations from within a Whitehall department refers to departments as “medieval baronies” ruled over by

departmental ministers (Rhodes, 2011). Norton, who conducted interviews with a quarter of all ministers serving between 1979 and 1997, describes departments as “the essential structural components of government”, where, unlike the Prime Minister, Secretaries of State exercise specific statutory powers within their own domains (Norton, 2000, p. 107). Davis, who has interviewed hundreds of civil servants, politicians and journalists, agrees that the “machinery of political publicity is driven by government departments and the competing leaderships of the main political parties” (Davis, 2010, p. 32). Thus, government communicators, and in particular press officers, work within a dual system of accountabilities, through political and civil service heads in both the departments and at the centre.

This places the Whitehall press officer at the centre of *four* sets of dynamics: the professional requirement to promote government policy; the commitment to serve the rights and needs of all citizens; the desire of political parties to promote themselves at the ballot box; and, as part of this, pressure from ministers to hide politically damaging activity (Turnbull, 2007). To this are added two further demands: the need to protect ministers from the temptation to abuse government information resources, and to ensure that departmental messages are coordinated with the corporate line from No.10. Their current proprietary code, like its previous iterations, has requirements that appear contradictory, or at best, difficult to reconcile, for example, stating that press officers must “remain impartial” while being “ready to promote the policies of the department and of the government as a whole”. In the five pages (out of 38) devoted to politicians and the press, they are advised to “maintain professional distance from ministers” while protecting them from “accusations of using public resources for party political purposes” (Government Communications Service, 2014b).

According to convention, the tool which enables civil servants to resist the dangers of politicization, is the doctrine, or article of faith held to be self-evident and only recently enshrined in law<sup>14</sup>: civil service impartiality. The blurring of boundaries between politics and an impartial civil service is a recurring theme in critiques of political spin in government. It is on this ground that the battle for control over the political agenda within the civil service has been fought almost continuously at least since the arrival at No.10 of Margaret Thatcher. Politicization, it is claimed, has

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<sup>14</sup> The Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010.  
[http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/25/pdfs/ukpga\\_20100025\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/25/pdfs/ukpga_20100025_en.pdf)

accelerated since the 1980s and become “the main source of disquiet” (Sausman & Locke, 2004) because it challenges the long-standing principle that civil servants need independence, or autonomy, to challenge their political masters – an important internal check on ministerial power. Bernard Ingham, Margaret Thatcher’s long-serving chief press secretary, warned that New Labour had “effectively created a hybrid system...without the consent or proper debate in Parliament that such a constitutional shift demands”(Ingham, 2003, p. 243).

Impartiality is considered to be both a norm and a cultural value which applies not only to the civil service but to national institutions such as the monarchy, the judiciary, the police, the universities and the BBC. For historian David Marquand, such “intermediate institutions” have traditionally protected the public from the politics of favouritism and patronage. An invisible line separating party political bias, and neutrality, is policed on trust by establishment officials, often in the face of debate and criticism, since impartiality is a principle of justice and equity which is context-dependent (Mendus, 2008). Marquand argues that the rise of “new managerialism” during the Thatcher years, which continued under Labour, placed public service values such as impartiality under threat (Marquand, 2004). The long-standing critic of the Blair government’s approach to media management, the former civil servant Christopher Foster, claims that major changes in practice that allowed ministers more control over senior appointments, were “as much an undermining of independence and impartiality as they would be of the judges” (Foster, 2005, p285).

Looking back over 20 years of attempts by politicians to reform Whitehall by making it more “responsive”, a paradox emerges. As we saw earlier, while all participants in the debate repeatedly reiterate their support for the ideal of Civil Service impartiality, ministers are increasingly publicly critical of what they see as civil service resistance to *their* reform agenda (Talbot, 2013). Here we see a power asymmetry: civil servants are duty bound to implement ministerial demands and proposals, but they neither initiate them nor have the right to publicly criticize them. Dowding questions the received wisdom on impartiality as a straightforward value, implying that, in practice, what is at stake is a power struggle over who wields power within the executive (Dowding, 1995, p.107).

These statements about impartiality from two powerful Conservative politicians, who disagree profoundly about civil service reform, show how elastic and contingent the concept of impartiality can be:

Governments come and go, and, in the absence of a codified constitution or formal separation of powers, it is this body of permanent officials that underpins the constitutional stability of our country. That is why a permanent and impartial civil service was established. Bernard Jenkin, Chair, Public Administration Select Committee, April 2014 (Jenkin, 2014)

The essence of impartiality is not indifference to the Government of the day but the ability to be equally passionate and committed to implementing a future Government's priorities and programme...It must be a passionate commitment to delivering the Government of the day's priorities. Francis Maude, Minister for the Cabinet Office, April 2014 (Maude, 2014).

As chair of the Committee that provides legislative challenge to the executive and monitors the civil service, Jenkin sees impartiality as a value that rises above party politics and the requirements of individual governments. As the (then) minister in charge of coordinating the communication of government policy from the centre, Maude sees it as a value that is subservient to the needs of the government of the day.

The discrepancy between ministerial pronouncements in favour of civil service impartiality, and their actions, can be seen as a form of “symbolic behaviour... a strategic element in political competition” where “individuals and groups are frequently hypocritical, reciting sacred myths without believing them and while violating their implications”(March & Olsen, 1984, p. 744). Within what remains predominantly a two-party political cartel, the UK's official Opposition may complain, but in practice knows that it will reap the benefits of incumbency (Katz & Mair, 2009). For Diamond the promise of benefits that accrue to governments within a power hoarding system, such as a discreet and compliant civil service, explains the persistence of executive dominance within the British political tradition (Diamond, 2014b). This will be discussed further in the next chapter, but it goes some way to explain, for example, why opposition politicians so frequently complain about the growth in the number of special advisers and the dangers of political spin, and yet when in power continue the process of increasing their numbers, as observed after the 1997 and 2010 elections<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> A House of Commons Standard Note in 2013 found that numbers had increased from 68 in 2010 to 98 as at 25 October 2013, while the special adviser wage bill rose from £2.1m in 2010 to £7.2m, at a time when the civil service as a whole experienced headcount reductions of 15% (Gay, 2013).

Civil servants are not immune from myth-making, especially when defending themselves against threats. One study examined speeches and statements made by civil service leaders in three Westminster-style systems – Australia, Canada and the UK, at a time when New Public Management was challenging their hegemony. The civil service leaders drew on specific, nostalgic readings of their own history, employing the rarely read but regularly cited Northcote Trevelyan report of 1854 (Northcote & Trevelyan, 1854) as “a myth set up as an ideal and used as a defence” (Rhodes, Wanna, & Weller, 2008, p. 468). However, civil servants’ critiques cannot be entirely dismissed as rhetoric laden with golden-age-ism. The former senior civil servant Christopher Foster argues that the Blair government by-passed the safeguards of the civil service and “told untruths as an aspect of news management”, producing public documents which were “propagandist” as opposed to providing “clear and detailed information”(Foster, 2005, p. 182). In a more recent paper he argues that the civil service has a dual, even contradictory role: “a duty to support the government of the day in developing and implementing its policies”, and a watchdog role on behalf of citizens in the form of “a duty to the state to seek to ensure that the business of government is conducted honestly and properly” (Foster, 2014, p. 1).

### **1.3 Conclusion**

The narrative of political spin is inconsistent and self-serving on the part of politicians, journalists and civil servants. We have discussed the sometimes unrealistic and contradictory pressures this narrative places on individuals such as government press officers to uphold the purity of the system. The narrative is compelling but simplistic in that it deploys notions of the corruption of the political public sphere by persuasive discourse fed to the media by demonised spin doctors. This rightly raises the issue of distorted public communication but its agent-centred focus serves to disguise a number of more profound and troubling developments at the meso-level. These include the use of government communications by political parties to gain advantage on the political battlefield; the cultural and institutional changes within the public bureaucracy that make it more difficult for dissenting voices to be heard in relation to politically-inspired government narratives; and a growing responsiveness to the mutually reinforcing pressures of politicization and mediatization through symbolic decision-making and action disguised as a neutral representation of government policy.



This thesis asks whether we are indeed looking at deep-seated and possibly still largely uncharted structural changes associated with media transformation within political institutions like the civil service. In their seminal work on the mediatization of politics, Mazzoleni and Schulz warned of the dangers of distortion in public communication that could challenge democracy itself (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; T. Meyer & Hinchman, 2002; Zaller, 1999). The concern with political spin has coincided with a deepening distrust of politicians and a corresponding decline in party engagement and electoral participation (Allen & Birch, 2015; IpsosMORI, 2016; Saward, 2010). Behind this lies the fundamental normative institutional question: what is the role of impartiality as a public sector value that seeks to protect ‘good government’, and how has it fared in the age of political spin?

This thesis will use witness accounts from government actors as well as archival and documentary evidence to establish chronology in relation to the changes in 1997 so as to tease out the various elements that make up the ‘black box’ of government communications. One original contribution will be to hear and acknowledge the voices of UK government press officers, not only as significant actors who are frequently criticized yet under-researched, but as participants in and witnesses to a historic change in the political/media landscape. The evidence for and against the process of ‘politicization’ as a progressive process of boundary transgression over time, where what would have seemed improper at one time later becomes acceptable or appropriate, is a recurring theme that will be discussed in the next chapter and will form the background to the four main findings chapters 4-7. At the heart of this discussion is the concept, or doctrine, of impartiality, which requires further dissection.

In Chapter 2, I examine continuity and change in the relations between governments and the media after 1997, asking how the concepts of politicization, personalization, presidentialization and mediatization can contribute towards a deeper theoretical understanding of the changing relationship between politicians, political parties, and the mass media. The chapter will review three diverse strands of literature to produce a conceptual framework that underpins the research questions and the empirical task: public administration accounts of changes in political institutions in relation to media; political communications studies of the relation between political and media elites; and mediatization approaches to media transformation as a global historical process which is transforming society at all levels. The review looks beyond media institutions and actors to study the dimensions and complications of pervasive media

change within political/administrative fields and institutions. In the light of this, government press officers can be seen as actors who navigate within a highly mediatized *and* politicized environment to perform a frequently uncomfortable but often bridging role between two highly competitive but also mutually reinforcing fields – media and politics.

Chapter 3, *Research Design and Methodology*, explains how and why qualitative research into the working practices, beliefs, perceptions and experiences of government press officers was carried out, how this evidence was contextualised by further interviews and documentary analysis, and how the data were analyzed. The four findings chapters (4-7) present the findings in relation to four concepts newly-applied to government communications. The first three, resilience, resistance and responsiveness, relate to mediatization as a process of change over time. A fourth concept, representing the public, will address the dual claim of civil servants to represent the government of the day *and* perform a watchdog role over the longer term interests of the public.

Some critics argue that the processes of “spin” and “meta coverage” are self-limiting, and that during the modern era, we are observing a distinctive historical process which has or will run its course. In 2007, McNair suggested that “we have reached the end of a cycle in government communication in the UK, and are now returning to an era of clearer separation between the ideologically motivated pursuit of party-political communication and that undertaken by government and the state on the behalf of the public”(McNair, 2007b, p. 108). Similarly, Gaber has recently argued that, partly in response to developments in the “digital public sphere” which has increased public access to political information, the so-called crisis in public communications asserted by Blumler and Coleman has passed its high point, in the UK at least (Blumler & Coleman, 2010, 2015; Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Gaber, 2016). Whether this is really the case, or whether the power struggle has taken on a new and as yet undiscovered form, will be an important consideration throughout this thesis. The research questions raised by this study will challenge the idea that political spin *per se* has corrupted modern politics. Instead, the study seeks to reveal and explain changes in the culture and internal dynamics that operate within and between media and political intermediaries at the interface between politics, the government bureaucracy and the media, at a time of profound and dramatic media transformation. At the heart of this research, then, is this overarching question:

In response to the pressures of *mediatization* after 1997, did the UK government communications service have sufficient *resilience* to deliver a public communications function consistent with its own stated purposes?

By relating *mediatization* to the concept of *resilience* and placing it within the context of the *stated purposes* of government communications, the question is an empirical one concerning change over time within the existing paradigm of government communications. This does not preclude comment on the issue of whether the paradigm itself is or is not appropriate but that is a question for the conclusion.

## **Chapter 2: Continuity and change in the relations between government and the media – a theoretical framework**

“Nothing, but nothing, prepares you for working in Downing Street in intimate relationship with the Prime Minister...the pressure of events almost suffocates in its intensity...you are cut off from the outside world. You function inside a combination of hothouse and bunker...you keep going on the adrenalin and the thrill of being at the summit of things”. Christopher Meyer, former Chief Press Secretary to John Major (Meyer, 2006, p. 13).

This recollection from Christopher Meyer, the civil servant who managed John Major’s relations with media between 1994 and 1997, is a powerful depiction of life at the interface between the government, politics and the media. It reflects the complexity of this elite mediatized political world and acts as a warning to researchers to consider the role of media holistically as “part of the general texture of experience”, which has cultural, institutional and personal dimensions (Silverstone, 1999, p. 2). It depicts a world of risk, uncertainty and isolation; not an environment conducive to straightforward or open communication.

This chapter will attempt to synthesize various conceptions of government communications derived from three distinctive areas of study: public administration accounts of changes in political institutions in relation to media; political communications studies of the relation between politics and the media; and mediatization studies, which consider media transformation as a global historical meta-process that is radically reshaping society at all levels. Relevant literatures from these three distinctive scholarly fields will allow us to reach a fuller and more integrated conceptualisation of the complexity of government communications that can be applied beyond the British case to liberal democracies in general. I will argue that a particular kind of mediatization approach, which I identify here as an “embedded media” field approach, is best placed to address the question of how social and cultural change linked to media change may impact on the communications function of central bureaucracies, and specifically on asymmetries between the party political and administrative arms of government.

This approach takes into account four important social and cultural changes which require further theorisation:

1. The higher premium placed on persuasion by both journalists and politicians as they battle for attention in an increasingly competitive marketplace (Kunelius & Reunanen, 2012);
2. The use of media-led strategic communications as a defensive strategy by political parties and individual politicians, when news can travel round the globe in seconds;
3. The steady growth in the scale, scope and status of PR and promotional culture (Davis, 2013b; Edwards, 2011, p. 5; Wernick, 1991);
4. The shrinking of the public domain and the so-called 'hollowing out' of the state, especially "the senior civil service where the frontiers of the public domain had been most zealously guarded" (Diamond, 2014b; Marquand, 2004, p. 2; 2008).

The chapter begins by looking at the media/political interface within government, focusing on the role of politicians in determining the shape and purposes of government communications, and the changing institutional and professional arrangements for managing the media within Whitehall after 1997. The second section examines ways in which change within government communications is currently understood, looking more closely at such concepts as politicization, centralization, personalization, and presidentialization and reviewing the evidence for qualitative change in the relationship between politicians and the mass media in recent decades. I will argue that it is essential to consider government communications within its changing political *and* institutional context; one which is itself subject to the over-arching meta-process of mediatization. In the third section, I present a conceptual framework for government communications which applies a field approach to the concept of mediatization in order to facilitate a more grounded, fine-grained and critical understanding of the complex dynamics which operate at the interface between government, politics and the media.

## **2.1 The media-political interface within government**

UK Government communications has been little researched *from within*, although recent studies into public bureaucracies' relations to media have been carried out in Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands and Australia (Pallas & Fredriksson, 2014) (Figenschou & Thorbjornsrud, 2015; Schillemans, 2012). What little evidence there is, is selective rather than systematic, but it suggests that, within the larger

government communications workforce, a relatively small group of about 750 people working as media relations specialists within the UK's 20 or so<sup>16</sup> ministerial departments, have been disproportionately affected by the three main forces thought to be linked to politicization: the influence of political parties and politicians on the structure and function of government media relations, changes in job security among civil servants who specialise in strategic communications, and the rise of a new type of temporary civil servant, the politically-appointed special adviser. I discuss each of these claims in turn.

### 2.1.1 The changing relationship between politicians and political parties, and the mass media

Political spin is more than an approach to media management. It is the pursuit of politics using the latest communications tools in order to exploit media power, and applied by politicians and political parties in a political battle field context. This is certainly the view of three of the founders of New Labour, Philip Gould, Alastair Campbell and Peter Mandelson, who, one can argue, were political as well as media actors (Lee, 1999; Pitcher, 2003). This battlefield has long been identified as the arena in which elections are fought, but with the rise of the permanent campaign, the field of battle has extended into the executive (Blumenthal, 1982; Norris, 2000a). As a matter of survival, politicians are demanding that all available tools in the media armoury are deployed in their interest, both as individuals and as representatives of political parties. This chapter aims to demonstrate that the process by which media cultures and considerations become increasingly embedded within political institutions, can be seen as a primary driver of political behaviour, both within and outside government.

Studies of the media activities of serving politicians in a number of countries have shown that they actively court media attention, and believe that the mass media, especially national press and broadcast news, can determine their futures (Davis, 2007a; Elmelund-Præstekær, Hopmann, & Sonne Nørgaard, 2011; Foster, 2005; Hennessy, 2014; Strömbäck, 2011; van Aelst, Shehata, & van Dalen, 2010; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011). Davis's interview study with 60 British MPs, found that most

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<sup>16</sup> Taking Hood and Dixon's (2015) estimate that there were about 3000 communications staff working in Whitehall departments in 2013, of whom around 30%, or about 750, specialised in media relations, communications staff represented about 0.7% of the 405,000 employees working in the civil service.

talked to journalists every day, to the extent that the relationship had become one of mutual dependence between “quasi-colleagues” (Davis, 2007a, p. 76). Politicians are dominant suppliers of news (Barnett & Gaber, 2001b; McNair, 2007a), while journalists are the gatekeepers to public attention that “confers political legitimacy on those already in power” (Davis, 2007b, p. 83), with the result that media and political elites have become “inextricably intertwined” (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995, p. 26). It has been argued that the development of strategic political communications in Britain since the 1990s has been led by increasingly centralised political parties and hence influenced by party ideology (Harrop, 2001; Wring, 2001). Others go further to argue that a predominantly two-party system such as that operating in the UK increasingly functions like a cartel, deploying the resources of the state to manage political competition, and capturing elements of the state apparatus (such as the government communications machine in our case) to promote party interests (Katz & Mair, 2009). By 1997 it was actually politicians within the main political parties who were driving the communications agenda rather than so-called ‘spin doctors’ (Brandenburg, 2002).

Subjective accounts provide evidence for the increasing importance of media management in the lives of politicians. Political and journalistic memoirs from the 1990s onwards have vividly described the increasingly jumpy atmosphere around ministers coping with life on the media frontline (Blair, 2010; Campbell & Hagerty, 2011; Fowler, 1991; M Garnett, 2010; Major, 2003; Mattinson, 2010; Mullin & Winstone, 2010; Powell, 2010; Price, 2005, 2010). Most revealing are the testimonies of current and former ministers at the *Leveson Inquiry* (Leveson, 2012) which demonstrate the existential fears and consequent actions of a political class grappling with media transformation. This disparate group of senior politicians is convinced that the mass media, and especially the national tabloids, are a source of power which they must at least appease, if not control and exploit. The witness statements to Leveson from former cabinet ministers from both political parties provide a litany of emotion; largely fear.

Kenneth Clarke describes people being “driven away” from politics by the fear of exposure (Evidence session: 30/5/2012). Chris Patten refers to politicians being unable to sleep (Evidence session: 23/1/2011). Peter Mandelson describes the “relentless hostility” of certain newspapers as “horrible and bloody” (Witness statement: 21/5/2012), and Alan Johnson refers to senior politicians as being “pilloried” and subjected to “fictitious stories” which can “damage your life forever”

(Evidence session: 22/5/2012) Most pejorative is the contribution from Tony Blair, who describes the behaviour of the media as "an abuse of power", and journalists as "these people" who are "all out against you", and who will engage in "long and sustained", "full on, full frontal, day in day out", "relentless and unremitting" "attack" that can "literally wash a government away" (Evidence session: 28/5/2012).

They express distaste for this "crude and sometimes debasing but nonetheless unavoidable...transactional" relationship with journalists" (Peter Mandelson). Tony Blair considers the apparent "closeness" between politicians and the media as "unhealthy", and built on fear. Jack Straw warns "if you get too close, your own position becomes compromised" (Evidence session: 16/5/2012). Alastair Campbell accepts that "at times we were probably too controlling" (Written statement: 30/4/2012), while his former deputy Lance Price is critical of his own role as "part of the process whereby No.10 would ask for announcements before departments had a policy that was ready to announce" (Evidence session: 12/4/2012). The two Coalition politicians explain why they were so determined to employ the controversial former News of the World editor, Andy Coulson, who was later jailed for his role in phone hacking. David Cameron wanted "someone tough and robust" who could handle "the huge media pressure" and "help you through what can be an absolute storm", where even the innocent are "thrown to the wolves" (Evidence session: 14/6/2012). George Osborne explains that Coulson was recruited because he had the experience to cope when things are "thrown at you very quickly" (Written statement: 4/5/2012)<sup>17</sup>.

Politicians' from both ends of the political spectrum expressed similar sentiments, suggesting that the standard criticism of the British press, that it has consistently promoted centre-right perspectives, may need augmenting (Curran & Seaton, 2010). Van Dalen et al. conducted a survey of 425 political journalists from the UK, Denmark, Germany and Spain between 2007 and 2009, supplemented by a content analysis of 1035 news articles in a range of quality newspapers. They found a uniquely negative tone towards all politicians in the British newspapers studied<sup>18</sup> that applied equally to left-leaning and right-leaning politicians (Van Dalen et al., 2012). Bartle tracked the changes in partisan alignment following the election of Tony Blair as Labour leader in 1994, and found that Labour received endorsements from six out of

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<sup>17</sup> Selected quotes taken from the testimony to Leveson of 11 politicians and two of their media aides appear in Appendix 1.

<sup>18</sup> *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian*.



the 11 national daily newspapers in 1997, rising to seven in 2001. Even in 2005, despite Blair's relative unpopularity following the Iraq War, Labour was endorsed by six out of 11, representing 58% of daily newspaper circulation compared to 34% for the Conservatives (Bartle, 2005). Wring agrees that the turning point in newspaper partisanship came after 1994, when the so-called 'Tory press' detached themselves from the Conservative project launched by Margaret Thatcher in 1979 by endorsing Tony Blair (Wring, 2005b).

In their 2012 report for *Democratic Audit*, Wilks-Hegg et al. concluded that the political affiliations of the UK national press became more fluid after 1997 but conservative dominance appears to have returned by 2010. Taking the period of 1945 to 2010, the Conservatives achieved 50-55% support by circulation overall, compared to 38-44% for Labour and 5-10% for the Liberals. This disguises significant fluctuation; from 1979 to 1992, Conservative support among national newspapers averaged just over 70% by circulation. Between 1997 and 2005, Labour support averaged 63%. By 2010, Conservative support had returned to 71% by circulation (Wilks-Hegg et al. 2012, citing Butler & Butler 2000 and 2006, and Wring, 2010).

In his own evidence to the Leveson Inquiry, the media scholar James Curran argued that although press partisanship was still important, UK politicians' relationships with the press were more influenced by fear of ridicule and hostility: "when in attack mode, national papers can be bullying, witty and unconstrained. It is this concentration of firepower that can be turned on and off that partly accounts for politicians' desire to court the press" (Curran, 2012, pp. 5-6). Such a discourse of powerlessness on the part of the most powerful politicians in the UK, in the face of what they consider to be an increasingly uncontrollable force, helps to explain the drive on the part of ministers to employ more and more personal aides to manage the media, and why a proactive (even hyperactive) government communications machine is so important to them: too important, indeed, to be left to bureaucrats.

### 2.1.2 The rise of the special adviser

Numerically small but steadily growing, the significance of special advisers (known colloquially as SpAds) derives from their proximity to ministers and through their collective influence on government narratives. The modern special adviser originated in 1964 when the incoming Wilson government appointed five to No.10 and the Treasury to bring more technical and economic expertise into government and to overcome what Labour saw as a naturally conservative bias within the civil service

(Blick & Jones, 2010). They attracted “much contemporary media interest” but were welcomed as a means of bringing new talent and expertise into public service (*Fulton Report on the Civil Service*, 1968, p. 74). Conservative administrations showed less interest in special advisers – Heath recorded just 10 – but the Labour governments of 1974-79 provided the “breakthrough (which) took place alongside a more general professionalization of politics” (Blick, 2004, p. 148) when numbers rose beyond 30 for the first time<sup>19</sup>. The biggest rise came after 1997; in March 1989 there were just over 30. By 1999, there were 68 in post across government, rising to 78 in July 2000.

In opposition, the Conservatives were frequently critical of New Labour’s special advisers, especially their role in briefing the media (BBC News, 2000; Davis, 2003; Maude, 2010) and pledged in their 2010 Manifesto to cap their numbers in government (Conservative Party, 2010). The 2012 Ministerial Code was amended to impose an official limit of two per cabinet minister but numbers rose from 66 in June 2010 to 74 in March 2011, the same number as in 2009 (McClory, 2011). Official figures released in July 2012 showed that numbers had risen further to 79, rising to 103 by November 2014, and 114 by December 2015 (Cabinet Office, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015b; Gay, 2013). As we saw in Chapter 1, the idea of the Extended Ministerial Office continued to be developed and they were formally adopted in five departments during the Cameron administration (2010-2015) (Faulkner & Everett, 2015). The Ministerial Code issued on behalf of the new Prime Minister Theresa May in December 2016 quietly removed the facility for EMOs<sup>20</sup> (Cabinet Office, 2016; Hughes, 2017).

The role of the special adviser has evolved since the 1990s when they were mainly seen as trainee MPs. One long-standing critic concludes that during the New Labour period, they were recruited mainly as media specialists and spent much of their time at the “front line of the vastly expanded interface between politicians and journalists”, (Jones, 2001, p. 68), bringing them into increasing contact with the government information service staffed by civil servants. This increasing media specialisation

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<sup>19</sup> This tally does not include unpaid or unofficial advice from supporters such as Tim Bell, the advertising and PR specialist during successive elections, and most importantly, during the Miners' Strike of 1984-5, or advisers on presentation such as Gordon Reece (Hollingsworth, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> See [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/579752/ministerial\\_code\\_december\\_2016.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/579752/ministerial_code_december_2016.pdf)

appears to be continuing. In 2010, an estimated 89% of Coalition special advisers newly recruited into departmental positions had been brought in from roles within either Party HQ or with MPs, where media relations formed a large part of their role (Ingham, 2010). They are more likely now to have had pre-government experience as party appointees working in media relations or public affairs than previously, when they were more likely to come from business, academia or the civil service (Yong & Hazell, 2014).

Little is known about how media special advisers operate day-to-day, although a series of recent scandals leading to high profile resignations of special advisers<sup>21</sup>, and a rare insider account by the former SpAd Nick Hillman (Hillman, 2014), suggest that many are given free reign by their ministers to brief journalists, write blogs, give presentations and tweet. For Yong and Hazell “special advisers exist because ministers need them, and much of their value lies in the flexibility and relative freedom from hierarchy and neutrality” (Yong & Hazell, 2014, p. 18). The ill-defined nature of the role has an advantage for ministers. A lack of formal oversight, for example, allows ministers to deny knowledge of the actions of their aides. The behaviour of Damian McBride in briefing against Gordon Brown’s opponents, which Brown claimed not to know about, is a case in point (McBride, 2013; Seldon, 2005)<sup>22</sup>.

The latest of a series of official reviews into the conduct of special advisers endorsed the legitimacy of the role in principle but raised concerns about lack of accountability and poor management (Public Administration Select Committee, 2012). A recent interview study found that although many insiders saw special advisers as a “firewall” protecting the civil service from politicization there were accusations that special advisers shouted at and bullied junior civil servants, prompting claims of “a fundamental breakdown of relationships between special advisers and departmental civil servants” (Gruhn & Slater, 2012, p. 10).

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<sup>21</sup> The Culture Secretary’s special adviser resigned in April 2012 following allegations that he held inappropriate discussions with News Corporation while the company was bidding to take over BskyB. The Home Secretary’s adviser resigned in June 2014 for briefing against another cabinet minister.

<sup>22</sup> Following McBride’s resignation over personal smears against opponents, Gordon Brown wrote to the Cabinet Secretary, Gus O’Donnell, assuring him that “no Minister and no political adviser other than the person involved had any knowledge of or involvement in these private emails” and asking that the Code of Conduct for Special Advisers be amended so that special advisers caught making “personal attacks” would “automatically lose their jobs” (Gordon Brown letter, 13 April 2009).

Concerns about the media role of special advisers led to a warning from the Public Affairs Select Committee (PASC) as long ago as 1998 that “the existence of two different officials, responsible for briefing the press on different aspects of Ministerial policy, is bound to lead to problems” such as duplication and substitution of the work of government press officers (Public Administration Select Committee, 1998, para. 32). Mike Granatt, then head of profession for government communications, told the Committee that about 40 special advisers (half the total at the time) dealt with the media, which included contributing to the wording of press releases, a practice he felt was appropriate (Blick, 2004). A former Head of Information claimed that advisers frequently instructed press officers on how to draft press releases and “sought to reproduce the tone of the Labour manifesto and repeat its election commitments as emerging news” (Oborne, 1999; Reardon, 1998). Successive reviews since have reiterated these concerns and called for a clearer distinction to be drawn between the media management roles of civil service communicators and special advisers (Gay, 2013; Public Administration Select Committee, 2000; 2002; 2012; Wicks, 2003) (See Appendix 2 for full list of reviews and their conclusions).

### 2.1.3 Job insecurity in government communications

Job insecurity, or what is usually referred to as ‘churn’ within a Whitehall-style civil service, can be seen as an indirect measure of politicization, as it indicates the extent to which officials move on with a change in political leadership. Sausman and Locke found significant churn within the UK civil service after the 1997 election but only within the Government Information Service, where it was particularly high among top ranking professionals (Sausman & Locke, 2004). It remains to be demonstrated that this was indeed “completely unprecedented” (Oborne, 1999) or that it was solely due to politicization. It could, for example, be the outcome of a natural turnover of ambitious civil servants who move on having developed close and trusting relations with particular ministers, in which case it could be an example of personalization. Equally, it could involve professionalization – planned moves within the service to gain experience and promotion which had been delayed by the election.

However, it is clear that the turnover in government communications was significant after 1997. During the first year of the Blair Government, 25 heads and deputy heads of information were replaced – 50% of the total – and by August 1999, all but two Heads of Information had been replaced (Oborne, 1999). By 2002, none of the Heads was still in post (Franklin, 2004). This was in spite of assurances given by the

incoming Prime Minister's press secretary, Alastair Campbell, at his first meeting with the Information Heads on 3 May 1997 that no great purge of civil service jobs was planned. In his Diary entry for 2 May, Campbell writes: "The press office people were nervous...They...sensed, rightly, that I had not been impressed by the John Major press operation and would want to make changes". Describing the meeting itself, he writes: "The press officers were a mixed bunch, but gave off the sense of being terrified" (Campbell & Hagerty, 2011). Later, he describes them as "a pretty dull and uninspiring lot" (entry for 13 May), and the "culture in which they had grown up" as being "way behind the times" (entry for 2 June). By 9 June, he was "beginning to think the majority were useless"<sup>23</sup>.

In his entry for 16 October Campbell refers to media complaints of politicization in government communications as "preposterous rubbish", "a lot of guff" and "more of the same crap". Yet, a few months earlier, he had written: "I was more convinced than ever that it can only work if you are clear you are working for the politician, not for the press" (29 May). Here, he is identifying the public interest with the elected politician, not the media, or indeed, the public servant. On 26 September, he writes: "I was trying to modernise the GIS because it needed modernising, *but I was also trying to make changes that would benefit us*" (my emphasis). This begs the question, what does he mean by *us*? Is he referring to government in general or New Labour in particular? Or even to Tony Blair? Campbell was, above all, a Labour loyalist, so it seems likely he was speaking in both party political terms and in support of the Prime Minister's aspiration that the service should be more responsive to steering from the centre (Negrine, 2008). If so, there must have been at least the risk of party politicization, and a consequent undermining of the impartiality of civil service communications.

Campbell's supporters emphasise his determination to modernise and professionalise civil service communications. In his memoir, Tony Blair's chief of staff, Jonathan Powell, defends the record of his former colleague: "Alastair was unfairly criticized for politicising the government press service. Actually, what he did was professionalise and modernise it" (Powell, 2010, pp. 193-194). Powell does not consider the possibility that professionalization or modernisation does not *preclude* politicization; if politicians are driving the modernization process and applying party

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<sup>23</sup> The term "useless" to describe officials is also used by Alan Milburn, then Secretary of State for Health, over supper in 2002, as noted by Chris Mullin in his diary (Mullin & Winstone, 2010), entry for 5 March).

political preferences, the process is *de facto* politicized, however well-intentioned or overdue. Contemporary accounts suggest that during the 1990s, there had been a consistent failure to recognise and respond to changes in the media. As we have seen, John Major later admitted that he was suspicious of ‘political spin’, telling the Leveson Inquiry that his lack of close relationships with the media had contributed to the hostile media the 1990-97 government often received”(Bale & Sanders, 2001; Hogg, 1995; Leveson, 2012). Others argue that the notion of modernisation itself is not a straightforward or neutral management reform process but “a rhetorical stance that puts effort into conveying an image of shiny modernity and purposive energy” (Hood & Dixon, 2015, p. 192).

By June 1998, the House of Commons Select Committee<sup>24</sup> had picked up enough disquiet to launch its own short enquiry. The report described turnover in government communications as “unusual”, noting that some departures were related to a lack of “personal chemistry with their Minister” (Public Administration Select Committee, 1998 para.33). Sausman and Locke claim “that some press officers left because of a desire on the part of ministers for information officers to be ‘less neutral’ than their civil service terms allowed” (Sausman & Locke, 2004, p. 114). From the beginning of Blair’s first term then, concerned observers were noting two forces at play regarding the retention of senior publicity officials – the personal influence of ministers, and their desire for a closer alignment between government communications and the aspirations of the party-in-government. Together, these traits could perhaps more accurately be described as ‘political responsiveness’: a process whereby the priorities and working habits of civil servants are determined by ministers and their aides (Mulgan, 2008). We return to the idea of responsiveness as part of a process of change later in the chapter.

## **2.2 Understanding change within government communications after 1997**

Officials and politicians working at the centre of Whitehall frequently bemoan and attempt to mitigate the variation in standards between departments (Kerslake, 2014). The Mountfield Report, for example, stated early in New Labour’s first term that “responsibility for ensuring practices within press offices are fully effective and up to date rests primarily with departmental heads of information” but found that “the

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<sup>24</sup> Renamed the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee after the 2015 election.

quality of these practices and arrangements varied between Departments” (Mountfield, 1997). Downing Street may be more or less active in managing the coordination of government information, depending on political and personal factors, but it can only operate through *influencing* departments, not *instructing* them (Heffernan & Webb, 2005). In his history of 20<sup>th</sup> century British government propaganda, Taylor shows how key departments such as the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Treasury and No.10, developed their own specialised and sometimes competing ways of briefing the press (P. M. Taylor, 1999). The norm within government communications oscillated between central coordination and resourcing, and a push back to departments, combined with retrenchment. Frequently, both states pertained, often uncomfortably, as for example, during the appeasement period leading up to 1938 when the Foreign Office frequently confounded No.10 by issuing anti-appeasement messages (Price, 2010, p. 81).

The historical evidence, plus anecdotal accounts of the competing media briefing regimes of No.10 and the Treasury during the Thatcher and Blair administrations, suggests that centralization is a cyclical process inherent in departmentalised, Whitehall-style systems. It is therefore more likely to be a background factor in increasing political control over government communications than a deciding one. However, as we saw in the Prologue, the freezing out of the Foreign Office during the production of the infamous dossier of 24 September 2002 (HM Government, 2002) led to the loss of an alternative voice within government that might have challenged the Blair narrative (Rogers, 2003). The growth in the Prime Minister’s policy staff after 1997, as identified by a number of scholars, also enabled Blair to bypass the advice of the Foreign Office during preparations for the 2003 Iraq War (Blick & Jones, 2010; Heffernan & Webb, 2005; Yong & Hazell, 2014). While not explicitly challenging the departmentalised model of Whitehall, cumulative structural change since 1997 led to what some have identified as a ‘de facto’ Prime Minister’s department, a transformation that has taken place “quietly and without publicity ...in a manner that is typically British” (Burch & Holliday, 1999, p. 43). A concern on the part of politicians with media management has been central to this change.

Centralization is better understood when analyzed in association with concepts such as personalization and presidentialization, defined as a concentration of power, both real and symbolic, within the political leadership. Webb and Poguntke’s comparative study of presidentialization found overwhelming agreement among 14 country experts that long-term structural change within central bureaucracies had taken place

to facilitate greater control by political leaders, and that the personalization of media image-making played a key part in the process (Webb & Poguntke, 2005). Indeed, Langer's content analysis of references to British Prime Ministers in the *Times* newspaper between 1945 and 2008 found a large increase after 1979 in the proportion of articles mentioning Prime Ministers and referring to them in personal terms (Langer, 2006; 2010). She argues however, that "parties have an enduring importance in British politics and its media coverage" (p76). Karvonen is critical of the so-called "personalization thesis" which claims that individual politicians, and especially political leaders, increasingly determine the way people understand politics and express their political preferences (Karvonen, 2010). His comparative literature review of Western liberal democracies since the 1970s, finds little evidence for *systematic* and *sustained* increases in party leader impacts on electoral behaviour or that election coverage has become more personal and less party-oriented. Citizens do not vote for leaders instead of parties, he claims, since "the party leader factor is, by and large, a function of the party factor" (p84).

The focus on personality, either of itself or as shorthand for the public representation of political ideas or parties, downplays the crucial role of institutions such as political parties and central bureaucracies in driving or responding to changes in political communication. To provide some key examples from a vast literature, one substantial study of party leader effects on party choice in nine Western democracies showed that "overall party evaluations predominate over party leader evaluations" (Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2004, cited in Karvonen, 2010, p66). King's six-country study concluded that "leaders are normally not decisive for election outcomes" and there are no indications that this is changing (King, 2003, p. 67). Poguntke and Webb are among those who conclude that partisan considerations still dominate voter assessments at election time, but that leader-centred campaigning and media coverage have increased significantly in most liberal democracies (Garzia, 2011; Poguntke & Webb, 2005).

The presidentialization thesis thus brings together the notions of an increasingly mediated form of personalization, and longer-term structural change within political systems. Passarelli argues persuasively that personalization is subordinate to presidentialization, even within parliamentary systems such as Westminster, where strong, leader-led political parties, and a unitary state in which party leaders increasingly operate as chief executives, encourages the marginalization of mid-level political actors and institutions such as party cadres, bureaucrats and parliaments



(Passarelli & Palgrave, 2015). Webb and Poguntke argue that many modern liberal democracies are moving towards a ‘neo-elitist’ form of plebiscitary democratic accountability where leaders become both more responsive and more vulnerable to (highly-mediated) assessments of public mood (Webb & Poguntke, 2005). Two powerful themes emerge from the presidentialization thesis which are particularly pertinent to this study: the significance of little-publicised changes within the public bureaucracy, and closer integration between political leadership and news management.

### **2.3 The administrative and political dimensions of government communications**

The Westminster model of public administration has been characterised as “the world’s leading example of majoritarian democracy”, where power is concentrated in the executive, and there are few ‘veto points’ (Lijphart, 1999, p. 314), and see also (Hood & Dixon, 2015). Civil servants navigate between the demands of politicians and their own traditional codes and norms but these are not immutable. The 2006 Civil Service Code, for example, insisted that civil servants must act “solely according to the merits of the case” and serve “equally well governments of different political persuasions” (Civil Service, 2006). They were also required to ensure fair, just and equal treatment of citizens when implementing public policy; a stricture which acknowledged a public interest element within the notion of impartiality (Burnham, 2008). In 2015, the code was reworded, requiring that civil servants “act in a way which deserves and retains the confidence of ministers” while ensuring that they can “establish the same relationship with those whom you may be required to serve in some future government” (Civil Service, 2015). This subtle difference removes the idea of the “merits of the case”, focusing on the perceptions of ministers, and leaving it to the civil servant to chart their own path between the need to retain the confidence of ministers while not engaging in undue criticism of the opposition. This has a bearing on the ways in which impartiality can be practiced within government communications, as we shall see.

The media environment within which civil servants who specialise in media relations must operate has become more complex and demanding. They must accommodate not only the increasing “ubiquity and complexity” of media (Silverstone, 1999) but also the drive by politicians to manage their reputations in what has become a “more

complex, media-driven and ‘name, blame and shame’ environment” (Lindquist & Rasmussen, 2012, p. 188). The constitutional, albeit uncodified, role of the UK civil service has been described in terms of the “restraints” or “checks and balances” that it places on political power within the executive in order to provide “an institutional counterbalance to the majoritarian concentration of power in the executive”(Eichbaum & Shaw, 2010, p. 7), see also (Lodge et al., 2013). Central to this is the often-quoted need to “speak truth to power” (Wildavsky, 1979). This raises the question of the extent to which the civil service communications function has the resilience to resist increasing pressure to manage the news for party political purposes on the part of their political masters.

Loyalty to ministers is a powerful determinant of behaviour on the part of senior officials according to the few observational studies of the UK’s central governing bureaucracy. In his analysis of everyday policymaking within six jurisdictions, including the UK, Page found that political control over bureaucratic policy development rarely takes the form of direct commands but proceeds through “the anticipation or indirect divination of the wishes of the minister”(E. Page, 2012, p. 47). Similarly, Rhodes concluded from his ethnographic study within a UK government department that “loyalty is a core belief and practice socialized into the newest recruit to the senior civil service. And that loyalty can spill over into, literally, devotion” (Rhodes, 2011, pp. 129-130). An ingrained dedication to providing personal support to ministers is built into UK civil service culture, and is at least as important an article of faith as the doctrine of impartiality, which in principle at least, enshrines the possibility, even the necessity, of resistance or challenge (Foster, 2005; 2014; Page, 2010).

Robert Armstrong, the former Cabinet Secretary to Margaret Thatcher (1979-87) implied that obstruction was inherent in the exercise of impartiality by government communicators, when he told the House of Lords Communications Committee in 2008 that: “The professional civil service communicator is one of the bulwarks against a blurring of the distinction between party political and government communications” (House of Lords Select Committee on Communications, 2008). By using the metaphor of the bulwark, he suggested that the government press officer had a duty to obstruct attempts by ministers to exploit the government communications machine for party political purposes. Logically, then, as the media environment becomes, or is perceived to be, more complex, demanding, and unforgiving, and news cycles speed up, we would expect bulwarks to become less

tolerable, possibly even unsustainable, from the point of view of politicians and their aides desperate to get their message across and living with existential anxiety.

To what extent, then, has there been a change in the balance between restraint (and resistance), and loyalty (or responsiveness) in government communications since 1997? Many accounts of bureaucracy in recent decades claim that the balance of power has tilted in favour of politicians as the civil service experiences a significant decline in its autonomy and status (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2010; Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014; Meer, 2011; Page, 2007; Page, Pearson, Jurgeit, & Kidson, 2012). Peters claims that there has been an increase in “top down politicization” since the 1950s, and that the “principal agents of this phenomenon (are) the political parties” (Peters & Pierre, 2004a, p. 287). Control over the communications function within central state bureaucracies is a particular concern for governing politicians so it is not surprising that reforms have been targeted at “communications functions ...an area in which some of the more egregious failings on the part of political operatives...have been made manifest”(Eichbaum & Shaw, 2010, p. 205).

One prominent critic of the impact of mass media on public administration considers impartiality within Westminster systems to be an ideal that enshrines two obligations: to serve all citizens, and to give impartial advice to ministers (Aucoin, 2012). Aucoin sees an increasingly audited, mediatized and politically-aligned public administration as a “corrupt form of politicization”, where impartiality is undermined by the misuse of public service to secure “partisan advantage” (p178). The public servant thereby becomes a “promiscuous partisan” – someone who must be seen to *enthusiastically* serve the needs of ministers at all times and, most crucially, to *actively promote* the government agenda to external stakeholders. Of all specialist functions of government, he argues, the communications function most risks becoming “the black hole of public service impartiality” (p183), especially when civil servants are explicitly required to promote the government’s message by advancing and defending its merits. The subtle differences between the 2006 and 2015 iterations of the Civil Service Code, provide an illustration of such an evolution.

It has been claimed that a reduction in Whitehall’s capacity to provide a “check on government” by providing “an assured conduit for good advice” has made it harder for individual civil servants to “stand up to ministers without paying a price”(Greer, 2008, p. 123). Greer argues that in recent decades the service has been re-shaped by politicians of both parties who “have wanted the civil service to be more of a tool than

a guardian”. Special advisers are “a direct manifestation of political responsiveness” (p132), he states, and a symptom of a wider failing – a civil service which carries out political instructions rather than influencing and assisting in political decision-making. Without elaborating, he argues that the need to delineate between partisan and non-partisan tasks is “most pressing in media and communications issues” (p134). Gains and Stoker also take seriously the collective impact of special advisers, arguing that, far from being situated outside the political and bureaucratic constitutional settlement, special advisers working for UK government ministers should be officially integrated into the civil service and critically evaluated as political actors in their own right, not simply as extensions of their ministers (Gains & Stoker, 2011). Hood and Dixon consider the rise of special advisers as the formal recognition of a political civil service (Hood & Dixon, 2015, p. 29) while others agree that the power and influence of political appointees in Westminster-style systems is “hugely under-rated” (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2014, p. 599). Despite this, as special advisers have noted themselves, there is little regulation, monitoring or understanding about what they actually do (Hillman, 2014; Wilkes, 2014).

The phenomenon of increasing political control within public bureaucracies is also observed in jurisdictions beyond Westminster but takes different institutional forms. For Eichbaum and Shaw, civil servants in many jurisdictions may “surrender the safety of distance, in an attempt to best serve their political masters”. This risks a slide into complicity, where challenging ministers becomes increasingly difficult (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2010, p. 9). One study examined political responsiveness since the 1960s within four ministerial bureaucracies, Germany, Belgium, Denmark and the UK (Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014). It found that all bureaucracies accommodated the drive for political responsiveness in different ways: Germany by extending the removal of senior civil servants after a change of government, Belgium by more than doubling the size of ministerial ‘cabinets’, and the UK by employing politically aligned special advisers. Danish ministers also employ party political advisers to manage the media, but, in contrast to the UK, they have the authority to instruct civil servants on media matters. The authors argue that what is exceptional about the UK case, is the extent to which public and media criticism of some of the worst behaviour excesses of special advisers has enabled the civil service to ‘push back’, at least in some areas.

Little is known about the responsiveness or otherwise of UK civil service communicators at departmental level, but the roles of Bernard Ingham and Alastair Campbell as No.10 Chief Press Secretaries have been subjected to much scrutiny and

both have written extensively about their activities in government. Ingham's success as the Prime Minister's spokesman led to accusations that he failed as a medium for properly informing the public because he had become "too partisan" (Cockerell, Hennessy, & Walker, 1984, p. 72), an accusation also levelled at Campbell (Moran, 2005; Tumber, 2000; Weir, 1998). Of course, the role of the Prime Ministers' Press Secretary is unique, but the related issue of the closeness of the relationship between the Secretary of State and the departmental Director of Communications and Head of News is rarely discussed. This has not been investigated empirically, but there must be at least the potential for a similar contradiction within the role of departmental government communicator between the need to work to the partisan and personal agendas of their political masters, and the wider information needs of the public. It is at departmental level that most interactions between media and government take place, since the Whitehall department is "the key unit where legal powers are generally held, political action assumed, and legal loyalties focused" (Daintith, 2001, p. 604; Davis, 2002). This is where the constraints, codes, norms and learned behaviours of civil service communicators and their managers are most commonly enacted, behind the scenes and beyond the scrutiny of the public, parliament or the media.

### 2.3.2 Political communications: media and politics as 'mutually reinforcing' dynamics

Much political communications research focuses on more spectacular and observable aspects such as party political election campaigns, the relationship between politicians and journalists, and the activities of party political PR consultants. The activities of government press officers are largely uncharted. Some commentators argue that the daily drip-drip effect of political messaging is more important than moments of transition such as elections (Norris, 2001). Official sources of news such as government departments and arms-length executive agencies are seen as paramount in setting the news agenda and filling newspapers in routine times (Barnett & Gaber, 2001a; 2001b); Davis, 2007b; McNair, 2007a). Further, it is argued that influencing public opinion over the long term is most effectively carried out when it is covert: "concealment being critical since once this influence becomes public the information loses its credibility" (Moore, 2006, p. 3). Much of the negotiation about what becomes news takes place behind the scenes between political and government sources, and journalists, as Cook found in his examination of the

relations between US government officials and beat reporters during the 1980s and 90s (Cook, 2006; 1998).

Party competition has a more subtle role to play in unofficially regulating power relations within the executive. Oppositions within two-party systems collude with the party-in-government to condone the concentration of party political power in various forms, while decrying it in public. As we saw in Chapter 1, politicians from both main parties have publicly upheld, even celebrated, civil service impartiality for example, whilst criticising civil servants for being obstructive. Similarly, opposition politicians condemn special advisers, while appointing them once in power.

Political language must be engaging and persuasive but it has been argued that this can militate against good public communication and even decision making in government. Coelho, for example, argues that the strategic use of information within adversarial parliamentary systems like Westminster reduces the government's capacity to take sensible long term decisions because "an intensely partisan and adversarial political environment creates incentives for parties and legitimate interest groups to misrepresent or manipulate information strategically" (Coelho, 2015, blogpost). Flinders agrees that the strategic deployment of information in parliament conflicts with the more sober responsibilities of statecraft because the partisan pressures on parliamentary accountability encourage the use of information in a party political battlefield context rather than as part of a balanced and constructive deliberation (Flinders, 2007). The government press officer seeking to challenge a politically inspired narrative has to work against the grain of a party political and parliamentary culture, which routinely makes use of the media to utilise information as a political weapon rather than a source of public insight.

As we saw in Chapter 1, it has been argued that the development of strategic political communications in Britain since the 1990s has been led by increasingly centralised political parties (Harrop, 2001; Wring, 2001). Mair acknowledged that the move by electorates away from lifelong party allegiance and declining involvement with mainstream politics allowed the media more scope to collude with party leaderships to set the agenda by drawing attention to short-term and more personalised and hence newsworthy considerations. Losing their community base, political parties become primarily office-seeking, staffed and controlled by professional political elites, and more integrated with the process of governing – either as the government or government-in-waiting - and disconnected from what they see as the insecurity of a "disengaged and random electorate" (Mair, 2013, pp. 42, 98). In the eyes of the

professional political class, the distant electorate, disenfranchised as a result of disengagement from political parties, becomes less of a citizen and more the member of an unknowable and unpredictable mass audience (Livingstone, 2005).

## **2.4 Mediatization: a field-based approach**

“The media do more than mediate in the sense of ‘getting in between’. Rather, they also alter the historical possibilities for human communication by reshaping relations not just among media organisations and their publics but among all social institutions...The concept allows us to rethink questions of media power in terms of richly contextualised, strongly historical processes that reject narrowly linear assumptions about media effects or impacts.” (Livingstone, 2009)

Much of the literature concerning public administration and political communication is, however implicitly, concerned with dualisms, or dichotomies, such as personalization/politicization, bureaucratic/political or traditional/modern. The risk of relying too heavily on such dualisms is that they can simplify and misrepresent a complex reality. It is commonplace, for example, for personalised communication to be party political, for political actors to be media actors, and for journalists to become political actors. Civil servants within an intensely political environment need to operate politically, while special advisers are also bureaucratic actors. In his writings on governmentality, Foucault proposed that “for these dichotomies I would like to substitute the analysis of *a field* of simultaneous differences and successive differences” (Miller, Gordon, & Burchell, 1991, p. 62) (*my emphasis*), an aspiration which is consistent with a mediatization approach. This study’s *field-based* approach to mediatization seeks to examine a changing process over time as it applies to *all* actors within a particular domain, defined here as the ‘cross-field. This approach combines a meso-level approach to empirically examining actors who have ‘situated agency’ within institutions, with an understanding of fields, where boundaries between the roles, purposes and practices of actors within different institutions become blurred or distorted in response to mediatization.

Mediatization scholars have argued that media and politics may “work in tandem, enabling a simultaneous mediatization of politics and a politicization of media” (Hepp et al., 2015, pp. 4-5). Mediatization interacts with politicization to become “an accelerating factor, causing political decisions to be made hastily without due

consideration” (Koch-Baumgarten & Voltmer, 2010, p. 224). Hyperactive decision-making and the forms of public communication that seek to justify this serve to foreclose deliberation and reduce public trust. Moss and O’Loughlin used in-depth interviews and focus groups with 200 members of the public following 9/11, to argue that the process of mediatization leads to politics developing an increasing symbiotic relation to the news cycle. This mutual exchange between political and media elites results in an increase in resistance, antagonism and disbelief on the part of the public (Moss & O’Loughlin, 2008). Thus, a mediatized form of political discourse may in some way be related to a loss of public trust, a fear which, as we shall see, has also been articulated by public servants.

So far, we have begun to draw together a more critical, fine-grained understanding of the dynamics that might be operating at the interface between government and the media and which might, therefore, form the basis for an empirical study. We have seen how political party influence over government narratives increases as ruling politicians prioritise media management and associate it with their own political survival. Political influence over central public bureaucracies increases, making it harder for officials to resist challenges to traditional norms such as impartiality. Meanwhile, loyalty and responsiveness within Whitehall-style systems intensify as ministers seek, and indeed, insist upon, protection from potentially damaging media exposure. As governments prioritise strategic news management over direct forms of communication, such as advertising or statements to parliament, we would expect storytelling to take precedence over information-giving, and civil servants concerned with media relations to face more pressure to respond to the dual demands of an adversarial media and political arena.

I want to argue here that a field-based mediatization approach is capable of accommodating complexity and change, and can avoid some of the risks of dualism, by offering a broader and more holistic perspective. Proponents of the mediatization approach suggest that it can be considered empirically as a non-normative, dynamic process which operates over time at particular sites of exchange (Lundby, 2014a); in this case, the institutions and actors situated at the interface, or ‘cross-field,’ between bureaucracy, media and politics. I argue that an empirical approach to a meso-level institutional analysis informed by the meta-concept of mediatization holds out the promise of a more sophisticated and inclusive insight into the problem of government communications, and places media at the centre as a force for change, while continuing to engage with other ideas, such as politicization and presidentialization.



### 2.4.1 Theoretical background to mediatization

Broadly speaking, there are two dominant traditions in what is still a relatively new area of theoretical development. I refer to these as the *media logic* tradition, and the *embedded media* tradition. The former argues that “changes associated with communications media and their development,” as originally theorised by Schulz (Schulz, 2004, p. 88), have led to “the growing intrusion of media logic as an institutional rule into other fields where it now supplements (and in extreme cases replaces) existing rules for defining appropriate behaviour” (Esser, 2013, p. 160). The *embedded media* tradition argues that the social, institutional and cultural changes related to developments in media are more profound than media logic would suggest, constituting a deep and long-term transformation in which more and more areas of human life are “communicatively constructed in a mediatized way”(Krotz, 2014, p. 139). The field-based approach that I am proposing here is a development of the *embedded media* tradition but before turning to this, I will briefly examine some of the claims of the *media logic* approach insofar as they relate to government communications.

The idea of media logic originated with the work of Altheide and Snow, who described it as a taken-for-granted set of assumptions through which political discourse is filtered through media and normalised as entertainment (Altheide & Snow, 2004). In his influential book *Media Democracy*, Meyer argued that the mass media had come to influence “the selection and shape of politics and the entire political process” to such an extent that politics had surrendered unconditionally “to the logic of the media system” ((Meyer & Hinchman, 2002, pp. xi, 57). In an echo of the presidentialization thesis discussed earlier, policy decision-making had shifted from the deliberations of the political party into “the inner circle of advisers around those top politicians whose power and position rest on personal, charismatic ties to the media” (p63). He argued that political parties, most notably Labour during the late 1980s, attempted to reorganise their strategic communications structures in order to gain more influence over media representations of political reality. He claims, however, that, politicians were “by nature unsuited to this sort of thing” (p107-8). On the contrary, as we have seen, far from being unsuited to media management, politicians and political parties seem able and willing to exploit the new political marketing techniques and have driven innovation in party political and government communications, both in and out of office.

The pessimistic view of mediatization as the colonization of politics by media, or of politicians as reluctant players in the media game, is challenged by Mazzoleni and Schulz (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999), who argue that there has not been a 'takeover' of political institutions by the media, but the evolution of a new, symbiotic relationship between politics and media. Although media can have distorting effects on the political process, in European democracies at least, media power is counterbalanced, even exceeded, by the power of political parties and institutions. Strömbäck and Van Aelst, scholars who have consistently spanned political communications and mediatization approaches, develop the idea of symbiosis as a process which acts through the "dual and integral role of the media" in political processes, identifying four dimensions of mediatization. The fourth dimension is the deepest form of adaptation, to the extent that "political actors adjust their perceptions and behaviour to news media logic". As part of this adaptation, strategic communication specialists become part of the dominant coalition at the top of political parties, leaders stand or fall by their ability to handle the media, and parties provide a steady flow of information subsidies to journalists (Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2013, pp. 348, 344) and see also (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014).

Schulz's four levels of media-related social change similarly depict an intensifying process of social historical change whereby media first "extend the natural limits of human communication capacities; second, the media substitute social activities and social institutions; third, media amalgamate with various non-media activities in social life; and fourth, the actors and organizations of all sectors of society accommodate to the media logic" (Schulz, 2004, p. 98). Finally, politicians come to believe that: "If you don't exist in the media, you don't exist politically" (Wolfsfield, 2011, p. 1), a conclusion which would be familiar to the angst-ridden politicians who gave evidence to Leveson.

The *embedded media* tradition accepts that society has already exceeded the fourth stage of mediatization, and that further interpenetration continues, for example through the incorporation of social media into everyday life, and the consequent speeding up of the news cycle. Rather than a takeover, or accommodation to media logic, mediatization is a "a historical, ongoing, long-term (meta-) process in which more and more media emerge and are institutionalized" so that "media in the long run increasingly become relevant for the social construction of everyday life, society and culture" (Krotz, 2009, p. 24). The focus should not be on media institutions or

actors, but on “the illumination of some of the shifting relations between and across multiple actors and the media” (Hoskins & O’Loughlin, 2015, p. 1325).

With the exception of some research into the mediatization of public diplomacy and information warfare (Hoskins & O’Loughlin, 2015; Pamment, 2015a, 2015b), mediatization is a concept rarely used by scholars examining government communications in the UK, although it is an important theme among media and communications researchers and theorists in Germany, the Netherlands, Scandinavia and Australia. Couldry uses Bourdieu’s notion of meta-capital to argue that the symbolic power of media constitutes a field of influence which is so “overwhelming” that it can “dominate the whole social landscape” (Couldry, 2003, pp. 664, 668), while appearing natural and inevitable. This acts as a warning to scholars to look beyond the more spectacular and visible manifestations of media change, to question media and political actors’ own estimations of their role in strategic political communications, and to challenge linear or causal explanations for the behaviour of media and political actors, for example where blame is attributed to media or media intermediaries in the name of “spin”.

Hepp provides a useful starting point for establishing an empirical approach to the study of mediatization. In a recent joint paper with Hjarvard and Lundby, he argues for a holistic and dialectical approach to the interplay between media and communications on the one hand, and various social and cultural fields on the other, that does *not* depict media (or ‘media logic’) as either ‘colonizing’ of other domains, or as a zero sum game. They argue that the study of the influence of media within other social and cultural domains (such as government, in our case), should consider resistance as well as response (Hepp et al., 2015). This is directly relevant to this study since, as we saw earlier, British civil servants are required to both respond to and resist ministers.

Ideally, this calls for a qualitative approach to methodology, where official accounts of institutional change can be set against an interpretative analysis of data from ethnographic observation or in-depth interviews. Lundby, who developed the idea of the “media saturated society” (Lundby, 2009a, p. 2), agrees that the most interesting and fruitful question to ask is “how social and communicative forms are developed when media are taken into use in social interaction” (Lundby, 2009b, p. 117). This type of approach has taken mediatization scholars into a wide range of arenas such as public bureaucracies, executive agencies and charities, political parties, parliaments,

even religious institutions, schools and the military (Crosbie, 2014; Hjarvard, 2013; Pallas & Fredriksson, 2013; Rawolle & Lingard, 2014; Thorbjornsrud, Figenschou, & Ihlen, 2014; Waller, 2014).

Empirical research into mediatization, then, should study culture change through “an empirically founded theorization of the manner in which our cultures are changing with the advance of mediatization”, (Hepp, 2013b, p. 142). It is not a question of establishing a single theoretical framework, he argues, since these rapidly go out of date as media cultures change. Instead, new theories can be “grounded” in and developed directly from, empirical work in particular spheres. One attraction of the *embedded media* approach is that it allows for more open-minded research that does not depend on the notion of ‘logics’, or on a cascading narrative of corruption whereby media corrupt the political sphere, mediatized politics corrupts the civil service, and politicized government communications corrupts public discourse. It has been suggested that the concept of mediatization is not a theory, or even a paradigm, since it is too broad to deliver “a coherent, robust and operational conceptual framework for a durable research programme”. Instead, it should be seen as a sensitizing concept rather than a definitive one; as a bridge into the empirical social world (Jensen, 2013, p. 218). Lunt and Livingstone agree, suggesting that, as a ‘sensitizing concept’, mediatization can guide empirical study and offer a heightened historical awareness, allowing us to reinterpret social transformations across a range of domains, and to examine the intersection of various meta-processes (Lunt & Livingstone, 2016). This has similarities with historical institutionalism, an approach widely used in political science although rarely in media and communications studies, which is referred to in the next chapter in relation to research design and methodology (Bannerman & Haggart, 2015; Hall & Taylor, 1996).

By examining the processes which shape and structure political institutions and the beliefs and practices of those who have ‘situated agency’ within them, we come up against the question of what distinguishes fields and institutions. In contrast to the relatively static identity held by even informal institutions, such as, say, journalism, a field can be seen as dynamic, fluid and unstable; as “a bounded space of competition over specific forms of capital by defined sets of actors”(Couldry, 2014, p. 9). More specifically, the field can be defined as “a site of contestation over power” where “institutions, individuals or objects derive their distinctive properties from an internal relationship to all other positions in the field” (Akram, Emerson, & Marsh, 2015, p. 351). This way of conceptualising mediatization, derived from the work of

the Australian scholars Lingard and Rawolle, contains the possibility of interference between fields, and the creation of so-called ‘cross-fields’ – interfaces, or spaces, where two or more distinct fields collide and interact to produce a unique set of patterns. This is explored more fully in the next section.

#### 2.4.2 Empirical research within the mediatization paradigm

In their approach to mediatization, Kunelius and Reunanen have taken as the focus for their research the centrality of “attention” as the particular resource, or currency, that the media control, rather in the way that power is the resource of politics (Kunelius & Reunanen, 2013). They argue that, as a form of shared currency in modern mediatized societies, attention can circulate widely and complicate institutional behaviours and norms, even structures. This is consistent with findings by Schillemans et al, who carried out substantial empirical research within public, semi-public and third sector bureaucracies in the Netherlands and Australia. Their content analysis of quality press coverage showed that, collectively, public sector providers were the subject of “vast, yet often inconspicuous media attention” (Schillemans, 2012, p. 11), accounting for over a third of all news stories. Through a combination of interviews, surveys and focus groups they asked officials how important it was that they kept abreast of the news. They found that: “the closer people work to the executive level of the organization, and the more strongly a field is politicized, the stronger this expectation of knowing the news seems to be” (p78). Further, “the organizations closest to the minister ‘suffered’<sup>25</sup> the most from mediatization” (p101).

The study of central public bureaucracies’ and executive agencies’ relations with media is a small but growing sub-field, in which scholars from different disciplines have used a combination of methods to identify ways in which these organisations adapt to mediatization (Cook, 2006; Deacon & Monk, 2001; Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, 2015; Pallas & Fredriksson, 2013; Rawolle & Lingard, 2014; Thorbjørnsrud et al., 2014). Pallas and Fredriksson have carried out a range of studies in Swedish executive agencies, using both documentary analysis and ethnographic observation, and conclude that organisations and the actors within them have “substantial agency” in how they adapt to and manage the media. Utilising Schulz’s

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<sup>25</sup> The use of the word “suffered” implies but does not demonstrate, that mediatization is a negative phenomenon within public bureaucracies. This implication also appears in the work of Thorbjørnsrud et al. I critically examine these ideas more fully in Chapter 7.

four dimensions of mediatization to examine the outputs from 20 randomly selected executive agencies, they conclude that organisations that are likely to be the subject of parliamentary attention through questions and statements are “considerably more mediatized than those who operate ‘under the radar’ of national politicians” (Fredriksson, Schillemans, & Pallas, 2015, p. 1062; Schulz, 2004). Mediatization or what they term ‘mediability’ – the process through which organizations embed mediatization – takes place unevenly within organisations. Thus, organizations can use their own autonomy and professional capital to “strategically navigate to avoid, negotiate and even resist mediatization pressures” which largely emanate from the domain of mediated politics (Pallas, 2016, p. 445; Pallas & Fredriksson, 2014). The political domain is a major driver for mediatization, meaning that the less autonomy and political capital held within the organisation, the less capacity it has to resist the pressures of mediatization.

This empirical exploration of the “(micro) processes and dynamics in which mediatization unfolds and gets enacted” prompts questions about the role of politicians in promoting strategic forms of communication from within public bureaucracies, which we have observed anecdotally within the UK. According to Pallas and Fredriksson, the formal autonomy of even arms-length public bureaucracies is not enough to protect them from ‘political interference’. In a move the authors define as ‘politicization through indirect mediatization’ officials tried to increase the media profile of their organisation as a way of pleasing politicians, hoping thereby to resist further interference (Fredriksson et al., 2015, p. 27). Similarly, Thorbjørnsrud et al.’s ethnographic study of a Norwegian executive agency found similar forms of adaptation to media amongst those closest to politicians, noting a struggle between backstage and public facing officials to uphold “legitimate bureaucratic governance” against so-called “arbitrary rule”. They argue that media pressure threatens to drive civil servants towards the latter, challenging Weberian ideals of equal treatment and the neutral bureaucracy (Kjersti Thorbjørnsrud et al., 2014); bureaucrats have a rationale of their own which comes into conflict with a pervasive “diffuse, porous and informal” infiltrating rationale of mediatization.

So how does the notion of fields, referred to above, relate to our discussion, or indeed to institutions and those with situated agency within them, which are the focus of this study? As Schillemans has stated, the question is not a causal one about who does what to whom, but what is happening within and between “complex systems of governance” (Schillemans, 2012, p. 9). Landerer, who has studied the contrast

between public media stances and the privately stated beliefs of Swiss political party actors, agrees that any causal link between media and politics is unclear. The domains, or fields, of media and politics, are equally dependent on mass public participation, either as voters, or as audiences and readers, and are hence both subject to the competitive pressures of marketization (Landerer, 2013). Again, attention becomes a form of currency dominant within the media field but also pervasive throughout society as part of the process of mediatization.

The work of Lingard and Rawolle develops the social field approach more fully with reference to Bourdieu, and provides what I would argue is a powerful approach to understanding the relationship between modern governments and the media, and conducting empirical research at the interface between them. Social fields “denote social spaces in which specific forms of competition operate with a distinctive logic of practice and a set of forces that act on people engaged in the competition”(Rawolle, 2005, p. 2). Thus, politicians and journalists, and political and media institutions, operate in distinctive ways both culturally and institutionally and yet occupy the same space as drivers of and as subject to the over-arching process of mediatization, as we have seen.

It makes sense, then, that any approach which incorporates the idea of ‘social fields’ must also consider what happens when fields intersect. In their examination of a specific policy case study, Lingard and Rawolle develop the notion of ‘cross-field effects’ to explain the behaviour, culture and outputs of government actors negotiating with journalists to create and convey public messages (Lingard, Rawolle, & Taylor, 2005; Rawolle, 2005). Their case study is the highly mediatized launch of Australia’s first ‘knowledge economy’ report in 1999, which drew on OECD categories to warn that the country was in danger of falling behind in the global race to exploit new technology. Rather than taking a linear, or even a mutual exchange approach, where policy development and media coverage are seen to influence one another, the authors use a field approach to address a complex policy arena which is subject to a range of higher order influencers including the state, journalism, global business (and what they refer to as the “rhetoric of numbers” that surrounds it), party politics and neo-liberal ideology.

At stake is the policy process itself: the attempt to name and manage social problems by diagnosing the cause and offering solutions. Feeding into this process are the politics of policy development, which operates to the timescale of the electoral cycle,

and the much faster and increasingly dominant news cycle. Education and the knowledge economy emerge as a “hot topic” that attracts public interest, and feeds into the news cycle. For the duration of the policy development process, and in the struggle to name a particular social issue, a ‘temporary social field’ was created, in which “journalists and policy agents adopted a range of strategies that produced cross-field effects” (Lingard et al., 2005, p. 734). An example of a ‘cross-field effect’, could be, for example, the media-friendly policy texts and speeches produced by government agencies during the lifetime of the ‘hot topic’, the decisions made during the media frenzy surrounding the ‘hot topic’, and the internal negotiations that take place between officials to sign them off. A ‘temporary social field’ is one which emerges during the process of policy development, whereby short-term negotiations of meaning take place between different fields such as policy, journalism and politics (Rawolle & Lingard, 2014). Thus, boundaries become fragile and fluid, and actors within each field become susceptible to mutual influence which itself is dependent on the power balances between actors in the different fields. The authors argue that journalism increasingly frames the parameters of policy debate and ultimately channels, limits and compromises the narratives that reach the public.

The metaphor of the cross-field as a shared policy and representational space which is subject to short-lived effects such as sudden shifts in power balances, changes in meaning and interpretation and a distorted relationship to time, is one that could helpfully be applied to many aspects of government media relations and the recurring media frenzies that affect and frequently destabilise governments, and, as we saw with Leveson, which preoccupy politicians. It could also apply to longer-term strategic attempts by governments to re-frame public attitudes towards populist policy areas such as crime, immigration and welfare, or to more specific processes such as the campaign to persuade the British public to support the attack on Iraq in 2003. Lingard and Rawolle do not deploy a longitudinal or historical approach, however. In order to establish a sustained and substantive ‘direction of travel’, this study will set such everyday instability against the durability or resilience of the institutional contexts within which such processes of change take place. Inherent within this logic is the idea that change may be resisted or responded to. Indeed, resilience may be said to incorporate both resistance to threats, and responses to change.



## **2.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has examined a range of literatures and some documentary evidence to produce a synthesis of the changes which are generally thought to have impacted on the UK's central government bureaucracy in relation to media change since 1997. These have included greater political competition for media attention, the use of strategic communications as a political resource, and long-term changes in the structure and culture of the UK's central governing bureaucracy to accommodate both direct media demands, and indirect demands from ministers for media representation. Politicians have emerged as key drivers of innovation in strategic communication within government; a preoccupation with media scrutiny dominates their thoughts and fears, and helps to explain their need to employ media aides who are responsible solely to them.

Immediately after the 1997 election, those suspected of being less able to “benefit us” within the government communications leadership were weeded out, bringing in new, untried and more politically-aligned senior communicators. It remains to be seen whether this is a long-term trend but it is likely to have increased perceptions of job insecurity among government communications specialists. Long overdue improvements to and greater investment in government communications took place after 1997 but these were implemented according to priorities set by party leaderships, leading to resistance on the part of parliamentary committees and the civil service in the form of a series of critical reviews and enquiries. Many of these changes were inexorable and difficult to reverse, such as the priority given to news management over direct communication, the steady increase in the numbers of politically appointed special advisers, and their growing involvement in briefing journalists. Public administration scholars have suggested that through such factors as reduced job security and greater political control there has been a move away from the traditional model of impartiality to one of “promiscuous partisanship”, but this needs to be convincingly demonstrated (Aucoin, 2012; Grube, 2014). Taken together, these changes indicate a radical and cumulative shift in both frontline practice and in what has come to be seen as appropriate within the Whitehall model. Some scholars argue that this shift has disproportionately affected the government's strategic communications function but again, this remains to be demonstrated (Sausman & Locke, 2004).

Tony Blair used his substantial political and media capital after 1997 to centralise government communications. It has also been suggested that by reorganising and boosting staffing levels within his own office, he created a Prime Ministers' department in everything but name (Burch & Holliday, 1999). However, by itself, centralization is contingent on other factors and appears to be cyclical within a departmental system such as Whitehall. I would argue that the balance between the centre – No.10, the Cabinet Office and the Treasury – and the powerful ministerial departments, is subject to fluctuation depending on political and personal factors within each administration. Political scientists and political communications scholars have deployed such terms as personalization ('lack of chemistry'), presidentialization ('Tony wants'), or politicization ('not one of us')<sup>26</sup>, to explain the direction of travel after 1997, linking these to a number of other changes, of which mediatization is one (Heffernan & Webb, 2005; Langer, 2011; Webb & Poguntke, 2005).

The personal and political interests of ministers were increasingly served by a new breed of special adviser who managed the media but were given little guidance or training in relation to such politically sensitive and exposed roles, and had to learn on the job, sometimes with disruptive results. This carries the risk of tribalism, whereby political appointees serve their political masters by attacking political opponents, often within their own party. The briefing and counter-briefing by the Blair and Brown camps as depicted in many contemporary political biographies, and the more recent resignations of special advisers during the Coalition period, provide ample illustration of this (Bower, 2005; McBride, 2013; Seldon, 2005). The suspicion that special advisers routinely trade privileged insider information in exchange for media coverage which is advantageous to their political masters is a major factor behind the charge of 'political spin', but there is little empirical evidence about what media special advisers actually do, and no detailed regulation of their role in this regard (Jones, 2006).

What is clear is that the civil servants who operate at the interface between media and politics, namely government press officers and special advisers, are disproportionately affected by the speeding up and proliferation of media competing for public attention, and the increasing tendency for political storytelling to incorporate blame, challenges to personal integrity and factional conflict. This study

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<sup>26</sup> The first two quotes refer to widely reported comments by government insiders during the first Blair administration, while 'not one of us' was a sentiment attributed to Margaret Thatcher in relation to what she saw as obstructive ministers or civil servants.

aims to challenge the idea that political spin *per se* has corrupted modern politics, and to reveal and explain changes in the culture and internal dynamics that operate within and between government and the media at a time of profound media transformation. This requires placing media considerations centre-stage and opening up the 'black box' of political spin.

As a conceptual framework, I propose to make use of the 'embedded media' approach to mediatization, and specifically Lingard and Rawolle's metaphor of the cross-field, a shared arena where political and media fields interact to create cross-field effects (Lingard et al., 2005; Rawolle & Lingard, 2008; Rawolle & Lingard, 2014). There are three main advantages of this approach: first, it is media-centred, although not media-centric, in that it places media impacts on non-media domains and institutions at the heart of study; second, it bypasses some of the problems of dualism and demonization and allows us to examine a complex picture non-normatively; and, third, it most closely matches the reality as depicted in biographical accounts such as Christopher Meyer's and as glimpsed through flashes of controversy and witness accounts presented to government and parliamentary enquiries.

The interface between media, politics and bureaucracy – here identified through the situated agency of government press officers, special advisers, ministers and journalists - can be seen as a permanent cross-field, where policies and actions are picked up, scrutinised and then dropped as part of the news cycle. Drawing on the work of Andreas Hepp, these actors' natural habitat, and the culture of norms, customs and beliefs within which they work, can be said to constitute a "culture of mediatization" which, over time, has developed its own distinctive ways of communicating, and where "life...is unimaginable without media". Within this cross-field, the media are more than an afterthought; they "constitute and construct the centre" (Hepp, 2013b, pp. 70, 71).

To investigate the micro-processes of mediatization taking place at this particular site, and through the 'situated agency' of key actors, it is essential to consider path dependency; that is, to observe "moments and objects along the way that demonstrate the transformation of the sociocultural practice or institution under study" (Lundby, 2014a, p. 23). Lundby proposes one example of a type of longitudinal approach which is pertinent to this study – interviews with retired legal professionals about changes in the media coverage of trials. He concludes that although mediatization is a non-normative concept, as a sensitizing concept it can help to answer the question of whether the process is changing things for better or worse. Others agree that the

concept of mediatization by itself is too broad to deliver a coherent operational framework, but can provide a bridge into empirical social worlds where various meta-processes intersect (Jensen, 2013; Lunt & Livingstone, 2016). This study will shed some light on the question as to whether this is a valid and productive approach.

Ultimately, I hope that this approach will facilitate three academic goals: to deliver empirical depth, allow for the development of theory, and help to answer normative questions about whether a mediatized culture of government communications puts at risk the democratic ideal of the informed citizen (Daintith, 2001). The threat to democracy, I would contend, is the real danger that lies behind widespread fears of the growth of political spin.

## Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that the site of interest for this study is the little-understood interface between media and government, which is theorised here as the intersection, or cross-field, between three social fields: media, bureaucracy and politics. Operating within this site are three main actors who have ‘situated agency’ to negotiate what becomes news: government press officers, politically appointed special advisers, and journalists. The role of No.10 in commanding the news agenda since 1997 has been much commented upon but the experiences and perceptions of departmental press officers are little studied. There has been, as we have seen, some ethnographic and interview based research carried out among government and executive agency press teams in the US, Sweden and Norway, but these studies are synchronic rather than diachronic (Cook, 1998; Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, 2015; Fredriksson et al., 2015). This study aims to fill this empirical gap by making visible the everyday processes and mechanisms that take place over time within this cross-field, through the testimony of those most concerned with enacting them.

As largely anonymous intermediaries, government press officers conduct their activities from within a “relatively closed” bureaucracy (Smith, 2008, p. 154), and are required by their professional and public service norms and ethics to conduct their activities anonymously. With a few exceptions, such as Damian McBride, Gordon Brown’s notorious civil service press officer-turned-special adviser, and Bernard Ingham, Margaret Thatcher’s long-serving Chief Press Secretary (1979-1990), they do not speak in public or publish memoirs (Ingham, 2003; McBride, 2013). Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair’s chief press secretary (1997-2003), has published edited versions of the diaries he wrote while in government, but on his own admission, and as discussed in chapter 2, he was primarily a political actor, rather than a civil servant, although technically he was a special adviser.

Journalists too, rarely discuss in detail their working relationships with government press officers, preferring to use distancing tactics to deny any implication of dependence on official sources (Cook, 1998; Gravengaard, 2012). Macnamara argues that social scientists and media and communications scholars have a blind spot to the workings of public relations in general, despite the industry’s growing size and significance (Macnamara, 2014; Miller, 2008), and are failing to critically examine

the process of political spin. Similarly, Aronczyk argues that research into political promotional culture must be taken seriously as “one step toward a pragmatic yet critical exploration of how political actors, intermediaries, journalists and citizens interact in and understand processes of political communication” (Aronczyk, 2015, p. 2021).

The approach taken in this study is distinctive in that it puts the civil service PR practitioner at the heart of the enquiry. Collectively, they represent a large cadre of communication power, probably the largest single group of specialist communicators in the country (Moloney, 2006). Within a centralised yet departmental system, where ministers have extensive executive and decision-making power, this resource adds up to a formidable machine, largely deployed at departmental level (Davis, 2002; Norton, 2000). The departmental Directors of Communication, and through them, their staffs, are in daily contact with ministers and journalists. From their position adjacent to the top of the departmental hierarchy, they observe ministers and Prime Ministers at their most vulnerable. Finally, they have been at the sharp end of a series of major changes since the rise of TV in the 1960s: the advent of 24/7 news in the late 1980s, and the explosion of digital communications from the mid-1990s onwards.

The logic behind the research design discussed in this chapter has three key features that arise from the theoretical framework:

1. Press officers are considered as both witnesses and actors within an institutional framework wherein they have ‘situated agency’.
2. Since mediatization is a meta-process that takes place over time, the research method must be diachronic, that is, examining changing contexts, multiple levels of causation and sequences and differences between one period of time and another (Szreter, 2015).
3. This study examines events in history through the narratives of primary witnesses and so is concerned with historical facts as well as narrative. The evidence contained in key historical documents can help to anchor the chronology, and provide a check on the accounts of these primary witnesses.

The initial intention was to focus solely on government press officers, but in doing so, it became clear that other participants involved in the process of government communication could contribute to a more rounded and critical understanding of the press officer’s role: namely, specialist policy journalists who encounter press officers as part of their regular ‘beats’, and special advisers who engage in media relations.

Official and archival documents – largely external but also some internal – played a key part in the initial literature review and scoping for the project, but at a later stage were also re-read and re-interpreted in the light of the interview material. This is therefore a mixed methods qualitative study, involving in-depth semi-structured interviews with three types of participant, and the analysis of largely contemporaneous documents. The data are therefore textual, and the analysis is mainly thematic but with narrative elements.

Finally, I need to explain my part in the research process. My experiences and position as a former long-serving public sector PR professional, although not in the civil service, played an important part in the identification of the problem, the development of the research idea, the conduct of the research itself, and the analysis and interpretation of the data. This will be considered together with the ethical and political implications of the study

## **3.2 Methodology – developing the research process**

### **3.2.1 Origins of the study**

The idea for the research originated in early 2011 while I was working for a local authority communications department and embarking on a part time diploma in public affairs as part of my professional development. The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), Eric Pickles, had just launched his *Publicity Code for Local Government*, which set out clear guidelines for impartial public communications. This guidance has now been placed on a statutory footing<sup>27</sup>. This move was interpreted by some left-leaning boroughs, including the one I worked for, as a party political attempt to silence dissent. Visiting the DCLG website to take a closer look at the code, and the stated rationale for it, I started to look at press releases issued by the department and was surprised by what seemed to me to be their party political flavour. This experience, and the reading that followed from it, led to my diploma research project (Garland, 2011). This formed the basis of my PhD research proposal.

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<sup>27</sup> On 31 March 2011 the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government issued a new Publicity Code under section 4 of the Local Government Act 1986 (“the 1986 Act”).

There appeared to be a disparity between the ideal of impartiality and its practice, and some ambiguity in the propriety guidelines, which were supposed to ensure that government information remained non party-political. As we have seen, there are at least two distinctive interpretations of impartiality, as a publicly-oriented value aimed at promoting good government, or as a straightforward enactment of political neutrality. In practice, impartiality is something more experienced than clearly defined: as an article of faith it is frequently reiterated yet only vaguely explicated, so how can we be sure that different actors are interpreting it consistently, or that more powerful actors are not reinterpreting it to suit their own positions (I. Young, 1990)? We have seen how the Labour governments of 1997-2010 were hit by a series of controversies related to ‘political spin’, while after 2010 there were two high profile resignations by special advisers due to public relations misconduct<sup>28</sup>. What was it about civil service culture and practice that allowed this to happen, despite the overwhelming continuing attachment to the ideal of impartiality?

### 3.2.2 Which methods?

Given that the object of study here is the individual with a particular form of situated agency, a qualitative approach involving an “in-depth exploration of a few carefully selected strategic or critical cases” is capable of generating data that has both analytical and empirical explanatory power (Karpf, Kreiss, Nielsen, & Powers, 2015). By listening to the voices of former government press officers through in-depth interviews, I sought to capture not only their factual accounts but a sense of the atmosphere and assumptions that influenced their day-to-day work. Ostensibly this could have been achieved in three ways: ethnographic observation from within a government department, interviews with serving officials, or interviews with former officials. There were three methodological requirements of the research design: to access key individuals who had *directly witnessed* significant change over time, to establish how key players *interacted* in responding to the challenges of mediatization, and to capture changing *perceptions, expectations and practices* during a crucial period between the late 1980s and up to and including the 2010-2015 Coalition government, but taking 1997 as a turning point. An ethnographic study, assuming that access to a government department could have been achieved, would have captured the interactions of key players at a moment in time, but in-depth interviews with a range of *former* key players whose participation ranged over the period in

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<sup>28</sup> The resignation of Adam Smith, special adviser to the Secretary of State for Media, Culture and Sport in 2012, and Fiona Cunningham, special adviser to the Home Secretary in 2014.



question, was less risky for the participants, and was capable of capturing change. Methodologically, ethnographic research privileges the contemporary, providing an information-rich snapshot, or “thick description” (Geertz, 1975) of a moment in time. The other alternative, interviews with serving officials, would also be subject to negotiation, requiring permission at the highest level, and taking place while the individual is ‘in role’.

Only one extensive ethnographic study from within a UK government setting has taken place to date. Rhodes’ *Everyday Life in British Government* (2011) observed day to day life at the top of three middle-ranking government departments at various points between 2001 and 2005. Access was subject to careful negotiation and re-negotiation, and was, in part at least, facilitated by Rhodes’ previous position as director of the large-scale ESRC Whitehall programme. This was a £2.1m research programme brokered with the support of the then Cabinet Secretary, Sir Robin Butler, in 1993, which ran until 1999 and involved 23 projects (Rhodes, 2000a, 2000b). It is unlikely that another project on this scale will be agreed in the foreseeable future, while smaller ethnographic projects taking place under the radar would be difficult if not impossible in an office as visible, as sensitive, and as exposed to ministerial scrutiny, as the press office. Unfortunately, Rhodes’ account excluded observations of the press office and does not refer to press officers in any detail, even during his account of the media-frenzy surrounding the resignation of the minister, Estelle Morris.

There are methodological advantages to interviewing former rather than serving officials for this study. Since they are out of role, they have no responsibility to political or administrative masters and are free to express opinions. Also, as they are speaking historically rather than contemporaneously, they are less likely to privilege the present over the past, and can view their careers over a span of time. They are in a position to reflect on, and question, the situations they encountered while performing the role. One possible bias is that memory is selective, leading to the risk of ‘golden ageism’ – a risk which can be mitigated through triangulation, and through checking their accounts against the official record.

This project therefore combined interview analysis with documentary analysis in order to track changes in custom and practice over time, and to highlight possible discrepancies between practices and ideals. The historical perspective, which derived from the systematic analysis of tranches of archived government documents dating

back to the early 1980s added “both empirical and analytical depth” (Layder, 1998, p68). These texts not only provided evidence of historical change, and showed how the government and others chose to record events for posterity, but served “as tools whose production, consumption and use is part of the negotiation of difficult subjects” (Jones, 2011, p. 71). Together, these methods enabled a meso-level approach, which allows us to “discern systematic patterns of change across time and space within a particular institutional framework” (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 154). More particularly, since media change is not always continuous, but contains “eruptive moments” (such as the arrival of television, the internet, or 24-hour news), it makes sense to zoom in on a site of change in order to “carry out a deep analysis of its specific communicative figuration”(Hepp, 2013a, p. 626) where a ‘communicative figuration’ can be defined as a network of individuals which “constitutes a larger social entity through reciprocal interaction”(Hepp & Hasebrink) in (Lundby, 2014b, p. 259).

This “qualitative, longitudinal deep case study method” is characteristic of the historical institutionalist approach common in political studies, which examines the interaction of institutions, ideas and agents (or interests) over time (Bannerman & Haggart, 2015, p. 10). This approach to method involves selecting the case study and time period, identifying the institution and agents/actors to be studied, identifying mechanisms that strengthen or weaken the institutions, agents and ideas in play and establishing who gains and who loses during a period of change. Such change could include, for example, the creation of new institutions, grafting new institutions on to old, or changing the functions of existing institutions. Certain groups may be favoured or excluded, options may be constrained or extended, and new debates and agendas may emerge as others recede or drift into irrelevance.

To take account of such macro- and micro-processes, the method must be sensitive enough to “examine informal routines and formal institutions over time, attending to path dependency, as well as to the fact that institutions contain conflicting forces that can be a source of instability”(p15). Within a political institution like the civil service, such forces may be resisted or responded to, and certain aspects of a given institution or group of institutions may be more or less resilient in the face of certain kinds of change. The institutions under study here are not only the established and understood institutions of the civil service, journalism and electoral politics, but the “formal and informal procedures, routines, norms and conventions embedded in the organizational structure of the polity” (Hall & Taylor, 1996, p.6).

### 3.2.3 Semi-structured interviews

The main methodology was qualitative: in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with three distinct groups of actors involved in the crafting of government news. The initial interviews with former government press officers were complemented by a second, smaller set of interviews with long-serving (and mainly) former policy journalists to find out how they viewed the process of change not only in terms of the demands on them as a result of the expansion of 24/7 media, but how, as customers and ‘critical friends’, they viewed the work of government press officers. While interviewing journalists, it became clear that, in tandem with the steady increase in their numbers, particularly since 1997, special advisers were becoming more active as sources of government news, even to the extent of marginalising government press officers. To obtain a richer analysis and an alternative perspective, I carried out a limited set of interviews with former special advisers, one from the Blair years, and two who had served during the 2010-2015 Coalition government.

An acknowledged strength of this type of interview is that it can assist in developing “an understanding of the relations between social actors and their situation”, by providing “a fine textured understanding of beliefs, attitudes, values and motivations in relation to the behaviours of people in particular social contexts” (Gaskell, 2000, p. 39). These interviews are traditionally classified as ‘elite interviews’, but in practice were also peer encounters, with a measure of ‘shop talk’, partly due to my own career history. Typically, elite interviews can yield not only colour, context, and chronology but also exclusive pieces of insider information offered both on and off the record (Goldstein, 2002), and that was the case here. The encounter was an active interview in that far from being “passive vessels”, the participants were aware of their role as witnesses to history, having had a part to play in a politically significant debate. In this sense, the interview provided an occasion for “producing reportable knowledge” and “formally and systematically” activating the participants’ interpretive capabilities (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997, pp. 122, 114).

There is also a group dimension to this approach. Data gathered from a particular social or professional group has a form of collective explanatory power that is more than the sum of its parts. As Gaskell puts it: “It is in the accumulation of insights from a set of interviews that one comes to understand the life worlds within a group of respondents” (Gaskell, 2000, p. 44). To express this in more institutional terms, interviews with even a “relatively small sample of individuals may produce evidence

that is considered to provide an understanding of the inter-subjective meanings shared by the whole of a community” (Elliott, 2005, p. 28).

The sampling, or more accurately, the selection process, was purposive, ‘non-probability’ sampling, where “logic and power lies in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study” (Layder, 1998, p. 46). The selection involved some quota sampling in order to select a range of key characteristics: service at departmental level as well as at No.10, and post-holding at all points throughout the period between the Thatcher and Cameron period (1979-2016) (See Appendix 3 for metadata about the interviewees). The sample is not representative but seeks to identify key figures involved in a specific set of events and processes taking place during a defined time and place (Tansey, 2007). Purposive sampling, however, increases the likelihood of selection bias and reduces generalizability, which needs to be taken into account at the interpretation stage, but it creates a more concentrated data source that allows the researcher to “probe beyond official accounts and narratives and ask theoretically-guided questions about issues that are highly specific to the research objectives” (Tansey, 2007, p.9).

An initial target list was drawn up after researching key names emerging from government and parliamentary reviews and reports, press releases, media coverage and secondary accounts such as published memoirs, diaries, autobiographies and biographies, and by using these names to identify further contacts. From this initial target list, 21 invitations were sent out to a range of former civil service communicators who had served in media relations roles between the late 1980s and 2014, and had worked for a range of government departments, as well as No.10 and the Cabinet office, and at a range of grades, with more emphasis on those who had reached Director or Deputy Director level. Snowball sampling was then used to extend the sample by a further six. This was especially useful among the group that was hardest to reach - civil servants who had left their posts more recently.

The length of the interview was set at one hour in order to provide time to establish trust, and penetrate the defences which characterise professionals who are practised in discretion, while also acknowledging that they are short of time (Harvey, 2011). The main topic guide (see Table 3.1) was designed with civil servants in mind, and was relatively open-ended, aimed at facilitating an ‘extended conversation’ in whatever order suited the participant around key topics related to the administrative and political dimensions of their work (Berger, 1998). All were recorded to maintain

the flow of conversation and capture every detail (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002). The interviews were probing in that they sought to find out what government PR practitioners do, how they define their role, how they work with politicians and their advisers, and how it feels to operate at the interface between the government bureaucracy, party politics and the media. The primary research focus was “the substantive content of the interview” (Elliott 2012, p.20) but the form, or narrative style, of the conversation was also important given the salience of the narrative of spin and ongoing controversies about the changing relationship between politicians and civil servants.

Although rich and rewarding, the in-depth interview presents risks to the validity of the data, for example by the unintended use of leading questions, or a failure to take account of what might be at stake for the interviewee, especially where there may be a professional identification with the interviewer. Wengraf warns against ‘contaminating’ an interview by letting the participant know too much about the research agenda (Wengraf, 2001). This is a particular risk when the participant is well-informed, is speaking in professional mode, and is keen to establish for themselves the nature of the research at the outset. Elite interviews in particular carry a risk of manipulation on the part of respondents (whether conscious or not) who are adept at staying ‘on message’ and representing their own contribution in the best possible light (Harvey, 2011). As professional storytellers and advocates for both their organisation and internally for their somewhat contested position within it, one should be aware of the possibility that they would overplay the importance of their role, underplay some of the difficulties, and perhaps deflect blame on to others.

As part of their professional socialisation, civil servants have been found to underplay their role in political decision-making (Tansey, 2007) and to provide “stock answers”, as found in numerous civil service studies (D. Marsh, 2001). It has been argued that although “both ministers and officials believe that ‘ministers decide’...the reality is more complex”, and that, when interviewed in role, UK civil servants “have a presentation of self which conforms to that model” (Smith, 2008, pp. 154, 152). This is to some extent mitigated here as the respondents are interviewed out of role but there may be an element of post-hoc justification, attempts to provide narrative coherence, ‘settling scores’, or a concern to present themselves positively. Tansey argues that for these reasons, elite interviews should serve an “additive function”, providing an accompaniment to other data sources such as histories, memoirs and

other secondary sources, archival evidence and official documents (Tansey, 2007, p. 7).

The topic guide was designed so that the questioning did not explicitly refer to concepts key to the theoretical framework or research questions, such as ‘politicization’, ‘mediatization’, ‘personalization’ or ‘spin’. The same applied to the wording of invitation letters and during the preamble to each interview. Although the year 1997 was the focal point for the study, this date was not mentioned specifically except as one of a series of dates when governments changed hands politically. The well-recorded ‘churn’ in government communications following the 1997 election was also not referred to directly but was dealt with by a more general question about impacts on day to day work of a change of government.

**Table 3.1: Topic guide - civil servants** <sup>29</sup>

<b>Administrative</b>	<b>Political</b>
Ethos and public service purpose	Managing the boundary between government and party political PR
Excellence and best practice; reputation and standing of PR within the civil service	The impact of a change of government
Nature of the job: highs and lows	The role of ministers in media management
Recruitment to senior positions in government communications	The role of ‘the centre’ in coordinating communications
Efficacy of current codes and forms of redress	The media responsibilities of special advisers

The stance taken by the interviewer was one of party political neutrality in order to be consistent with the cultural norms and expectations of the interviewees, and also because questions about the partisan press, or ideological attitudes towards the public sector in general and the civil service in particular, were not the explicit research objectives of this study. These factors were, however, raised indirectly in the context of changes in the way different governments communicate through the media, and what it felt like dealing with journalists, politicians and their aides. The operationalization of the key concepts in the topic guide is explained in Table 3.2

<sup>29</sup> See Appendix 4 for full versions of the main topic guide.

below. This conceptualisation is consistent with the theoretical framework outlined in chapter 2: mediatization is operationalised as the primary, overarching process within which other processes such as politicization, personalization and professionalization take place.

**Table 3.2: Operationalization of concepts**

<b>Professionalization</b>	<b>Politicization/personalization</b>	<b>Institutional context</b>
Public purposes of government communications	Experiencing a change of government	Image and reputation of government PR
Excellence in government communications	Media relations role of ministers and special advisers	Ethics, codes and common practice
<b>Mediatization change over time</b> –	→	→

The phenomenon also highlighted by Wengraf, of “anxious defended subjectivity” on the part of interviewees, also had to be taken into account during the interviews and in the analysis, since distressing matters such as redundancy, bullying or dismissal were likely to come up (Wengraf, 2001, p. 59). There may well be significance in the unanswered question, or the question which prompts either a stereotyped, inarticulate or limited response.

The research process was adaptive, using a phased approach, in that the core interviews with civil servants were carried out first followed by interviews with established policy journalists working for the national broadsheet press, a national news agency and broadcasters<sup>30</sup>. Lobby journalists were largely excluded from this analysis since they liaise mainly with No.10 through the lobby system, which has already been extensively covered and is not the subject of this study (Cockerell et al., 1984; Hennessy, 2000, 2001; Ingham, 2003; Robinson, 2012). The sampling of journalists was again purposive, involving those covering specialist beats that

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<sup>30</sup> By adaptive, I am referring to the approach outlined by Derek Layder whereby theory adapts to, or is shaped by, incoming evidence, while data is filtered through prior frameworks, concepts and ideas (Layder 1998, p5). He argues that this approach is especially pertinent when examining dynamic 'lived experiences' and meanings, within a wider social and institutional context.

necessitated regular contact with government press officers from the 1960s to the present day. Again, priority was given to length of service and to former rather than serving journalists in order to facilitate a historical approach. The journalists' topic guide was derived from the original civil servants' topic guide, and was influenced by the interview content since it was produced after the press officer interviews had been transcribed and subjected to some 'provisional coding'. This "inherently open-ended" approach allows for changes and developments in theoretical direction (Layder, 1998, p. 55). The journalist interviews covered similar ground to the civil servant interviews, but from the perspective of an 'involved outsider' or 'critical friend'. Fewer interviews were needed since theirs was not a core contribution but contextual one, so nine journalists were approached of whom one had been a political correspondent for the Press Association (the UK's main national news agency), two were former BBC TV specialist news correspondents, and five were specialist reporters/editors from national broadsheet newspapers. Two were still working as journalists.

Once all the journalists' interviews had been transcribed and provisionally coded, it became clear that special advisers were playing an increasingly significant and hitherto uncharted role in media management, but one which loomed large in the working lives of press officers and journalists. I approached six former special advisers representing the three political parties of government – Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat. Three were interviewed using a topic guide derived from interviews with the civil servants and journalists. While both pertinent and interesting, the data derived from interviews with such a small sample of special advisers can only represent the tip of the iceberg – special advisers are a particularly diverse and mobile group on the political scene. Their media relations practices alone are worthy of study in their own right but this is beyond the scope of this research. The purpose of these interviews was to provide a check on the recollections of government press officers and journalists, and to examine some key concepts from an almost diametrically opposed perspective.

The second and third tranches of interviews acted as a form of correction against the occupational biases of government press officers' accounts of a particularly eventful period in their history. They also provide some correction against *social desirability bias*, whereby the subject subconsciously or consciously responds to questions by providing socially acceptable answers. This is particularly likely as a learned response among those operating in sensitive or competitive environments, where approval is



needed and reputation is the key to accessing desirable attributes such as promotion, professional identity, status, or power, or may even be seen as a condition of professional survival (Spector, 2004).

### 3.2.4 Documentary and archive analysis

Official documents are more than just a factual record, they are tools with which institutional actors negotiate “difficult subjects” or reconcile ambiguities (H. Jones, 2011, p. 71). The central focus of this study, how civil servants have, over time, negotiated the media ambitions of elected governments while maintaining impartiality, runs like a thread through countless primary and secondary documentary sources: the diary entries of Alastair Campbell and the memoirs of Damian McBride; the reform aspirations expressed by politicians like Francis Maude, Tony Blair and even Margaret Thatcher; the meta-coverage of media relations crises like the controversy over the case for the 2003 invasion of Iraq; and evidence sessions to inquiries conducted both inside and outside Parliament.

My reading of documentary texts played an important part in every phase of this study: helping to identify the key problem, refining the research questions, influencing the research design, augmenting and triangulating the evidence derived from the interviews, and illuminating the interview findings. Official documents and archive material were partners to the empirical and theoretical material of the literature review, as we saw in Chapter 2. A thorough trawl of official published documents relating directly and indirectly to government communications after 1997 was conducted and texts were analyzed both as part of the literature review and thematically as texts. By reading and re-reading selected documents, my aim was to become well-versed in official accounts of government media relations in order to extract from the interviews the key themes and narratives as they developed over time. Which preoccupations appeared in the official literature most consistently? How was the problem of government media relations defined and delineated? How did official accounts relate to or differ from the accounts of those delivering the service? How important were civil service norms, rules and codes in influencing the behaviour of press officers and special advisers in relation to journalists?

The archival approach taken here is necessarily diachronic rather than continuous due to the 30-20-year rule which restricts the release of government documents. There were three main tranches that were chosen for the initial trawl: No.10 papers concerned with the presentation of government policy between 1981 and 1983 (PREM

19/720/721) and 1983-86 (PREM 19/1775); the minutes of the two regular central coordinating Government Information Service meetings (MIO and MIO(E)) between 1980 and 1985 (CAB 134/4487, CAB 134/4382, CAB 134/4919); and documents from the Ingham archive dated May 1979 to April 1985<sup>31</sup>. These include minutes, memos, letters, notes, briefings, and presentations relating to media matters, some with annotations from Margaret Thatcher. They provide a useful baseline against which to situate some of the accounts of media management during the Blair and Brown era.

In addition, I examined recently-released Treasury papers relating to the Thatcher government's first annual spring Budget briefing of 1980 (T414/169 and 174). This was in order to establish a baseline for the approach to media management of the government's most important public announcement as conducted pre-1997. Martin Moore's archive-based history, *The Origins of Modern Spin*, was a guide to the origins of the UK government's information services since WW2 (Moore, 2006) but I also personally examined selected archival documents relating to the post-war organization of government publicity (CAB 78/37 and CAB 134/355).

The documents that played a part in this study therefore fall into three main groups: externally published documents, internal documents, and archives. A summary of documents used is presented in **Table 3.3** below.

**Table 3.3: Key documents relating to government media relations**

<b>Externally published</b>	<b>Type of document</b>
Parliamentary Select Committees	Reports, memos, submissions, correspondence and oral evidence sessions
Parliamentary debates	Hansard and UK Parliament
Government reports and reviews	Civil service, judge-led and independent inquiries. Machinery of government reports, reviews and speeches.
House of Commons Standard Notes	Research based summaries on subjects like the Ministerial Code, Special Advisers, Government Communications and Machinery of Government Changes.

<sup>31</sup> Archived with the Margaret Thatcher Papers at <https://www.chu.cam.ac.uk/archives/collections/thatcher-papers/> See also <http://janus.lib.cam.ac.uk/db/node.xsp?id=EAD%2FGBR%2FO014%2FINGH>

Codes and propriety guidance	Civil Service Code, Code of Conduct for Special Advisers, Ministerial Code, Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity.
Acts of Parliament	The Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010.
Civil Service Statistics	Whitehall monitor (Institute for Government)
<b>Internal documents</b>	
Departmental capability reviews	Department of Transport (2012) Cabinet Office (2013)
Professional handbooks	The GICS Handbook (1998), Guidance on the Work of the GIS (1997), GCS Handbook (2015).
Government Communications contacts lists	Government Department communications and agency contacts (2014 and 2015). GCS People Finder - <a href="https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/people-finder/">https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/people-finder/</a>
Government Communications Network (GCN) notes	Notes on the History, Reform and Structure of Government Communications (now archived)
Internal propriety guidance	Extended Ministerial Offices: guidance for departments, A Brief Guide to Propriety in Government Communications, GCS propriety guidance
Government Communications Service (GCS) publications	Governance of the Government Communications Service, Government Communications Plans (2013-2017), GCS Capability Reviews
<b>Archives</b>	
Treasury papers 1980-81	T414/169 and T414/174
No 10 Liaison Committee papers 1980s	PREM 19/720 and 721 History of the Liaison Committee
MIO(E) - 1980	Meetings of information officers involved in the presentation of economic policy: minutes, reports, recommendations
MIO (1980) and (1985)	Meetings of departmental chief information officers
Margaret Thatcher Archive	Papers of Bernard Ingham: May 1979-April 1985

The two most significant parts of the documentary corpus, in terms of relevance and quantity, are firstly the documents relating to the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee (PASC), which became the Public Administration

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and Constitutional Affairs Committee after May 2015, and secondly government or government-commissioned reports and reviews into matters relating to media and communication. These cover most of the period of interest to this study. The PASC documents include investigations into government communications and propriety, the work of special advisers, the machinery of government, and civil service reform. The government reviews referred to throughout this text include the Phillis Review of Government Communication (2004), the Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction (2004), the Hutton Report (Hutton, 2004), the Butler Report (2004), the House of Lords Report on Government Communications (2008), the Leveson Report (2012) and the Chilcot Report (2016).

The corpus also includes a range of internal and published documents relating to propriety guidance and civil service codes of conduct, such as the Ministerial Code, the Code of Conduct for Special Advisers and the Civil Service Code. Documents relating to propriety and conduct in government communications are mainly considered to be internal documents, and so tend to be superseded and over-written, and hence lost, rather than archived systematically, which makes it harder to track changes over time. The documents which I have managed to retrieve date from 1997 to 2015 and include staff handbooks, propriety guidance, communications plans, a departmental communications capability review and information relating to governance.

In broader methodological terms, such an approach which examines “the relationship between ways of seeing (documenting) things and forms of professional practice”, has been described as a “potentially important field for social scientific research”(Prior, 2010, p. 74). Given that documents have played an integral role in all aspects of this study, they should be seen not just as artefacts or sources of knowledge but as “a site or field of research” in its own right which deserves “parity of esteem with talk and behaviour in the execution of the research process” (Prior, 2010, pp. x, 68). The production, distribution and use of official documents such as Parliamentary enquiries takes place in a political context and can be used by political and other actors as “allies in various forms of social, political and cultural struggle” (p13). The process of archiving itself can be significant and illustrates the evolving dichotomy within the Whitehall system between its administrative and political dimensions. The status and positioning of government and parliamentary enquiries into the communications service should be seen in the context of accounts from other sources, such as archival and interview material. Bernard Ingham published his memoirs but

also chose to archive official documentation within the Margaret Thatcher archive. Alastair Campbell published his contemporaneous diaries as a form of personal public record. Both are aware of their place in history, but Ingham prefers to be seen as part of Margaret Thatcher's official record, Campbell as a self-determining political strategist.

### **3.3 Collection and analysis of material**

Once the sampling frame had been completed all interviewees were contacted by letter or email. The invitation to interview was short enough to fit on a single side of paper, and included the LSE logo, a brief description of the study, a reference to my career background, and the terms of the interview. The initial letter, topic guide and the interview itself were piloted with the help of a former government press officer and her suggestions were included in the final version. The invitations to journalists and special advisers were broadly similar<sup>32</sup>. I had no prior personal or professional relationship with any of the respondents with the exception of one of the journalists, which I refer to in section 3.4, but he did not remember me.

The description of the project was necessarily brief, stating that the aims of the project were:

To obtain first-hand accounts of the government media relations operation, given the massive changes in media since at least the 1980s, and the constraints and demands of government.

To examine how media demands, whether real or anticipated, influence modern government, since little empirical research has been done into this.

I made clear that the interview would last no longer than one hour, that it could be conducted anonymously if required, and that I would meet them whenever and wherever was most suitable for them. The questions would cover:

The impact of media on time and policy decision-making and policy implementation, the role of politicians and special advisers in media relations, and how you saw the role and practice of government media relations over time, including during periods of transition from one administration to the next. My focus is on the period from the 1990s up to the present day.

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<sup>32</sup> See invitation to interview in Appendix 5.

I referred them to my LSE profile, named my supervisors, and explained my background as follows:

To tell you a bit more about myself, I worked in public sector media relations for more than 20 years - in public health, medical research, the BBC and local government.

Of the 27 former civil servants approached, 16 (59%) replied and were interviewed, three declined and six (22%) did not reply. One agreed to be interviewed but a date could not be arranged because he lives abroad. Of the three who declined, two explained that they did not think they fitted into the remit for the study but suggested other potential interviewees. One said he would not participate but did not give a reason. Four agreed to be interviewed on the recommendation of other interviewees. Between them, the interviewees had spent a total of 243 years' in government (average 15.2 years), from the 1960s to 2014. The average length of interview was 58 minutes, running to an average of 7,754 words per interview.

Of the nine journalists approached, six (67%) agreed to be interviewed. One did not respond, and two agreed to be interviewed in principle but despite numerous attempts, a date could not be arranged. Of the six, two were practising journalists working on broadsheet newspapers, two had been broadsheet journalists, and two were former broadcast journalists. Their length of service was even greater than civil servants, averaging 32 years (192 years in total). Their interviews averaged 67 minutes, and 7,521 words.

Six former special advisers representing Labour, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats were approached and three (50%) accepted and were interviewed, one each from the three parties. Their length of experience was notably less, 15 years in total, averaging 5 years – their employment is tied to that of their ministers and routinely ends once an election is called. The interviews averaged 42.2 minutes in length and ran to an average of 6,849 words.

Seven out of the 16 civil servants, five of the six journalists, and all three of the special advisers spoke on the record. All were offered the chance to meet again and see their quotes in context before submission – a follow-up practice which has been described as “a venerated but not always executed, practice in qualitative research” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 275). Eighteen of the 25 interviews responded to this offer: all three special advisers, four out of the six journalists, and 11 out of 16 civil servants.

De-briefing notes were written after each interview and were used to reflect on the interview process and to feed into the analysis (Wengraf, 2001).

**Table: 3.4: Breakdown of interviews.**

	<b>Approached (no.)</b>	<b>Interviewed (no/%)</b>	<b>Length of service (mean years)</b>	<b>No. on the record</b>
<b>Civil Servants</b>	27	16 (59%)	15.2	6
<b>Journalists</b>	9	6 (67%)	32	5
<b>Special advisers</b>	6	3 (50%)	5	3
<b>Total</b>	42	25 (59.5%)	17.4	14

*See Appendix 3 for full details of participants, interview dates, and other metrics.*

Length of service is both a historical resource and a potentially complicating factor in the analysis since the six journalists were noticeably more long-serving than the other groups. Civil servants too were long-serving but this disguises a wide variance, from an average of 21.5 years for the eight civil servants who started their employment before 1997 (range: 8-37 years), to 9 years for those who joined after 1997 (range: 2-13). This demonstrates some diversity within the sample which acts as a mitigating factor against possible biases related to length of service. The special advisers' perspective as short-term appointees, however, serves as a counterbalance to the relatively long service histories of all the journalists and many of the civil servants since they are less likely to have 'bought in to' long-established cultural norms or hidden assumptions, and hence are more likely to challenge them.

In terms of the time span served by the interviewees, four left their positions during the 1990s, ten between 2000 and 2010, and eight during the period of the Coalition government between 2011 and 2014. Three civil servants and two journalists experienced both the Labour and Coalition governments. These two journalists were still in post at the time of writing. Excluding these two, and the two civil servants who joined during the 1960s, the bulk of the interview evidence concerns the period from 1978 to 2014, with 15 witness accounts relating to the period between 1997 and 2010, and ten relating to the period after 2010. This suggests that the period after 1997 and up to 2014 is fairly evenly covered by the interviews.

### 3.3.2 Data Analysis

The approach to analysis was a hybrid one, combining both deductive and inductive elements whereby “theory-driven” codes were integrated with “data-driven codes” (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 83). The interview topic guides were deductive in that they were derived from the literature review and theoretical background as outlined in Chapter 2, and from my own experience in performing public sector media relations roles. This meant that the interviews were semi-structured around established themes, or ‘orienting concepts’, although these were not explicitly referred to in the interview questions: namely, politicization, personalization, professionalization and mediatization. The notion of the ‘cross-field’, where journalists, press officers and politicians (or in this case, their aides) struggle to define policy problems and solutions, and avoid or seek attention, appears in the questions relating to media-related communicative action at the top of the departmental hierarchy. The documents too were structured around established assumptions, especially those relating to impartiality, ‘political spin’ and ministerial responsibility, as iterated in various government and parliamentary enquiries and reviews. Once thematic analysis began, however, the process became more inductive, whereby the codes derived were based on the data, not established in advance. This meant that concepts could be challenged and reconsidered in the light of the data. This indeed happened, leading to the identification of a new set of organising themes, the four subsidiary concepts relating to mediatization, on which the four findings chapters are based, namely: resilience, resistance, responsiveness and representing the public. These concepts allowed for a fuller, more dynamic and more open analysis of both documentary and interview data than would have been possible using such notions as professionalization and personalization, as we shall see later in this chapter.

The interviews with civil servants took place first, were recorded and transcribed by me within a week of each interview, and then subjected to a rolling manual thematic ‘provisional coding’, or ‘indexing’ which ran alongside the interview process, and aimed to establish key themes and concepts, see (Layder, 1998). This initial thematic coding was then used to produce topic guides for the interviews with journalists and special advisers, and the same process of purposive sampling and snowball interviewing took place. This initial manual coding yielded a provisional coding frame based around the four main themes familiar from the literature review: politicization, professionalization, personalization and mediatization. Even at this stage, it was clear that, although useful as a starting point, these were normative



labels, which were not sufficiently robust or precise to provide much explanatory power, as opposed to fundamental concepts or themes arising from the data itself which could address the research questions.

The second phase of coding involved the sanitizing of the transcripts to remove false starts and hesitations, and these were uploaded into the text-processing package, NVivo, and subjected to thematic analysis. To keep the coding as close as possible to the text, codes were not pre-assigned but emerged as the transcripts were re-read as NVivo documents. The coding frame consisted of 76 separate codes, with a hierarchy of 2 or 3 levels, under 16 main headings<sup>33</sup>. The form of analysis was cross sectional and categorical, since I was looking for accounts of particular events and institutional changes across all the interviews. Key documents were also entered into NVivo and subjected to thematic analysis. These included enquiries, evidence sessions, reviews and internal documents such as propriety guidance, codes of conduct and reports produced between 1998 and 2014<sup>34</sup>. As one indication of salience, the greatest concentration of references within both the interviews and documents to particular codes is shown in **Table 3.5**.

**Table 3.5: References to most commonly cited codes**

<b>Most commonly cited codes (30+ references in NVivo)</b>	<b>No. references</b>
Impartiality/'crossing the line'	81
Change of government (1997)	72
Perceptions of government communications by other civil servants	51
Change of government (2010)	46
Alastair Campbell	45
Iraq War	44
Ministers' perceptions of media	42
No.10/Prime Minister	42

<sup>33</sup> See Appendix 6 for a sample interview transcript and Appendix 7 for further detail about the coding frame.

<sup>34</sup> The Ingham documents, and records of meetings about government presentation during the 1980s were all in hard copy only and were analysed manually.

Principles and purposes of government communications	42
Role of special advisers	38
Positive evaluations of the job of press officer	38
Problems with special advisers	34
Broadcasters	33
Propriety and codes	33
Journalists' relations with press office	30

This listing is just one indication of salience, since this is not a quantitative study, and although inductively derived, these codes are inevitably linked to the topic guide since these were semi-structured interviews. However, it is clear that the issue of impartiality, the changes of government in 1997 and 2010, the perceptions of government communications by other civil servants, and the role of Alastair Campbell, were all prominent issues. The Iraq War remains significant, and perhaps surprisingly, there were plenty of references to the principles and purposes of government communications. Special advisers attracted much comment – 74 references if their role and problems with special advisers are combined. It is also interesting to note that ministers' perceptions of media attracted significant comment. All these codes played a prominent role in the analysis of texts as the findings chapters will show.

It is also interesting to note some of the codes that might have been expected to appear more frequently but did not. Given the long-standing controversy over claims that civil service appointments have been politicized, there were just 12 references to recruitment. Despite an interview question on the importance of digital communication and the web, these terms were referred to just 21 times. The word 'spin' appeared 171 times in official documents but on only 26, 23 and 2 occasions during the journalists', civil servants' and special advisers' interviews respectively. Compare this with the use of the term 'public', which was cited on 2523 occasions, mainly in official documents but also 134 times by civil servants, 32 times by journalists, and four times by special advisers.

It is worth taking some time here to consider in more detail the four original labels identified in the topic guide and later used as part of the provisional coding process, namely: politicization, personalization, professionalization and mediatization. These categories proved to be too large and general to provide much explanatory power and it was difficult to distinguish between them at times since they were multiply-determined: for example, personalization and politicization often occur together. The terms also have theoretical weaknesses. The label ‘politicization’, for example, is essentially a categorical term used to describe a continuous process since politicization is a matter of degree, not a binary process, and is not mutually exclusive with the other terms. Politicization also carries with it a negative charge – it is assumed to be ‘bad’, rather than a feature of a particular institutional or social configuration. As the interviews made clear, government press officers, like other civil servants, may have an impartial ‘mind-set’, but they operate politically (Aberbach, 2000). The impartial mind-set is contingent in that it is applied according to context, when it is seen as “natural, rightful, expected, and legitimate” to do so (March & Olsen, 2009, p. 3). As indicated in Table 3.5, and as we shall see in the findings chapters, impartiality emerges as a powerful central theme. This is picked up in relation to ideas such as representation, the public, and the informed citizen, in Chapter 7.

Similarly, ‘personalization’ is assumed to be a contaminant of rational political discourse, although in practice it can be seen an integral part of the political process, since democratic politics is conducted by individual elected representatives. Again, as the interview data show, the personality of ministers is crucial to the strategic operation of a government department. The issue may not be whether an approach is personalised, *per se*, but the extent to which the personal ambitions of ministers are allowed to deflect the government from its public communications objectives; it then becomes an issue of who holds power over strategic communication. ‘Professionalization’ too is a problematic term. The increasing professionalization of government communications is referred to regularly in the literature and by my interviewees, especially when justifying some of the post-1997 changes, but it would be simplistic and inaccurate, for example, to claim that Bernard Ingham did not run a professional service during the 1980s, or that Harold Wilson’s, or even Lloyd George’s approach to publicity was amateurish (Negrine & Lilleker, 2002).

The category, mediatization, when used as a thematic term, also lacked rigour, since it could be argued that all comment on government communications could be labelled

‘mediatization’. This supports the theoretical framework from Chapter 2, which proposes that the concept be deployed as an overarching ‘sensitising concept’, not a category (Lunt & Livingstone, 2016). It can then be used to address questions about how social change linked to media change impacts on government, and how or whether this leads to changes in the balance of power between the political and administrative dimensions of government. As discussed in Chapter 2, mediatization is a non-normative, continuous concept which encompasses all the other variables and allows us to assess the complexity of media and political change over time and hence to answer the research question (Lunt & Livingstone, 2016).

Later in this chapter we consider methodically and thematically how mediatization can be analyzed as a process which operates at the cross-field between the media and the two dimensions of government – bureaucracy and politics. As the over-arching concept, mediatization is analyzed through four subsidiary although not entirely mutually exclusive concepts against which we can more effectively and critically examine historical change, namely, resilience, resistance, responsiveness, and representing the public. These concepts arose inductively during the data analysis process and through concepts derived from the literature review, and especially the work of the mediatization scholars Hepp, Lingard and Rawolle, (Hepp, 2013b; Hepp et al., 2015; Rawolle, 2005). A further explanation of the origin of these four concepts as part of this study and their relation to the research question are elaborated in the conclusion section to this chapter.

### **3.4 Reflections on the interview process: ethical, political and personal considerations**

One of the strengths of the in-depth interview is its richness and complexity. By interviewing a relatively close-knit group of professionals who self-identify as a distinctive group, common patterns of thought and belief may emerge which represent a collective identity and which seek to legitimise certain roles or institutions. As a distinctive profession within the civil service, government press officers straddle two professional identities: the civil servant, and the PR professional. In their outward-facing boundary role they are double advocates: for government to the outside world (via the media), and for the public’s right and need to know (also via the media) to the civil service. Both advocacy positions can be problematic and are often contradictory. In both senses, this advocacy role is *doubly mediated*, calling

into question claims that the process of ‘making the news’ (Cook, 1998) represents what ‘the public’ wants or believes. Neither journalists nor press officers are likely to challenge the assumption that political news coverage is a proxy for public opinion, because this would challenge the basis of their own legitimacy within the political process. This needs to be borne in mind in analyzing the interview texts.

Hjarvard argues that the media coverage of politics can be read as a process of *overhearing*, whereby the media coverage of politics can be read in two ways (Hjarvard, 2013). Readers assume that media coverage is concerned with the negotiation of “public consent for political decisions”, but inherent within this ‘honest broker’ role is a double *mis-understanding*. Political actors *mis-understand* news as a way of *overhearing* the conversation between journalists and members of the public. Audiences *mis-understand* the news as a way of *overhearing* conversations between political actors. In both cases, the media provide a prism whereby media and party logics (and increasingly commercial logic) deflect messages and themes as they move from government into the public sphere. As interviewees, intermediaries such as government press officers, journalists and special advisers, are potentially in a position to disclose (inadvertently or otherwise) the mechanisms that form the process of mediation and thereby contribute to a more grounded critique of the political communications process.

Earlier we discussed ways in which officials may present a biased account; this also applies to journalists. Like officials, journalists have an incentive to downplay their own power as political actors as a way of professionally distancing themselves from the political process. Special advisers, as relatively new and frequently demonised political and administrative actors, may feel the need to justify their position but as semi-outsiders can also provide a useful critique of traditional civil service values. All three sets of interviewees share a characteristic that makes them especially valuable witnesses; they are ‘boundary spanners’, operating along and across institutional boundaries (Williams, 2010). According to Cook, however exalted their position, officials who specialise in public communication “may be in but not of the political institution” and “fulfil a ‘boundary role’ that builds bridges to the other occupant of a boundary role, the reporter at the newsbeat” (Cook, 1998, p. 140).

As a former public sector PR professional, I approached my civil service interviewees with some authority and with the promise that I would empathise with and understand their world. As a press officer, I had worked at the frontline answering

journalists' calls and had experienced the excitements and occasional terror of the 'cross-field'. Now, as an interviewer, I occupied a new role as an academic researcher; my own experience was excluded from the encounter but the interviewees knew, that I knew, what they were talking about, and perhaps more importantly, what they weren't talking about. The interviews were overwhelmingly fluent, friendly, and rich in detail.

The interviews with journalists re-played my experiences of the social distance between so-called 'hacks' and 'flacks'<sup>35</sup>. PR professionals are resigned to, and even sympathise with, journalists' estimation of them as either closeted officials, failed journalists or dodgy salespeople, and since they spend their working hours serving their needs, they respect them, advocate for them within their organisations, and believe that by doing so, they are upholding the ideals of public accountability. As such, both professional groups comply with Couldry's notion of the 'myth of the mediated centre' whereby centralised media are socially constructed as the central access point to the realities of the social world (Couldry, 2005). This notion brings with it certain 'theoretical biases' that originate from historical but not necessarily inevitable developments in media. The six journalists interviewed here were all highly experienced, had reached the top of their profession and by temperament and background, were analytical and reflective about their former role. The interviews therefore took place in an atmosphere more typical of elite interviews – that of respect and distance. One respondent, Nicholas Timmins, a policy journalist with nearly 40 years' experience on broadsheet newspapers, had been a regular at the end of the phone during my days at the Health Education Council, although he hadn't remembered this, and I felt again those mixed feelings of fear and awe about what kinds of 'mischief'<sup>36</sup> he might be getting up to.

Originally, I resisted interviewing special advisers, partly due to an ingrained negativity bias but also because of the stated focus on government press officers. This was challenged by two illuminating accounts of life as a special adviser (Hillman, 2014; Wilkes, 2014), and the findings of the UCL Constitution Unit's special advisers

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<sup>35</sup> As Cook puts it, for a journalist to be called a 'flack', is a serious "loss of prestige within a profession that lacks traditional markers for membership and accomplishment" which explains why they perform rituals in order to "distance themselves from their sources" (Cook, 1998, p105).

<sup>36</sup> 'Making mischief' was a playful term used by my boss, the Head of BBC Television Publicity, Keith Samuel (a former journalist), to describe tricky questions and manoeuvres by journalists to try and give their story legs, often by introducing drama and conflict.

project (Yong & Hazell, 2014), which led me to reconsider my decision not to interview them. I needed their perspective on journalists' claims that the media role of special advisers was transforming the rules of engagement between government and the media. These final interviews confirmed that this group of actors was crucial to the government communications. I found them open, easy to talk to, happy to help, and interested in the progress of this project.

### 3.4.2 Ethical and political reflections on the interview process

There are ethical and political dimensions to encounters such as interviews that invite participants to explicate their views and experiences in relation to a contested area in the public domain as is the case here. Openly discussing a matter that is usually not publicly discussed is inherently exposing. It can be, and is, distressing to recall events such as a loss of status or position, which challenge personal and professional identity, or offend a sense of justice. It can be difficult to ensure anonymity within small professional networks so this was a priority where interviewees requested it. The subject matter is politically sensitive, so there is a need to consider "the broader implication of research in terms of the impact it may have on society or on specific subgroups within society" (Elliott, 2005, p. 146).

In relation to contested issues in the public domain, the mention of 'Damian McBride', or 'Jo Moore', and a raised eyebrow by the interviewee, spoke volumes about the ripple effect such events can have throughout a professional network, even many years later. When contacting the 27 civil servants invited to interview, I tried to use a 'softly-softly' approach, sending just one invitation and no follow up requests, deliberately avoiding the appearance of putting them under pressure to respond. I contacted Alastair Campbell twice, once directly, and once through a friendly journalist, giving him the chance to participate, since I had already interviewed two other former chief press secretaries, but he did not respond to the first and declined the second. However, his views are contained in detail in his published diaries and elsewhere. Matt Tee was also contacted twice and did not respond on either occasion. Prospective interviewees knew the risks and benefits of 'going public' and those who did not respond may not have wanted to be identified as having said 'no'. The only former civil servant who declined was brusque and to the point in his response; he had been a victim of the 1997 'cull' and in any case had already spoken on the record. Discretion was also necessary when telling participants who had and had not participated in the study. I sought permission from the participants before using their

names to encourage others to come forward, and did not refer at any point to the names of those who wanted to remain anonymous. In giving them access to their quotes in context before submission, I also provided them with the opportunity to check that I had anonymised them sufficiently.

Professional persona provides some protection against emotion – and indeed is integral to the neutral role of the public servant - but issues discussed in relation to day to day working life also reflect “life experiences and thus touch on issues of personal identity”(Elliott, 2005, p. 140). Some interviewees felt that their reputations since leaving the service had been undermined; some expressed an enduring sense of injustice following the changes of government in 1997 and 2010, while others regretted the changes in the service that seemed to undermine their own achievements. One participant asked to go off the record when talking about Damian McBride; another would not elaborate when asked about the difficulties he had experienced following the 2010 election.

In terms of informed consent, the initial letter and the interview preamble all made clear on what terms the interviews were taking place. The closing remarks included a further reference to the offer of a follow up. This offer was repeated via email once the first draft of the thesis had been completed. Nearly all responded and were shown their quotes in context either personally or via email. Changes were made only to protect their anonymity or to clarify misunderstandings. All the civil servants were told that I was also interviewing journalists, and none had difficulties with that. I could not inform either them or the journalists about my interviews with special advisers as I had not at that stage made the decision to include them but several actually suggested this as a potentially useful addition to the study.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

This chapter explained how a qualitative and diachronic research design and methodology makes use of in-depth interview texts and a range of documents in order to operationalize the theoretical framework as outlined in Chapter 2, and address the research question posed at the end of Chapter 1. Four subsidiary concepts have been proposed through which to analyze the mediatization of government communication: resilience, resistance, responsiveness and representing the public. These concepts are derived logically from the concept of mediatization itself, and institutionally from the



dual function of the civil service as discussed in the literature review, namely, to provide a check on ministerial power (resistance), and to serve ministers (responsiveness). These concepts will be used in two ways: to orient the process of empirical analysis by organising the data, and to provide a provisional theoretical underpinning to the findings.

We saw in Chapter 2 how, in order to serve ministers and preserve impartiality, civil servants were required to use their own judgement to provide a 'bulwark' or a check against excessive partisanship. At the same time they were required to loyally serve not only the government of the day, but also individual ministers. As we have seen, terms such as responsiveness and resistance are widely, if loosely, used by public administration scholars to refer to civil servants' dual role in both challenging and loyally serving ministers. The approach outlined here then, both operationalizes and analyzes changes impacting on a particular site within the public bureaucracy, theorised here as the cross-field. This is an elite, semi-public sphere, which operates in opaque if not invisible ways, and where the largely hidden bridging activities of PR and media relations are enacted (Davis, 2010).

The use of concepts such as responsiveness and resistance also relates directly to the concept of mediatization itself. If, as we argued in Chapter 2, mediatization is an overarching meta-process that operates over time, it will inevitably encounter both opposing and enabling forces, namely, resistance or response. This point was made by Hepp et al. when they proposed a holistic approach to studying mediatization that does *not* depict media influence as either 'colonizing' of other domains, or as a zero sum game. They argued that both resistance and response to mediatization could and should be examined empirically (Hepp et al., 2015). In this study, these two concepts are brought together within the concept of resilience, which expresses the durability of the institutional and cultural frameworks that shape relations within the 'cross-field' over time. Resistance relates to the extent to which the field in question maintains its integrity and shape in response to pressure, while responsiveness relates to the degree of elasticity of the field. Finally, the concept of representing the public brings normative elements to bear on the question of how to understand and interpret change in government communications, both in relation to the ethics and norms of civil servants themselves, and as understood by theorists of representative democracy.

These four concepts, which head the following four findings chapters, can now be defined and aligned with the research questions and presented as sub-questions, as follows:

- *Chapter 4: Resilience* - to what extent did government communications express, plan and deliver in relation to its public purposes and objectives, and what were its strengths and weaknesses over time?
- *Chapter 5: Resistance* – how and when did government officials responsible for dealing with the media resist or challenge what they saw as media and/or political obstacles to their public purposes and objectives? Did such resistance increase or decline over time?
- *Chapter 6: Responsiveness* – how and when did government officials responsible for dealing with the media respond to the needs and demands of media and political actors? What impact did such response have on its public purposes and objectives? What is the relationship between political and media responsiveness?
- *Chapter 7: Representing the public* - what are the stated public values of government communicators, how have they changed over time, and what kind of representative claim is implied by these values?

*Overall question:* In response to the pressures of *mediatization* after 1997, did the UK government communications service have sufficient *resilience* to deliver a public communications function consistent with its own stated purposes?

The four subsidiary concepts will be explicated further in the four findings chapters, 4-7, to which they provide the chapter headings. Each chapter will apply the relevant concept to answer the research questions. Documentary and interview evidence will be examined together and chronology is contained within each chapter.

## Chapter 4: Resilience

“The civil service is quite resilient, you know, whether it be a sacking or a reshuffle, within two days, you would never have known, and you just get on with it. The names have been changed and there are new pictures on the wall”. Head of News (until 2014) C14.

### 4.1 Introduction

*Resilience* is the first of the four theoretical and operational concepts that I will be using to critically examine historical change in order to answer the overarching research question of this thesis: in response to the pressures of *mediatization* after 1997, did the UK government communications service have sufficient *resilience* to deliver a public communications function consistent with its own stated purposes?

In navigating around a term like resilience which is now so nebulous and widely used that it is in danger of becoming a buzzword, it is essential to set out the scope and relevance of its use in relation to this study (Fainstein, 2015; Rose, 2007). The term has become ubiquitous in policy documents issued by national and transnational bodies (Brassett, Croft, & Vaughan-Williams, 2013). It is widely and variously deployed in a range of academic and policy contexts such as climate change and other environmental challenges and natural disasters; emergency planning, intelligence and security (especially in response to terrorism); the development of new technologies and digital governance; and in relation to individuals and communities thought to be vulnerable (Austin & Callen, 2012; Reid & Botterill, 2013). It has also been used as a measure of the capacities of democratic governments to achieve popular consent to govern in complex societies, as in claims that a “lack of resiliency in dealing with conflicts leads to lack of legitimacy in government itself”, and that “resilient government is government that can deal with value conflict (Anderson, 2012, pp. 556, 561).

Referring to governance, Bourbeau argues that although the term has been negatively associated with neo-liberal approaches because it calls on individuals to develop their own resilience, thereby “permitting states to abdicate responsibility in times of crisis” (p375), it can also be seen as a vital aspect of popular *resistance* to the neo-liberal state:

“To resist— and especially to resist one of the most powerful political organizations in the history of humankind (i.e., the state) — is not an easy course of action, and it is one that is calling for resilience to ensure its continuity” (Bourbeau, 2015, p. 388).

In relation to public administration, Steinberg refers to the resilient institution as one that is “resilient to the extent that it maintains its effectiveness over time despite changing external conditions, where ‘effectiveness’ is the extent to which the institution fulfils the core mission envisioned by its founders” (Steinberg, 2009, p. 65). To fulfil its mission and sustain its normative commitments, institutional arrangements need to be in place to advocate for them, even against internal and external challenge. Hood adds that although resilience in public administration applies to the system’s robustness, adaptability, endurance and survival, it also relates to core public service values, such as honesty, legitimacy and trust (Hood, 1991).

In a compelling theoretical synthesis between resilience thinking and public administration approaches, Duit argues that although the concept of resilience is “of central importance to the study of public administration”, the problem with most theorists is that they apply simplistic natural science models to social systems and fail to consider internal power dynamics such as the role of ‘veto players’ and the potential for ‘elite capture’ (Duit, 2016). Glor examines resilience as the organizational capacity for fitness and survival *in relation to its environment* (my emphasis). According to this conception, the capacity for fitness requires both adaptability and the ability to communicate, or at least to receive feedback from changing external and internal environments, so that “the messages being received about the need for change are very important”. Adaptability requires the capacity to deal with challenges, so an organization that meets challenges is more fit. Resilience, then, addresses the capacity to adapt, to receive and manage feedback, to face challenges and to survive. Ultimately, “failure to maintain core activities, boundaries and goals, which can be at risk at times of innovation and change, is a sign of organizational death” (Glor, 2015, pp. 34, 36). However, although the idea of resilience is increasingly popular in organizational studies, Boin contends that empirical research on resilient organizations is actually quite rare (Boin, 2013, p. 429).

Turning to our case study, resilience is a term which could fruitfully be applied in connection with the remarkable longevity of many British institutions, which are thought to combine *elasticity*, the flexibility to respond to change or threat and to spring back into shape, and *toughness*, the ability to recover quickly from difficulties

and challenges (Oxford University, 2000)<sup>37</sup>. Yet, as we have seen, functional and structural concerns are not the only ones to consider. Of particular interest when considering the mechanics of government communications is the culture, or the set of norms, customs and practices within which decisions to act are made. In this sense, resilience can also be applied to March and Olsen's idea of "the institutionalized capability for acting appropriately", which, they argue, is determined by "the distribution and regulation of resources, competencies and organizing capacities" within the bureaucracy, (March & Olsen, 2009, p. 10). The actions of certain key individuals, such as Bernard Ingham and Alastair Campbell, are made possible and become significant within the context of certain political and institutional norms, and the possibilities which emerge during times of change and conflict.

For this chapter then, the resilience of the government information service during a period of intense and pervasive mediatization entails more than the elasticity and toughness that facilitate its continuity and survival. How faithful is the service and those working within it to what it sees as its core mission, its values such as probity, public trust and impartiality, and the external environment, namely, the increasingly mediated democratic public sphere? How resilient are the institutional arrangements that facilitate resistance to both internal and external challenge, and to what extent are these arrangements enabled or obstructed by power relations? This chapter asks how and to what extent the media-related changes which began in the 1980s affected the capacity of the service, and the specialists working within it, to adapt, express, plan and deliver in relation to their public purposes and objectives, both implicit and explicit. I will argue that the arrival of the New Labour government in 1997 with a particular approach to media relations exploited the weaknesses and threatened the resilience of a communications structure that had been in place since 1945, while enabling the service to become more responsive to ministers and the media. Before 1997, as we shall see, the drive by politicians to reduce the autonomy of the GIS, and to exert greater control over government messaging was taking place *covertly*, intensifying with the increasing pressures and possibilities of mediatization, as archival evidence from the 1980s shows. In strengthening political control over government communications, did successive governments undermine its resilience, and if so, how?

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<sup>37</sup> For the OED definition of resilience see <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/163619?redirectedFrom=Resilience#eid>

This chapter will use evidence from interview texts, official literature and archival documents to explore the cultural and structural capacities of government communications over time, asking whether 1997 was indeed a turning point. The resilience of government communications will be examined in the light of three historical developments:

1. The establishment of the Government Information Service after 1945 as a separate network within the civil service, and the consequent impact of this on perceptions of the service and its practitioners.
2. The role of politicians in instigating innovation and change - not just after 1997, but following the Thatcher victory of 1979. How did civil servants and journalists experience increasing job insecurity of the information service leadership after 1997 and 2010 and the ensuing changes in government communications?
3. Attempts to make explicit the public purposes of government communications in the light of a series of publicized scandals in from 1997 onwards. What effect did successive reforms have on the autonomy and public purposes of the service?

## **4.2 Structural and cultural continuities**

In Chapter 2, I argued that the departmentalized structure of Whitehall tends towards cyclical change in the power relationship between the centre and departments, rather than an inevitable tendency towards increasing centralization. To counter such centrifugal tendencies, successive Prime Ministers and their advisers repeatedly devote ‘personal and institutional power resources’ in order to introduce a more integrated corporate model for communications (Heffernan, 2006). Sir Bob Kerslake, joint Head of the Civil Service until 2015) was the most recent senior official to call for more consistency in standards between departments (Kerslake, 2014), while the current Executive Director, Alex Aiken, is the latest head of profession to seek to implement a more coordinated, coherent narrative across government, with a series of government-wide communications plans (Government Communications Service, 2013, 2014a, 2015b). The drive for better coordination was a preoccupation of Bernard Ingham during his 11 years at No.10, and was a major part of Alastair Campbell’s drive to modernize the communications service (Campbell & Hagerty, 2011; Ingham, 1981). The Mountfield Review found that, despite the efforts of

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Ingham between 1979 and 1990, by 1997 “responsibility for ensuring practices within press offices are fully effective and up to date rests primarily with departmental heads of information”, and that, in consequence, “the quality of these practices and arrangements varies between Departments” (Mountfield, 1997, para 41).

The resilience of the service as a whole therefore rests on the resilience of both departmental and central communications leaderships, and their ability to form both political and administrative alliances towards a common goal. I hope to demonstrate that although the relationship between the centre and the departments is cyclical, and hence shows continuity over time, external factors such as the drive by politicians to manage their reputations in the face of increasing media scrutiny, can have wide-ranging and possibly unintended effects that damage the relationship between governments and citizens (Foster, 2005).

#### 4.2.1 The Government Information Service after 1945: basic structure established

Today’s Government Communications Service (GCS) on the face of it looks very like the structure that emerged from the delivery of wartime propaganda which, after a shaky start, was considered to have successfully mobilised the population on the ‘home front’: the Ministry of Information (MOI) to deliver and coordinate effective propaganda, the No.10 press office and chief press secretary based in the Cabinet Office to serve the Cabinet and Prime Minister, and the departmental press offices to disseminate information about government policy (Grant, 1999; Maartens, 2016; Moore, 2006). Soon after the Labour victory was declared on 26 July 1945, a Cabinet Committee chaired by the Prime Minister Clement Attlee quickly drew up plans for the post-war organization of Government Publicity (National Archives: Cabinet Papers CAB 78/37). On 18 September, the Committee made the controversial decision to retain a single, centralised agency based on the Ministry of Information<sup>38</sup> model, despite the widespread assumption that the MOI would be dissolved after the war. The Committee noted that a centralised agency would provide a “unifying influence” over “publicity work on the home front”. With the demands of postwar reconstruction and a radical agenda for change, the government felt it needed “a body of technically expert staff which knew how to conduct publicity without incurring the charge of propaganda”. This body of professionals would have a degree of autonomy

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<sup>38</sup> Renamed the Central Office of Information (COI) in 1946. The decision was made in 2011 to abolish it. It closed in 2012 and its tasks were transferred to the Cabinet Office. For the background to the decision see (Horton & Gay, 2011; M Tee, 2011).

under a civil service director but would work to a Minister without portfolio who had responsibility for the coordination of what was then referred to as the presentation of government policy.

The committee was aware of the potential problems associated with this model and anticipated criticism from both Parliament and the press<sup>39</sup>, but accepted that although “the boundaries between information, explanation and advocacy were tenuous” and there were risks of “embarrassment and misrepresentation”, governments had an obligation to provide “the material on which the public could reach an informed judgement on current affairs”. A memo dated 14 September, from the Lord President, Herbert Morrison, who later became the minister in charge of government communications, stated in terms very similar to those stated by modern politicians that “there should be no return to the old timidity and reticence in the relation between Government departments and the public and press” but there must be “no questions of Government publicity being used to boost individual ministers”. Media relations was not a major concern of the new agency; the minutes of another Committee, the Cabinet Home Information Services (Official Committee), or I.H(O), which was formed in April 1946 and chaired by the Director General of the COI, show that government communication was heavily dominated by direct communication through films, talks, leaflets and advertising (CAB 134/355). This Committee was the forerunner of the regular MIO, the Meeting of Information Officers, which ran throughout the Thatcher period, and has now been superseded by the monthly Director of Communications group led by the Executive Director, Government Communications, Alex Aiken.

The dual accountability of the government communicator to both political and administrative masters, and the requirement to ensure that government information is disseminated without incurring the charge of propaganda, was established from the start. This was later enshrined within propriety guidance that called on government communicators to ensure that the boundary, or *the line* between party-political and public information was maintained. Here, then, was the shape and culture of a government communications structure which in broad outline still exists: the differentiation between central and departmental control of information; a separate cadre of in-house communications specialists who are distinct from the rest of the

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<sup>39</sup> A House of Commons debate took place on 7 March 1946, approving the change, and the COI was launched in April. On 24 September that year, the Daily Express “referred to Morrison as the head of the Government’s ‘propaganda machine’ and called the COI an ‘odious’ new instrument of government” (Grant, 1999: 66).



civil service; a dual administrative and political leadership, with ultimate oversight resting with the minister; and the concept of ‘the line’, however blurred, that divides public information from party political communication. The abstract notion of ‘the line’ is referred to frequently in the interviews, while government documents generally refer to ‘boundaries’ (National Archives: Cabinet Papers CAB 78/37, 1945) (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2012; Public Administration Select Committee, 2002). A concern with appearances, which runs through existing propriety guidance, presents civil service communicators with difficult dilemmas that they may be ill-equipped to handle, as we shall see in the next chapter, *Resistance*.

A concern that certain sorts of government communication may lead to charges of party political bias emerged much later during the Thatcher administration, when, on 19 July 1982, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Leon Brittan, proposed to members of the top secret Liaison Committee<sup>40</sup> that they change the rules in relation to party political ministerial speeches. The Questions of Procedures for Ministers (QPM), the forerunner to the Ministerial Code, permitted these to be circulated only through the party. Brittan proposed instead that they be circulated through the official Government machine, in order to secure “far more coverage” (National Archives: PREM 19/720). Bernard Ingham wrote to the Prime Minister the same day insisting that she should “resolutely refuse” to change the rules since these were “well-founded” and had served successive governments well by “protecting Ministers from charges of misusing Government resources for Party ends and the GIS from the charge of party political bias”. Two days later, the Liaison Committee agreed that “it would be presentationally unwise for this Government to be seen to be tinkering with the rules” and the idea was dropped.

This principle is still in operation as part of the Ministerial Code and expressed in practical terms in the GCS Propriety Code (2014b; 2010). Very little has been written about the Liaison Committee but it has been claimed that Ingham’s participation in the Committee was in itself, improper. In his biography of Margaret Thatcher, Hugo Young argued that Ingham’s presence was “a testimony to the intimate linkage even

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<sup>40</sup> The Liaison Committee on the presentation of government policy aimed to provide a coherent approach to presentation between ministers and the Party. A long standing but intermittent post-war body, it was revived in 1981 and attended by selected Cabinet ministers, the Party Chairman, and staff from the Conservative Research Department and selected civil servants including Bernard Ingham. Possibly due to the continuing sensitivities relating to government communication, its existence was not shared with the Cabinet until March 1982.

beyond the bounds of Whitehall propriety, between party and government machines” – a charge which foreshadows later criticism of Alastair Campbell (Young, 1989, p. 299).

The 1980 *Official Handbook for Information Officers* devotes a section, ‘The Political Factor’ to managing politicians, and contains a nugget of advice which illustrates how appearances may be allowed to deceive. Information officers are advised that “the arranged Parliamentary Question is an invaluable method of putting right ill-informed criticism. It is not immediately obvious that the occasion has been ‘arranged’, and the reply is likely to receive general coverage”, cited in (Scammell, 1991, p. 16). The issue of appearances was raised again in 2002 when the then Director General for Government Communications, Mike Granatt (until 2003), reiterated their importance in relation to trust when he gave evidence to the Public Administration Committee (2002):

If any government wanted to go down the route of having overtly politically driven management of its services they would have to think very carefully indeed about whether the audiences concerned, media or public, were actually going to invest those operations with the sort of trust that the current system does.

He appears to be implying that although not *overtly* political, the GIS in its various incarnations, was *covertly* politically-driven. The later controversies relating to the Iraq dossier of September 2002 and the subsequent Hutton, Butler and Chilcot inquiries, should be seen in this context.

The self-regulating nature of the Government Information Service, and the concern with appearances, were flaws built into the structure from the start, according to Moore. In his archival analysis of the 1945-51 Labour government’s approach to communication, he concludes that although the government instituted a comprehensive and efficient method of communicating with the public, it did not provide adequate controls and so entirely failed to make it accountable, perhaps because to do so would make it harder to control.

There were no guidelines set up for how the State should, and should not, communicate. There were no constraints put on the way in which the government produced communication or worked with the independent media (over and above the insufficient civil service code of neutrality). There was no way to ensure the government was giving the news media sufficient or equal access, and no way to ensure any consistent representation of information (Moore, 2006, p. 216).

The extent to which the UK government communications service defines and fulfills public purposes and democratic norms is still very much open to question, as the ensuing chapters, and especially Chapter 7, will show.

#### 4.2.2 A ‘narrative of disdain’: the institutional weakness of government communications

The resilience of the government communications service is related to its reputation among its core clients, politicians, journalists and non-communications civil servants. If it is held in high esteem it is likely to be given more autonomy to deliver a service in accordance with its own purposes. In line with the development of promotional culture and the mediatization of politics, we might have expected the reputation, standing and resourcing of the government PR function and its operatives to have increased markedly overall from the 1980s onwards (Aronczyk & Powers, 2010; Corner, 2007; Davis, 2013; Sanders, 2011; Strömbäck, 2008; Sussman, 2011; Wernick, 1991).

In fact, during that time, as we saw in Chapter 2, the service was subjected to repeated criticism by politicians, senior civil servants and even its own leadership. Bernard Ingham fought to promote and defend the work of the GIS under his leadership from what he saw as the scapegoating tendencies of ministers, but in his interview for this study he describes the quality of the service that he inherited as “very mixed”. Two weeks before officially taking up the post of Chief Press Secretary on 1 November 1979, he sent the Minister in charge of presentation, Angus Maude<sup>41</sup>, an 11-page paper on presentation, arguing that the challenge of radically reforming “the post-war national ethos” would be tough and painful but worth it, and would probably take at least three years. He warned that “too much should not be expected of” public relations. Instead, he suggested, attention needed to be paid to coordinated economic presentation by three parties: backbenchers, ministers working with administrative civil servants, and the GIS, whose performance and morale he agreed needed to be improved. In his memo to Maude, on 15 October, he outlined his aspirations for the future of the service:

We need to introduce some of the disciplines of a newspaper office into Government Information work...we need to formalize the practice of telephoning into No. 10 press office by 5pm a news list for the following 24 hours (...) I shall shortly have met the Information heads of all the main Departments. I am clearly indicating to them...that

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<sup>41</sup> His son, Francis, held the same position between 2010 and 2015.

I am anxious to raise the reputation and status of the Government Information Service, but that it can only be done by a collective demonstration of effort and competence. Memo 15/10/1979 (Ingham Archive, Margaret Thatcher Foundation: May 1979-April 1985).

On 5 December he presented the Prime Minister with an eight-page paper on economic presentation with “proposals for injecting purpose and drive into the presentation of economic policy”. In it he argued that the government was too reactive, and that there needed to be “a broad and consistent view of Government policy (through) a series of mutually supportive campaigns aimed at different sections of the public”. To improve the resilience of the press office, and its ability to continue to think long term while dealing with short-lived frenzies (such as the public unmasking of the former spy, Anthony Blunt<sup>42</sup>), he argued that a distinction should be made between its handling of emergencies, and the need for longer term communications planning.

Again and again in the archives, we see examples where Ingham deflected the criticism of ministers by blaming poor presentation on their failure to pull together, while trying to raise standards and gain greater central control over government messaging. When the Chancellor Geoffrey Howe expressed doubts in the run up to the 1982 Budget as to “whether Whitehall’s information forces (GIS) are ideally deployed for the proper presentation of the overall economic message,” Ingham dismissed the Chancellor’s comment as “gratuitous, so long as Ministers of the Government cut the Government to pieces.” He insisted on being included in meetings about the matter and offered to prepare a paper (PREM 19/720). In a confidential note to the Prime Minister on 19/1/82 entitled *Getting the government's economic message across*, he argued that “all the slick presentation in the world counts for little or nothing if the Government is seen to be divided among itself or unhappy with its own policies”. The basic responsibility for the presentation of economic policy “must rest with the Treasury” but he was critical of his own profession, stating:

I regard the Treasury Information Division as one of the less effective and desperately in need of some dynamic professionalism. Too much emphasis is apparently put upon

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<sup>42</sup> Known as the ‘Blunt Affair’, a media storm was unleashed when his betrayal, and subsequent confession and immunity from prosecution, were revealed by Margaret Thatcher in the House of Commons in November 1979.

economic expertise, and far too little on a robust ability – and enthusiasm – to communicate simply (MIO 1982: National Archives: CAB 134/4382).

Respondents interviewed for this study praised the “dramatic changes” implemented by Bernard Ingham. Jonathan Haslam, John Major’s Chief Press Secretary until 1997, claims that Ingham’s incumbency heralded “a big step change”:

Bernard brought together a great understanding of the totality of government, the journalists’ nous about what makes a story, and how to have proper effective relationships with journalists (...) there was a higher degree of professionalism and a higher degree of importance placed on the role (...) He was massively good on understanding the bigger picture, understanding the parts that the departments played, boosting their own morale within the civil service, boosting their own standing (C07).

Yet despite Ingham’s achievements, and the typically close working relationships between ministerial teams and even quite junior press officers, many respondents reveal a steady narrative of disdain, largely from fellow civil servants. They refer to being seen as ‘minister’s narks’ or ‘toys for the ministers’; as being ‘below the salt’ and ‘treated with a certain amount of contempt’. Their role was considered to be a ‘soft option’, and yet there was envy at their privileged access to ministers. Government PR was felt to be “inherently dishonest (...) something that you use to sell dog food”. More broadly “there was the slight feeling that you are not proper civil servants” and were looked down on “not exactly as a necessary evil but certainly not to be taken quite as seriously”. Colleagues “tended to look down on (the service), especially the fast streamers”.

The isolated position of the government information service without a professional champion of the calibre of Bernard Ingham after 1990, led to stagnation and a failure to recognise and adapt to changes in the media. As we saw in Chapter 1, John Major has admitted himself that he was suspicious of ‘political spin’, and did not prioritise media relations sufficiently, even at No.10 (Bale & Sanders, 2001; Hogg, 1995; Leveson, 2012). Jonathan Haslam refers to this as ‘hair shirtism’; a reluctance to spend money on providing services for journalists. He remembers the struggle to provide toilets for female lobby members, like Elinor Goodman (C4 News 1988-2005), and to change the arrangements whereby each morning, lobby correspondents had to pass through the Chief Press Secretary’s office in order to get to the lobby room where 40 people would squeeze into a room for 10. He admits that, prior to 1997:

It was behind its time and there were things that I think we should have done with the benefit of hindsight that we didn't do but were done elsewhere (...). The media was growing like Topsy in front of us. We were running like fury to try and keep up, particularly when I was in Downing Street. It was a tiny office. It was absolutely ridiculous when you think about it. I did get No.10 wired. So that when we were doing broadcasts in Downing Street, rather than the incredibly amateurish point of view of having a van parked outside and wires trailing through windows, that actually had the place wired upstairs, but it took forever to do (C07).

Despite the increased status and resourcing devoted to government media relations after 1997, the sense of 'them and us' within the civil service extended to the most senior levels, and persisted even when, following the Phillis Report of 2004, the head of profession was elevated to Permanent Secretary level for the first time with Howell James as the first incumbent. Siobhan Kenny, an experienced Director of Communications (1994-2005) who had previously had a successful career at No.10 during the Major and Blair governments, recalls that:

Howell suffered from that when he was in name the Permanent Secretary but I think they made it pretty clear that he wasn't a proper Permanent Secretary. It's a ludicrous thing but that's the way the civil service operates. Every other Permanent Secretary becomes de facto knight, dame or whatever, and Howell was appointed CBE when he left. You'd have to be in the know to know that that is really cutting but that is how they do it (C03).

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

Several respondents in this study felt that press officers were more attuned to the needs of ministers and journalists than other civil servants. This long-serving senior manager within the GIS and later the GICS, recalls that:

There was quite a well entrenched view that communicators should not have a role in formulating policy whereas quite often ministers would feel that communicators had a valuable role to play in advising ministers as to how a particular policy might play with the public (C10).

Illustrating this point, Nadine Smith, a former Chief Press Officer at the Cabinet Office with experience as a departmental press secretary (1998-2009) explained how, in meetings, she would cause discomfort among policy civil servants by making common cause with the Minister of State, in effect becoming a ‘troubleshooter’ on her behalf:

I used to watch the civil servants in a way that I didn’t think that I was one of them (...) I would watch them worming their way out of things and I was astonished by how they wouldn’t give the information that I knew was out there or they’d try and put a gloss on it (...) I was shocked and I thought ‘my god, these ministers have got nowhere to turn’. I did try and make it my job to get her the information and the right people round the table for her to talk about press linkages and media handling lines and defensive lines and her plans for her visits that week, and who’s she seeing and why she’s seeing them and not somebody else, and you ....you feel like you’re their troubleshooter (C09).

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

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

Policy officials were also resentful because they felt that “the complexity of their area was never properly represented”, and that “press offices (...) would be so close to ministers and sometimes give advice without policy people being there because of the nature of the fast moving working towards the next days’ headlines”(C10). This came from a rare survivor of the 1997 ‘cull’, who had experienced life under four governments. One long-serving Director of Communications (1991-2011) agreed that communications staff were often more aware of the perceptions of the public and the concerns of ministers because as a whole, most civil servants:

tend to have quite a narrow social demographic, so there were lots of presumptions about the wider public (...) and quite often therefore it was your job to be Cassandra, and say to them ‘actually our problem is not that people understand and are doing nothing, the problem is people don’t care because they’re trying to get the kids to school, pay their mortgages, keep their jobs’ (C11).

This sense of the government communicator as an ‘outsider’, is also seen in the various reviews and enquiries that took place between 1997 and 2004. The 1997 Mountfield Report noted “something approaching disdain for media and communications matters”, while the 2004 Phillis Report was critical of a ‘them and us’ mentality within the civil service:

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

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

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

The Phillis Report called for a radical rethink of what government communications should be, with a focus on a “continuous dialogue” with the general public:

Our central recommendation is that communications should be redefined across government to mean a continuous dialogue with all interested parties, encompassing a broader range of skills and techniques than those associated with media relations. The focus of attention should be the general public (Phillis, 2004, p.3).

The idea that governments should consider the *information* needs of the public above the *communications* needs of the government was revolutionary. We consider the extent to which these aspirations were and continue to be met in government communications in Chapter 7.

In response to the pressures of mediatization it appears that the civil service as a whole failed to prioritise the resourcing and management of government communications, or to respond to ministers’ increasing desire to manage the risks



and possibilities of what they saw as an increasingly influential power resource. This widened the gulf between communications specialists and the rest of the civil service. In the absence of strong and well-connected professional leadership, this left the field relatively open to a determined group of politicians to devote their considerable political capital to instigating the kind of modernisation of the information service *which suited them*. This is precisely what happened after 1997, as the next section will demonstrate.

### **4.3 The role of politicians in instigating change**

In Chapters 1 and 2, I argued that, far from being an activity confined to aggressive political publicists, “spin”, or strategic political communication, is the pursuit of political goals using the latest communications tools. Politicians and political parties exploit media power as a form of capital within a battlefield context (Lee, 1999; Pitcher, 2003). This battlefield was traditionally identified as the arena in which elections are fought, but with the rise of the permanent campaign (Blumenthal, 1982; Norris, 2000a), the field of battle expanded deeper into the executive. In the struggle to survive and prevail, politicians demanded that all available tools in the media armoury be deployed in their interest, both as individuals and as representatives of political parties. Developments in government communications post-1997 were mainly driven by politicians and their aides, but as we saw in the previous section, a more strategic approach had already been developing during the early 1980s. Going back further, the very structure of postwar government communications had been determined by ministers, building on foundations developed during the command and control era of wartime.

Taking up his new post after the 1979 election, Bernard Ingham immediately faced pressure from incoming ministers for a more proactive and promotional approach to communication. The archives show him repeatedly anticipating and then pre-empting ministerial interference by driving through a more coordinated and disciplined approach on the part of the service. This may have suited his political mistress, Margaret Thatcher, who was engaged in a struggle against the so-called ‘wets’ in her cabinet, but it was also consistent with his own values as a civil servant. What happened to the GIS after 1997, however, was more than evolutionary; it was radical - so much so, that former government press officers employed at the time or a few years later still recall the savagery of the changes, even though some accept that

they were a means to a necessary end. A further trauma was in wait after 2010, as the Conservative-led coalition used a draconian approach to government communications to illustrate their determination to cut spending. In the next section, I examine recollections of what happened after the elections of 1997 and 2010, and ask how these changes impacted on the resilience of the service.

#### 4.3.1 Job losses after 1997: pushing out the “dead meat”

From a vantage point of 36 years in the civil service, the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Robin Butler, describes the arrival of New Labour as “quite a climacteric really, a watershed”. The changes were profound, he says, for three reasons: firstly, “departmental ministers and their special advisers were very much less satisfied with the operations of their departmental press offices”; secondly, “it was politicized in the sense that special advisers (...) were very much more active in dealing with press relations than their predecessors had been”; and thirdly, “they had a very sophisticated media operation. Very rapid response geared to being 24/7” (Co2). Ed Balls’ recollection of his early days at the Treasury as Gordon Brown’s press officer illustrates some of the contempt Labour felt for the government’s media operation in 1997, as this quote from his memoirs reveals:

We all had mobile phones and pagers and were used to being in constant touch, but the Treasury’s head of communications and her team had no pagers, and one mobile phone which was passed to whichever press officer was on duty. It was the opposite of the ‘rapid rebuttal’ approach we’d been used to in opposition. Charlie Whelan, Gordon’s press officer, couldn’t hide his disdain (Balls, 2016, p128).

For Jonathan Haslam, John Major’s press secretary, who moved to the Department of Education after the 1997 election before leaving for the private sector in 1998, the experiences of his colleagues “reinforced for me the political sensitivity of the comms function” in that, for ministers, “the Permanent Secretary, the Personal Private Secretary and the Comms director are the three people that the minister has most to do with personally and directly” (Co7). This makes them vulnerable, particularly where, as we saw in the previous section, they are viewed by colleagues as ‘outsiders’, or even worse, distrusted as ‘ministers narks’. For Bernard Ingham the arrival of the New Labour government was a “watershed”.

Standards....went to pot very rapidly after 1997. Within a week. After 2 May 1997 when all the heads of information were called together by Mandelson and Campbell and told they’d better up their game or else and to play it their way (Co1).

In May 1997, Siobhan Kenny, who later became Director of Communications at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, was then a press officer at No.10. The small, close-knit team of civil servants around the Prime Minister had bonded after years of “fighting in a bunker” on behalf of the Major government, but the arrival of the new government was exciting and refreshing. “It was amazing” she says. “As a civil servant it doesn’t get much better than that”. It required considerable confidence and resilience though, to pass the “little tests” set by Alastair Campbell during his first week:

You’d be sitting in the press office and, say we’d briefed him for lobby that morning, (...) he would phone up and say, ‘you know that thing you told me this morning, can you come round and tell me again’, and you’d suddenly find yourself standing in front of him and Tony Blair and Tony Blair would be looking a bit bemused and he’d say ‘can you go through this little bit again’, so I think he was just putting you through little tests to make sure you could do it (C03).

She recalls that none of her immediate colleagues was “got rid of” but it was a different story in many of the departments, where “you had the special advisers whispering into the minister’s ears saying ‘this lot are not really supporting you’, that made for an uncomfortable couple of years”. Rather than blame Campbell, she suggests that ministers were responding to a form of ‘Campbell envy’: “I’m a big fan of Alastair and I think he’s brilliant but what happened was that he spawned a lot of people who were kind of sub-Alastair Campbell”.

To illustrate the brutality of the working environment post-1997, Steve Reardon, who lost his job as Director of Information at the Department of Social Security, was referred to as ‘dead meat’ by the special adviser to the Secretary of State, Harriet Harman, a comment which found its way into the Daily Mirror and Daily Mail (Public Administration Select Committee, 1998). An article in the Times on 2 October 1997<sup>43</sup>, quoted from a leaked letter from Alastair Campbell to all Whitehall press officers, calling on the service to “raise its game”. The article mentioned the behaviour of dissatisfied ministers like Health Secretary Frank Dobson “who has bawled out his team”, and George Robertson, Defence Secretary, who “fears he has become the forgotten man of British politics”.

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<sup>43</sup> *Whitehall press officers get lesson in spin*. The Times. 2/10/1997.

This atmosphere of rivalry, suspicion and job losses caused widespread disquiet within the informal government communications network which lasted for years, as the interviews show. One former close associate of Bernard Ingham's who was one of the few to stay on in a senior direct communications role well into the Blair era, says that although she didn't feel threatened herself, "I knew every one of the Heads of Information that lost their jobs, so it's not pleasant." She remembers how Mike Granatt, then Director of Communications at the Home Office, provided a home for "a string of people (...) quite a few heads of information who'd been pushed out who actually came and worked on a temporary basis doing consultancy work (C10). A departmental press officer (1999-2004) refers sorrowfully to the heads of communication being "shuffled out":

I don't know how long it took but slowly they were shuffled out and certainly, in my department, there was a head of news that had been there for quite a while, a lovely woman, but somehow she was shuffled out against her will and they brought in a journalist who'd worked for a left wing newspaper to replace her (C05).

The six journalists interviewed for this study were also well aware of the vulnerability of government press officers after 1997, but placed far more emphasis than civil servants on the role of special advisers in news management. Nick Timmins, a specialist correspondent for *The Times*, *Independent* and *FT* (1981-2012) described the change as "a takeover by special advisers (that) happened in most departments" (J19). Another specialist journalist on broadsheet newspapers (1991-date) sensed that resistance would have been futile, since: "if you weren't quite New Labour enough then you probably didn't last very long" (J18). The veteran political journalist Chris Moncrieff, of the Press Association (1962-date), who retired from the lobby in 1994 but continued as a political commentator, relied mostly on unofficial sources since he considered press officers to be too "inhibited" for his purposes, but also felt that the job losses were unfair: "They dismissed lots of very senior experienced, seasoned press officers who'd worked loyally for years for Labour or Conservative, and put their own Labour party stooges into press offices." (J17).

Jon Silverman, who spent 27 years in BBC news, 13 as home affairs correspondent, described the departure of most Directors of Information as "a complete clear-out" with a few notable exceptions. One of these was Mike Granatt, who had previously forged a good relationship with the reforming and media-minded Home Secretary, Michael Howard, and, according to Silverman, had already introduced "the grid system which Mandelson and New Labour always claim as their invention" (J22).

The significance of the ‘cull’ was not just that it replaced a layer of managers, but that it brought about a permanent change in how government news was managed. David Brindle, a long-serving specialist journalist at *The Guardian* (1988-date), remembers the change happening “almost immediately” (...). Suddenly you had this new tier of semi-political operators working with chosen journalists, using the lobby, not specialists, to place stories, to influence the way a running story was being reported”. As a specialist in health and social policy, he had worked more closely with departmental press officers than many journalists, and considers himself to be “more understanding of (their) position and the complexity of their role than perhaps my colleagues.”(J21)

He recalls especially the humiliating experience of Romola Christopherson, the highly-regarded Director of Communications at the Department of Health (1986-1999), and one of the few to survive the ‘cull’ of 1997.<sup>44</sup> Despite nearly 40 years as a government press officer, she was “given a dressing down by Health Secretary Frank Dobson” (Pulse: 4 April, 1998) after briefing a journalist using an agreed government narrative that “surgeons will be called off the golf course to carry out more operations” (Daily Telegraph. 19 March 1998):

This caused a huge row with the BMA, and (Frank) Dobson, the Secretary of State then wrote this letter to the Times (sic) basically dumping on her and saying ‘I’ve identified the career civil servant concerned and made clear that I repudiate her for making this claim against the hard working doctors on which this country depends’, so she was hung out to dry (J21).

In his letter, Frank Dobson stated that: “I share the anger of the profession at this insulting remark and dissociate myself from it” (Golf course remark ‘wrong’. *The Daily Telegraph*, 24 March 1998). Brindle sees this as “an example of a career civil servant press officer who was trying to play the special adviser game, and was then dumped on from a great height”. Before 1997, putting together a complex policy news story in a way that made it accessible to the public was a “collaborative role” between the journalist and the government press officer, a perspective reminiscent of Cook’s conclusions in relation to US government-source relations (Cook, 1998). After 1997,

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<sup>44</sup> When she died in 2003, *The Times* said she was “one of the most forthright official voices in Whitehall but was also one of the most popular.” (*The Times*. Government press officer who instinctively mistrusted journalists. 20/1/2003). In her obituary in *The Independent* (25/1/2003), the journalist Nicholas Jones said that “journalists appreciated her practice of playing it straight” and that she survived in post after 1997 “due in large measure to her philosophical acceptance of changes wrought in her department” (J20).

and continuing to this day, he argues, news priorities for government were determined by the grid: anything that didn't support the government's narrative didn't make the grid, and therefore was of lesser status. In his interview for this study, Nicholas Jones, the former BBC industrial editor who has specialized in explaining the underlying mechanics of government 'spin', claims that the grid is "a political tool; the special advisers' bible". Although it "has the civil service stamp" and has been "accommodated within the civil service structure" it is driven by a political agenda (J20).

#### 4.3.2 After 2010: "We don't think you're very good at your job and there's too many of you"

Frequent changes in government were common during the 1970s, but as a result of the more stable, long-serving administrations from 1979 onwards, most press officers interviewed for this study had served, at most, just one or two governments. Five of the 16 civil servants interviewed for this study experienced the change of government after 2010, and of these, one had also seen the changes after 1997. This departmental Director of Communications (1991-2011), identified three factors that applied in both 1997 and 2010: firstly, the "year zero approach to understanding where they are coming from"; secondly, the fact that "they will be suspicious of us because they beat us and we worked for the other people"; and thirdly, negative briefing about civil servants both in person and through the media. Overall though, he felt that, in 2010, the "level of day to day hostility was much higher":

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

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

This tallies with the claim made by one civil servant informant in Yong and Hazell's study of Whitehall special advisers. He said that, following the 2010 election "too

many special advisers see themselves engaged in Jihad against the public sector”(Yong & Hazell, 2014, p. 178). Our interviewee also observed that, as in 1997, some senior vacancies were filled by those who were more politically and personally sympathetic to ministers:

Michael Gove got rid of the communications director in Education when he arrived. She [Caroline Wright] went rather quickly and was replaced by [James Frayne] who was the campaigns director for the Taxpayers alliance (...). He could have been brought in purely because he has a robust view on public finances but when he left he went to work on the Mitt Romney campaign<sup>45</sup> (C11).

A Deputy Director of Communications and Head of News (2001-2014) felt that the communications team suffered more from cuts than other parts of the department, describing it as:

An absolute bloodbath. What was difficult is (...) the general impression given by ministers was ‘we don’t like you, we don’t trust you’ – this was the civil service in general but it was applicable to the press office as well – ‘we don’t think you’re very good at your job and there’s too many of you’ (...). They cut everything. Everything went. Biscuits in meetings. Plant pots had to be removed and we didn’t have any pens...but because they’d come in on such an austerity drive, particularly as the Secretary of State was the figurehead of that, we had to be made an example of. It was horrible. Really horrible (C14).

The idea that civil servants in general were ‘blockers’ was a recurring theme among those who experienced the 2010 change of government. A Director of Communication (2001-2014) who developed good working relationships with her Secretary of State and special advisers, thinks this interpretation is fundamentally mistaken:

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<sup>45</sup> Caroline Wright was replaced by James Frayne, who worked at the Department for Education between 2011 and 2012 before moving to the US. In 2014 he became Director of Policy and Strategy at the right-leaning think tank, Policy Exchange. *Department for Education hires James Frayne as comms chief*. PR Week. 24/2/2011. Accessed: 18/11/2015. <http://www.prweek.com/article/1056837/department-education-hires-james-frayne-comms-chief>

I think the Conservatives or a lot of them feel that, and you get a lot of this briefing in the media, Labour did it as well, the sense that the civil service is this unwieldy bureaucracy, they're blockers, they're not there to enable, to facilitate, to provide fresh thinking, they're there to just say no and are a barrier to good government and to actually getting things done, because ministers are there to get things done. And I just really deeply disagree with that because I think there needs to be an appropriate check to what ministers want to do (C16).

The level of hostility from incoming ministerial teams in 2010 depended on the extent to which civil servants were perceived as 'blockers', according to a departmental press officer (2010-2013) who started just before the 2010 election:

Some understood where ministers were coming from and the agenda they were trying to promote and were much more news savvy, and others were more, if you like, traditional civil servants and were very 'straight bat', and didn't really get on board with that agenda, and I think suffered because of it. They were disliked by ministers and special advisers and would be cut out of the loop on occasions to try and circumvent them (C13).

Despite the cuts, he noticed no fundamental change in communication priorities and practices because "politicians of all colours are after the same thing, which is positive news coverage for whatever it is they are deciding to announce that week". He also had no doubt as to who he needed to please to be seen to be doing his job well - "Ultimately, success was 'are ministers happy?' You weren't really working for the department as such, you were absolutely working for ministers."

There was some evidence in the interviews with government press officers and in evidence sessions to various inquiries, that the reputation of government communicators improved after 1997 but this was limited. Matt Tee told the Public Administration Select Committee in 2010 that "although I think communications has made considerable progress from a point where it was seen as a sort of service industry, we are still not at the point where communicators generally are seen as peers around a policy making or delivery table"(Tee, 2010).

One Director of Communications who left government in 2011 after 20 years, felt that the downgrading of the Head of Profession post was a retrograde step: "What you lose with the Permanent Secretary is to have someone at the Wednesday morning table who can raise the profile of the profession and also at that meeting a level of presentational advice." Further down the chain, though, he acknowledged that there



had been improvements. Even though communications specialists “endlessly complain that officials don’t understand their work or how important it is”, and policy officials feel that press officers “trivialise things and are far too eager to jump to a minister’s tune rather than thinking things through (...) it is nothing like as bad as it was”. An important turning point came after 2010 when it became common practice to include Communications Directors on the Departmental Boards:

I think they are seen as more useful than they were and more an integral part of the team. (...) There came some downsides that you were just awash with corporate responsibilities that we could probably have done without but it did at the same time mean that at that level communications was seen as like finance or HR, it wasn’t the kind of Rolls Royce policy making machine, but you couldn’t do without it, and it wasn’t just people who barged into your office and said the minister wants this done by Friday’ (C11).

As noted in Chapter 2, there was significantly less public and media interest in the issue of ‘churn’ following the 2010 election, but my own analysis of changes within the small group of Communications Directors in ministerial departments suggests that there has been a similar turnover (see Appendix 8). By March 2014, of the 20 Directors in post in 2010, just two remained. However, within this group, several long-serving officials were moved within the GCS, for example, Simon Wren from the Ministry of Defence to the Home Office, and Pam Teare from the Crown Prosecution Service (and prior to that the Ministry of Defence) to the newly-formed Ministry of Justice, where they both remain (as at July 2016). Other post-holders in 2010 were reported as having been “head hunted” by other employers: for example, Yasmin Diamond at the Home Office was “poached” by the InterContinental Hotels group in January 2012 (Cartmel, 2012). Nonetheless, it appears that a significant level of churn amounting to an almost complete clear-out following both the 1997 and 2010 elections took place at senior levels of the Government Communications Service. This is indicative of at least some degree of party politicization and is worthy of closer academic attention, although this is beyond the scope of this thesis.

#### **4.4 Making explicit the public purposes of government communications**

As discussed in Chapter 2, Labour’s approach to government communications was frequently challenged, and led directly to a series of government and parliamentary

reviews culminating in the House of Lords report on government communications in 2008 (House of Lords Select Committee on Communications, 2008). The role of special advisers was followed up by the Public Administration Select Committee's review of the work of special advisers in 2012 (Public Administration Select Committee, 2012). The efforts of Bernard Ingham to improve discipline and coordination in civil service communications, the 'modernisation' programme led by Alastair Campbell, and Alex Aiken's drive to introduce strategic campaign planning, are all in their different ways, a response to the centrifugal and politically-driven tendencies of the structure inherited from the 1945-51 Labour government (Moore, 2006).

What is surprising though, is that from its inception the government information service has never made explicit or in any detail what its public principles and purposes should be, beyond the general need to inform the public. In the absence of agreed purposes, successive government and parliamentary committees attempted to articulate this but only in the briefest terms. In 2002 the Public Administration Committee stated that government communicators "have a vital role in serving the public interest"(p3), while the House of Lords Communications Committee (2008) agreed that: "One of the most important tasks of Government is to provide clear, truthful and factual information to citizens (2008; 2002). In as far as a set of consistent public purposes can be discerned at all through the public statements of politicians, government and parliamentary reviews and successive Heads of Service, UK government communications has, over the years, been expected to fulfil the basic criteria as outlined in **Table 4.1**. There is no recognition of the specific requirements and potential risks of media communication, and no commitment on the part of the government to give news media "sufficient or equal access" to information (Moore, 2006). This deficit becomes increasingly significant as government communication becomes more focused on media communications.

**Table 4.1: Public purposes of government communications**

To inform citizens about government policy to help them reach informed judgements on public affairs
To use specialist technical and professional skills to conduct publicity without incurring charges of propaganda

To provide clear, truthful and factual information
To maintain the dividing line between party political and public information
To plan centrally in order to provide a unified and coherent public information service
To provide information in a way that serves the public interest
To ensure both administrative management and political oversight

Sources: (*The Future of Public Service Communications: Report and Findings*, 2015; Government Communications Service, 2014b; Government Information and Communications Service, 2000; House of Lords Select Committee on Communications, 2008; Mountfield, 1997; Public Administration Select Committee, 2002), see also (National Archives: Cabinet Papers CAB 78/37).

The fullest exposition of the public purposes of government communications appeared in the Phillis Report of 2004. This key document was the first to propose a comprehensive set of founding principles for government communications, and as such, formed the starting point for *Engage*, a three year programme launched in 2007 which aimed to provide a “common framework for strategic communication” (HM Government, 2007). It is striking that the government communications plans issued after 2012 make no reference to foundation documents like the Phillis Review or earlier work such as the *Engage* programme (Ramsey, 2014). In fact, there is now no official way to access the Phillis Report, or its predecessor, the Mountfield Report, or information about the *Engage* programme, except through a tortuous process of trial and error using the highly selective and incomplete UK Government Web Archive<sup>46</sup>. This ‘year zero’ approach to government was referred to by one of the respondents earlier in this chapter, and, it appears is now being applied to the recent history of government communications. To illustrate this, I have listed the seven Phillis principles alongside the list of the six primary functions outlined by the UK Government’s Communications Plan of 2013/4, as **Table 4.2** shows).

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<sup>46</sup> Chapter 2 of the House of Lords Communication Committee Report (2008) contains evidence given by Sir Robert Phillis together with a summary of the reports’ findings and recommendations (see <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200809/ldselect/ldcomuni/7/704.htm>)

**Table 4.2: Principles of good government communications**

<b>Seven principles of good government communications (Phillis, 2004)</b>	<b>Six primary functions of government communications (Government Communications Service, 2013)</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Openness, not secrecy</li> <li>2. More direct, unmediated communications to the public</li> <li>3. Genuine agreement with the public</li> <li>4. Positive presentation of government policies and achievements, not misleading spin</li> <li>5. Use of all relevant channels of communication, not excessive emphasis on national press and broadcasters</li> <li>6. Coordinated communication of issues that cut across departments</li> <li>7. Political neutrality, rather than a blurring of government and party communications</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To provide information in order to fulfil specific legal or statutory requirements</li> <li>2. Help the public understand the government’s programme</li> <li>3. Influence attitudes and behaviours</li> <li>4. Enable the effective operation of services</li> <li>5. Inform and support the public in times of crisis</li> <li>6. Enhance the reputation of the UK</li> </ol>

There are clear differences between the seven principles and the six primary functions, which tell us something about the positioning and autonomy of the communications service at different points in time. The Phillis principles represent a high point for public-facing values in government communications, coming as they did at a time when the Labour government had faced a series of public and media scandals relating to its approach to public communication. The principles present an ideal for open and democratic communication in the public interest, which tries to rebuild public trust by offsetting some of the communication biases resulting from excessive concern with media coverage. These principles are universal and therefore would apply to any government, and in all circumstances. In a speech in 2005, the new (and first) Permanent Secretary for Government Communications, Howell James, described his aim “in line with Phillis’s recommendations” as being “to adopt a strategic approach, to better inform and respond to the requirements of citizens and people who use and work in public services” (James, 2005a).

In contrast to the Phillis principles, the primary functions in the 2013-4 plan set out the ways in which the main objectives of the government can be operationalised

through the communications function, but without reference to abstract values and principles. There is no logical connection between the principles and the primary functions. The task of the government communicator is seen not as serving the information needs of citizens, but as delivering the kind of messaging which can successfully deliver a particular political narrative; the narrative created by an incumbent government.

The 2015-16 *GCS Communications Plan*, published just after the 2015 election, is quite explicit about this in its summary of “core themes” and priorities for government communications:

At the heart of the plan is the Government’s One Nation narrative, which gives us a clear focus for the year ahead. As communicators, we need to demonstrate how our work furthers the four main themes within the narrative: helping working people, spreading hope and opportunity, bringing the country together and Britain in the world. (2015b, p. 4).

Rather than being a public declaration of its wider purposes, the plan is a professional document aimed at government communicators and stakeholders. Its symbolic function is to construct a particular collective identity among the dispersed communications teams, not only in government departments, but in the many executive agencies that report to departments. Its second, more substantive function is to demonstrate how the latest strategic communications techniques can and should be used to construct a single coherent government narrative. A third, less visible purpose, is to raise the profile and reputation of the Government Communications Service among both politicians and other civil servants. In this sense its professionalising and centralising objectives are similar to those of Bernard Ingham and Alastair Campbell. However, in contrast to the Ingham approach to coordinating the presentation of government policy, and Campbell’s concern after 1997 to build and defend the government’s reputation through a strategic and proactive approach to the mass media, the plan calls on communications specialists to utilise the latest customer insight techniques to “understand the audience’s attitudes, habits and preferences” so that “our communications are suitable, relevant and meaningful”. It asks them to apply the following set of techniques as recommended by the Cabinet Office’s Customer Insight Team<sup>47</sup>:

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<sup>47</sup> Insights produced as part of the *GCS 7 Trends in Leading-edge Communications report*, produced with Ipsos MORI and Google, April 2015. Accessed at

- Use “the power of storytelling to create an engaging, emotional connection with audiences”
- Ensure “that content is relevant, personalised and delivered at the right time to maximise interest”
- Create “shareable, ‘snackable’ content to encourage audiences to re-transmit”
- Harness “the influence of digital influencers, such as online vloggers, to build trust and reach”
- Build “emotional connections with our audiences to maximise the impact of our campaigns”
- Communicate “a clear social purpose in our Government messaging for audiences to identify with”.

In her critique of the structural changes in government communications since 2010, Anne Gregory<sup>48</sup> highlights two major changes as a cause for concern: the redundancy of the post of the Permanent Secretary, Government Communications in January 2011, and its replacement by the less senior position of Executive Director; and the closure of the COI in April 2012 and the reallocation of its core functions into the Cabinet Office under the direction of a politically-led system of governance. The body which determines communications priorities, the Government Communications Service Delivery Board, is chaired by the Minister for the Cabinet Office, and because it “has strong political representation”, she argues, “there is clearly the potential for political pressure on civil servant communicators akin to and possibly even stronger than that exerted by special advisers, in which case government communications will not only have come full circle but also come under a tighter political grip” (Gregory, 2012, p. 374). She predicts that the communications service will become “a much more purposeful and focused service prioritised on delivering government objectives (...) a function that can help drive its political agenda forward by heavily directed communication activity”. For the political communications theorist, John Corner, this approach to government communications relates to the further embedding within government institutions of the ‘permanent campaign’.

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

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<https://gcn.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/7-trends-in-leading-edge-communications.pdf> on 18/11/2015.

<sup>48</sup> Anne Gregory is Professor of Corporate Communications, Strategy, Marketing and Economics at the University of Huddersfield and worked on and off as an adviser and on attachment to government communications from the mid-1990s.

government-public communications outside of electoral period and its increasing naturalization across this range” (Corner, 2010, p. 59).

## 4.5 Conclusion

*RQ: Resilience* - to what extent did government communications express, plan and deliver in relation to its public purposes and objectives, and what were its strengths and weaknesses over time?

The structure of government communications has shown remarkable resilience in the face of not only the challenge of mediatization, but the political pressures arising from it, which led to the ‘cull’ of 1997. Despite these changes, and the regular chorus of disapproval from politicians, the media, and (less vociferously) from fellow civil servants, the government communications service largely retains its postwar appearance. The balance of power between the centre and the departments remains and the service operates as part of a specialist hierarchy, retaining a civil service head of profession, albeit now based at the Cabinet Office as opposed to the COI. Directors of Communication in the departments run professional teams that work closely with ministers and special advisers to contribute towards a coherent government narrative. In the sense that the service has shown elasticity in response to change, and the toughness to resist challenges, it can be said to be structurally resilient.

A major exception is the closure of the COI and the dispersal of its functions into the Cabinet Office that took place suddenly in 2012, on the advice of the outgoing Permanent Secretary, Government Communications, but without external consultation, and with little apparent criticism, either from the media, civil servants, the public or parliamentarians (Horton & Gay, 2011)<sup>49</sup>. The change also represents an intensification of a process which had already been taking place over time: the tendency for government presentation to move “from a common service agency”, to a “pattern of ‘spinners’ clustered in central agencies and around ministers in departments” (Hood & Dixon, 2015, p. 174). In 1945, as we saw earlier, politicians expressed the need for “a body of technically expert staff which knew how to conduct

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<sup>49</sup> It is puzzling that a House of Commons Library Standard Note (SN/PC/06050) *Abolition of the COI* (2011), which is mildly critical of some of the processes (or possibly the lack of them) behind the closure, has been removed from circulation and is no longer available – with no reason given. My query to the Library went unanswered.

publicity without incurring the charge of propaganda” (National Archives: Cabinet Papers CAB 78/37). As the concerns of Anne Gregory demonstrate, it is difficult to claim that, as in 1945, the body of communications professionals currently known as the Government Communications Service, has a degree of autonomy under a civil service director (Gregory, 2012).

The structure of the service may be resilient, but what about its culture? As **Table 4.3** below shows, an apparently superficial name change may be unimportant, but could there be significance in the substitution over time of the word ‘information’ by the word ‘communication’?

**Table 4.3: What’s in a name?**

<b>1946</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2013</b>
Government Information Service (GIS)	Government Communications and Information Service (GICS)	Government Communications Network (GCN)	Government Communications Service (GCS)

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

The one effort to shore up the service by introducing a set of explicit public values, the Phillis Report, has been put into reverse and the report abandoned in a ‘year zero’ approach to history which solely serves the needs of the government of the day. Without widely-understood and shared public values, there can be no public



accountability, because to what ends can the public, parliament and the media hold the service accountable? The service was founded in 1945 at the behest of politicians and with no built-in accountability mechanism. Changes that have taken place since then such as the abolition of the COI, the introduction of special advisers, and the *de facto* introduction of politicized leadership within government communications have served to strengthen what Gregory refers to as the ‘political grip’ over government communications (Gregory, 2012).

And yet the commitment to political neutrality on the part of civil servants in general and government communicators in particular is regularly re-stated by politicians and in propriety guidance, and is depicted as a vital ingredient in maintaining impartiality and hence public trust. Policing the line between party political propaganda and public information is a bureaucratic function which is at odds with politicians’ desire to act, and to act quickly. Returning to March and Olsen, to resist these demands, bureaucrats must draw on “the institutionalized capability for acting appropriately”. Far from being negative and constraining, they argue, “some of the major capabilities of modern institutions come from their effectiveness in substituting rule-bound behavior for individually autonomous behavior”(March & Olsen, 2009, p. 10). The Phillis Report, and those which followed, were an attempt to make explicit a set of generally accepted and applicable rules by which a genuinely citizen-focused government communications service could be evaluated.

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

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

The connection between impartiality and the interests of the public is explored more fully in Chapter 7. The evidence presented in this chapter suggests that the autonomy available to government communicators to behave appropriately in relation to their own codes of propriety, and their own public purposes, minimal as they are, has been significantly depleted in a process of mediatization and politicization which

accelerated after 1997 and is continuing. In this sense, despite appearances, there are serious concerns about the *resilience* of government communications.

In the next three chapters I look at the evidence in more detail. In Chapter 5, I ask what kinds of *resistance* government press officers offered in relation to media and political change and challenge, despite the loss of resilience. In Chapter 6, I consider the issue of *responsiveness*, asking in what way the civil service responded to the new and tougher demands of media and political actors, and what the outcomes of this were for the media management of government announcements. Finally, in Chapter 7, I examine the more normative issue of representing the public. Is it possible for a public servant to *represent* the public, and if so, how does this form of representation relate to formal electoral representation? How does this relate to claims that the media are increasingly used by politicians as a form of accountability?

## Chapter 5: Resistance

"It is absolutely necessary to pursue today's policy with energy; it is almost equally necessary, in order to survive, to withhold from it the last ounce of commitment....and to invest that commitment in our particular institution, the Civil Service itself, with all its manifest imperfections". Richard Wilding, Deputy Secretary, Civil Service Department, Whitehall, November 1979<sup>50</sup>

"The media can create its own dynamic, but sometimes you have to be quite resistant to that", Director of Communication, Government Department, 2014

### 5.1 Introduction

In chapter 2, we saw how resistance, or challenge, has traditionally been seen as integral to the role of the impartial civil servant, and how government communicators in particular have been depicted by high ranking former civil servants as bulwarks against "a blurring of the distinction between party political and government communications" (*Future of the Civil Service*, 2013; 2008; Public Administration Select Committee, 2013a). A former Cabinet Office minister, Oliver Letwin (2010-2016), referred in a speech to civil servants as "one of the great bulwarks against tyranny" because they provided a "continuing safeguard that ministers of any persuasion will not be able to use the machinery of the state to personal or party political advantage"(Letwin, 2012). From its earliest post-war origins, the Government Information Service was structured in order to protect the government from charges of propaganda; a responsibility enshrined in successive iterations of propriety guidance.

We also saw earlier how Hepp et al. argued that studies of the influence of media over time within other social and cultural domains (such as government, in our case), must consider resistance as well as response (Hepp et al., 2015). This is logical: any process of change – in this case, mediatization – will encounter resistance as well as response, often concurrently, and frequently unevenly, as the Swedish and Norwegian ethnographic studies based in government departments have suggested (Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, 2015; Pallas & Fredriksson, 2014). We have also seen how the

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<sup>50</sup> Cited p115, *The Ponting Affair*, Richard Norton-Taylor (1985). Mrs Thatcher abolished the Civil Service Department in 1981 and Wilding's post was discontinued.

terms responsiveness and resistance when used with reference to ministers, carry cultural force within the civil service as an institution because they refer to the responsibility of civil servants to both serve, and hence respond to, ministers, while also offering resistance, or challenge, as a way of stress-testing policy ideas and ensuring continuity and propriety in government. Resistance and response are not necessarily mutually exclusive since some forms of resistance may serve the purposes of responsiveness, for example, when a senior civil servant questions the legality of a particular form of action, or advises that certain policy decisions contravene collective cabinet responsibility. As we see in Chapter 7, there is also the issue of *public responsiveness*: do civil servants have the right to challenge ministerial actions and decisions when they feel that to do so is to recognise certain public interests?

There may be subtle differences between the two interpretations of resistance as applied in the quotes that open this chapter but both were civil servants speaking pragmatically. Wilding is recognising that civil servants have a loyalty that reaches beyond the government of the day which requires them to *withhold* a measure of obedience to ministers; the Director of Communication is explaining that governments should *resist* the dynamics of media pressure, however powerful. In this chapter, we apply the concept of resistance in relation to both media and political dynamics, as observed within the “cross-field” where the fields of politics, bureaucracy and media intersect (Lingard et al., 2005; Rawolle, 2005). A loss of resistance to ministers or the media (either directly through media pressure, or indirectly through the media sensitivities of ministers), can be seen as an indicator of politicization *and* mediatization. In the previous chapter we saw how the undermining of resilience as a result of job losses after the 1997 and 2010 elections made it harder for government press officers to resist ministers’ demands in relation to media, despite a normative framework which makes such resistance an inherent part of the role. This supports Bourbeau’s idea that resistance to “one of the most powerful organizations in the history of human kind (i.e. the state)” is especially difficult, even from within (Bourbeau, 2015, p. 388).

The idea that even senior civil servants might engage in resistance introduces the idea of differentiation within the governing elite. Indeed, as we observed in chapter 2, the doctrine of speaking truth to power implies discomfort and risk on the part of the individual with less power – the servant. But what form does resistance take in practice? In their analysis of “disobedient civil servants”, Barker and Wilson point out that “British civil servants have a clear constitutional duty to obey their ministers.

Yet civil servants may be confronted with situations in which they believe, on the basis of their knowledge or expertise that the course of action a minister favours would have sharply damaging consequences for the government or the country”. They interviewed 49 senior civil servants in 1989-90, and a further 56 in 1993-94, and found “various forms of non-compliance with ministerial requests or instructions” (Barker & Wilson, 1997, pp. 223, 227). Most said they would refuse to undertake inappropriate tasks and would appeal to their departmental seniors if asked to carry out tasks which were unethical or ‘sharply damaging’ to the department. Yet virtually all claimed that the option of leaking was unacceptable, even contemptible<sup>51</sup>. They remained critical of the disgraced civil servant, Clive Ponting, who was acquitted by a jury when he cited public interest in support of his decision to leak secrets about the sinking of the Argentinian ship the *Belgrano* during the Falklands War in July 1984. However, there were limits to their readiness to resist, which, the authors argue, reflect the weakness of the UK’s central governing bureaucracy as a restraint on ministerial power. Firstly, none was prepared to take an issue of concern beyond departmental boundaries. Secondly, resistance related almost exclusively to issues of legality, propriety or ethics rather than substantive policy or public interest issues.

There are other, less covert, institutional arrangements that enable both the bureaucracy and parliament to delay and scrutinise possible abuses of power within the executive which can be seen as institutional forms of resistance, such as the commissioning of reviews, inquiries and other forms of scrutiny. As a last resort, where civil servants disagree with the propriety or wisdom of a decision, particularly in relation to public expenditure on government projects, the Permanent Secretary may request a formal ‘written direction’ from ministers, as occurred on 26 June 2015 in connection with the charity Kids Company<sup>52</sup>. This form of resistance is rarely used. In February 2016 the government’s own watchdog, the National Audit Office (NAO), expressed concern that the power to request a ‘ministerial direction’ was not being used effectively. The incentives for permanent secretaries to stand up to ministers in relation to their role as departmental accounting officers were found to be “weak compared with those associated with the day-to-day job of satisfying ministers”. The

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<sup>51</sup> This is not to say that leaks don’t occur. One journalist interviewed here relied heavily on leaks from what he referred to as “unofficial sources” (J17), although another insisted that most civil servants “behaved properly” (J19). A former head of the civil service has claimed that special advisers leaked regularly (M. Foster, 2015).

<sup>52</sup> For more information about this story see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-33787201>. For a graphic showing the numbers of ‘ministerial directions’ between 1991 and 2011, see Appendix 9.

NAO Director, Amyas Morse, said that “the ever-increasing influence of special advisers and ministers’ greater involvement in policy implementation and civil service appointments, is pressing down on the ‘ministerial’ end of the see-saw further and further, while considerations of value for money and public value rise steadily into the air” (National Audit Office, 2016).

In relation to the concerns of this study, then, how do these and other patterns of resistance relate to the practices of government press officers, who, as we have seen, are exposed to the media needs and demands of ministers? In Wilding’s interpretation of civil service values, to attain political neutrality, uphold impartiality and speak truth to power, the civil servant must withhold “the last ounce of commitment” from the government of the day<sup>53</sup>. This cannot be assured if civil servants fear losing their jobs if they speak out. The former head of the No.10 policy unit (2003-06), Matthew Taylor, witnessed self-censorship by civil servants in the face of ministerial enthusiasms:

One of the more uncomfortable experiences I had as a government adviser came in meetings when it was clear that well informed and well paid civil servants were self-censoring in the face of political determination. As the minister (or prime minister) described the policy they wanted to unveil, or the commitment they wanted to make, you could see the officials wrestling with the need to provide a reality check – but all too often deciding it was better to nod sagely than look career-threateningly unhelpful (Taylor, 2015).

For the Director of Communication also quoted at the beginning of this chapter, battling on two fronts, serving both media clients and political masters, it is essential, at times, to resist not only ministerial enthusiasms but also the *dynamic of the media* – and often both pressures working simultaneously.

In chapters 1 and 2, I identified a series of contradictory pressures on government press officers to (a) act as a bulwark against the political ambitions and actions of ministers and their aides, while responding to their needs (b) to facilitate and yet control lines of communication between departments and the media, and (c) to act as advocates within their departments for the needs of journalists, while protecting the department’s reputation. Within the cross-field where government press officers operate, the process of resistance can have a range of *sanctioned* manifestations:

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<sup>53</sup> The Armstrong Declaration of 1985 and the more recent comments of Francis Maude (see Chapter 7) are at odds with this interpretation.

resisting time pressures set by the news media, seeking to set the agenda rather than following it, applying propriety codes that limit certain actions, challenging the news-led demands of No.10, saying ‘no’ to departmental ministers and their aides, or making use of the machinery of government to delay or scrutinize controversial decisions. *Unsanctioned* manifestations of resistance include leaking information to journalists or political rivals, off the record briefing or leaking, passive resistance such as failing to return calls or carry out assigned tasks, or using official and unofficial channels and networks to isolate and undermine a powerful source, whether a minister, special adviser or external adversary.

As we saw in Chapter 4, the extent to which an individual can perform acts of resistance, and the form that this resistance takes, is related to the extent of their *power to resist*, which is itself contingent on the resilience of the institution of which they are a part. The leadership, autonomy, and ethical and professional framework within which government press officers operate has undergone both cyclical and long term evolutionary change during the period under consideration here. In this chapter we ask what the interview and documentary data tell us about any change in the degree and the nature of resistance to both media and political pressure manifested over time. We look at what respondents have to say about resistance, and relate this to the documentary and archival evidence examined as part of this study, in the light of the literature review and some of the most salient themes to emerge from the NVivo analysis (see **Table 3.5**), namely: impartiality, changes of government, ministers’ perceptions of media and the role of No.10. Together, these themes are examined under the following headings:

1. Managing the expectations of incoming governments
2. Challenging ministers
3. Policing the ‘line’ between impartial and partisan communication
4. Resisting news media deadlines and demands
5. Resisting news management by No.10.

## 5.2 Managing the expectations of incoming governments

“There’s a great maelstrom of emotions – your own little carefully ordered world is upset”.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the party political changes of government in 1997 and 2010 were times of vulnerability for government press officers, especially Directors of Communication and Heads of Profession. This remained the case in 2010 despite the huge difference in political mandate: in 1997 the government had a 179-seat overall majority; in 2010, the Prime Minister governed as the head of a Coalition. What is also quite marked is the extent of the impact on government communications of both incoming governments in 1997 and 2010, which suggests the tendency on the part of new governments to deploy rhetorical devices and even structural reform to the communications function in particular, as a means of demonstrating and signifying their arrival. Over and above that cyclical tendency, is the longer term trend after 1997 of increasing responsiveness to ministers on the part of the civil servants closest to them (see Chapter 6), and through ministers, to the news media, which relates to the growing dominance of media in government and politics as outlined in Chapter 2.

### 5.2.1 After 1997

Almost immediately after the May 1997 election, two interviewees faced the issue of how to respond to the arrival of a New Labour government that was determined to impose from the start its own view of what good government communications should be: the Cabinet Secretary, Robin Butler, and the outgoing Chief Press Secretary, Jonathan Haslam.

In his interview, Lord Butler described 1997 as “quite a climacteric really, a watershed”; an election which led to particular difficulties for government communications:

I was concerned. These were troubling times for the Government Information Service and for the Head of the Government Information Service on their behalf and, yes; he did come to talk to me<sup>54</sup> (C02).

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<sup>54</sup> This was probably Mike Granatt, who made way for Howell James, the first Permanent Secretary, Communications, from 2004, following the Phillis Report. It is interesting to compare Lord Butler’s recollection of his concern of “troubling times”, with Alastair Campbell’s recent claim that, as Cabinet Secretary, Butler gave him the go ahead to “shake things up a bit”(Campbell, 2015).



Butler emphasised that although he wasn't directly involved in dealing with the difficulties facing departmental press offices, for example, having to make Heads of Information (as they were then called) redundant, he did refer elliptically to his role in seeking to take the heat out of the controversy as it developed during the first few months after the election:

Alastair Campbell and Robin Mountfield, who was my deputy in the Cabinet Office, had a working group to discuss precisely these issues: how the government information service could be made more effective, what were the limits on the things they could do politically and where the boundary line lay and what needed to be done politically, so that was an issue that was addressed then, and I think it was addressed successfully (C02).

The civil servant given the task of chairing the review, Robin Mountfield, made clear later that Butler was the driving force behind setting up the review:

As the autumn wore on this issue became more tense; on the one hand Ministerial dissatisfaction with the GIS, on the other concern about politicization of appointments and of the things the GIS was expected to do. I was asked (not by Ministers, but by Sir Robin Butler) to chair a small working group to review the whole thing (Mountfield, 2002).

For Jonathan Haslam, who made the decision to leave government in 1998, the 1997 election "had more profound, very profound implications for the relationship between government and the media" but it was also a personal upheaval:

There's a great maelstrom of emotions. Your own little carefully ordered world is upset. I make no bones about this. I am personally very fond of John Major. I know his wife very well and we remain in contact (C07).

The combination of culture shock at the change of administration after 18 years of Conservative government, and the loss of fellowship and friendship at No.10, made resistance more difficult. Eighteen years later, remembering the first crucial meeting with Labour's communications leadership a few days after the election<sup>55</sup>, Haslam still

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<sup>55</sup> Another attendee, Stephen Reardon, Press Secretary at the Department for Social Security, recalls that the meeting took place in the White Dining Room at No 10: "Mandelson did virtually all the talking, while Campbell watched us. There were no chairs and we all stood like a Privy Council audience of the Queen". (Daily Mail: 16/6/2007). Accessed 5/8/2015 at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-462464/If-media-feral-Tony-Blair-craven-manipulation-Civil-Service-blame.html>.

wonders whether he and the rest of the senior team in the government information service could have done more to protect the incoming government from its own excesses:

We weren't sufficiently forceful with them, to say to Alastair Campbell and Peter Mandelson on the first Monday after the election, 'you can carry on the same way in government that you did in opposition, you can play desperately and almost all the time the exclusive card, you can play one title off against another, but ultimately you manage to piss off everybody and this will come and bite you in the bum and in the process of doing that you destroy quite a lot of public confidence in central government' (Co7).

As Haslam was suggesting, the ripple effect of the post-election changes in government communications went beyond 1997. Far from being the last word, the Mountfield Review (Mountfield, 1997) turned out to be the first of a linked series of government and parliamentary-sponsored reviews of the Government Information Service<sup>56</sup>. Taken together, these reviews, often critical of government actions in relation to the media, can be seen as a form of institutional resistance on the part of the civil service and parliament, to moves by governing politicians from New Labour onwards to introduce radical changes to the service. The findings of the Mountfield Review led directly to the most influential review of all, the *Independent Review of Government Communications* (Phillis, 2004), which was set up in response to a recommendation of the Public Administration Select Committee's review into the Jo Moore controversy of 2002 (2002). In its turn, the Phillis Review formed the starting point for the House of Lords' own review into Government Communications in 2008 (2008).

Howell James, who sat on the Phillis Committee and became the first Permanent Secretary, Government Communications, in 2004, following one of its recommendations, recognises that *caution*, on the part of government communicators, can be interpreted by incoming ministers as *resistance*:

I think there's often a lot of misunderstanding when a new government comes in. It's back to the slight tendency for communications functions to be a little bit of a

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<sup>56</sup> See Appendix 2 for the full list.

handbrake, to caution, and if you come in with a great majority after a great election victory it's quite hard to hear those cautionary voices initially (C08).

Among the 16 of the 17 Heads of Information who lost their posts within two and a half years of the 1997 Election, two demonstrated their resistance publicly after leaving government, by giving evidence to the Public Administration Select Committee's 1998 Inquiry into *The Government Information and Communication Service* (Public Administration Select Committee, 1998). This looked at the service's response to the huge expansion of news coverage, and the rise in expectations from New Labour. The aforementioned Steve Reardon, who lost his job in 1997 after 30 years in government, lamented the fact that so many heads of department were "summarily driven from their posts 'for a variety of reasons' so soon after the election, in a way that was undeservedly and publicly humiliating" (Reardon, 1998). He told MPs that communications officials were more vulnerable than other civil servants:

The security of tenure of Heads of Information still remains dependant very much on the pleasure of Ministers and in a way that would seem to apply to few if any mainstream policy officials...volatile pressures remain on heads of information, which transmit down through the GICS, that do not apply to anything like the same extent to other civil servants.

He added a warning that:

The capricious nature of pressure like this will detract from the ability of a head of information to provide the objective service to ministers, as enshrined in the (Mountfield) report... I would expect that there are a number of senior members of the GICS who feel that they are very much on trial with Ministers and who will be concerned that giving unpalatable advice may result in them losing their jobs. I regard living under pressure of this kind as being "politicised", albeit not "party politicised".

The former Director of the Northern Ireland Information Service, Andy Wood, told the Committee that, in July 1997, after 23 years in the GIS, he was "sent on 'gardening leave' on the orders of the Secretary of State"<sup>57</sup> (Wood, 1998). He had served under a Labour administration for five years before they lost to the Conservatives in 1979, and observed that: "the Conservatives did not clear out their press offices in the way and

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<sup>57</sup> Mo Mowlem, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1997-1999) complained of a 'lack of personal chemistry' between them. Wood was replaced by a former BBC Belfast news editor, Tom Kelly, who later became Tony Blair's official spokesman. In 2003 Kelly faced calls for dismissal when it was revealed that he had described the weapons inspector Dr David Kelly as "a Walter Mitty character". [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/3124677.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3124677.stm)

to the extent that has happened since last May.” He contended that Labour’s belief that it was effective media management that enabled them to win the election of 1997 so decisively, was not only erroneous, but “catapulted them into an attack on the Government Information Service”, and sent the civil service into a defensive reaction that threatened its impartiality:

The Civil Service as a whole—particularly the very top echelons— were nervous about what changes a new government might bring. If that is the case, then I believe the Civil Service, fearing what some commentators have called the ‘Washingtonisation’ of the British Civil Service—the replacement in key positions of professional civil servants by ‘politically acceptable’ temporary bureaucrats—took advantage of the ‘culling’ of my GIS colleagues to prepare its defences against further encroachments on its neutrality and professionalism. What they did NOT DO publicly was to take a stand and decry these removals and refuse to sanction them. Apart from a reference in a valedictory interview with *The Times* in which Sir Robin (now Lord) Butler spoke of his unease<sup>58</sup>, the top of the Civil Service has been conspicuously silent about these removals.

Wood’s veiled warning that although they might be safe for now, the ‘very top echelons’ of the civil service might face trouble further down the line, appears to have been borne out following the 2010 election, where disquiet focused not on communications specialists, but on fundamental disagreements about the relationship between ministers and ‘departmental accounting officers’, the Permanent Secretaries, as we saw in Chapter 2 (Allaby, 2012; Blick, 2012; Bogdanor, 2012; Brecknell, 2013; Diamond, 2014a; Foster, 2014; Riddell, 2012).

### 5.2.2 After 2010

It is hard to find evidence of resistance or open criticism, however muted, on the part of government communications specialists to the changes implemented following the arrival of the Conservative-led Coalition government of 2010. This is despite (or perhaps because of) a 50% cut in government spending on communications between 2010 and 2013<sup>59</sup>, and the decision to abolish the COI. On the contrary, at the instigation of the Cabinet Office minister, Francis Maude, the then Permanent Secretary for Communications, Matt Tee, wrote a paper recommending the closure

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<sup>58</sup> ‘Keeper of the skeleton closet – interview – Sir Robin Butler’. *Sunday Times* (4/1/1998)

<sup>59</sup> Louise Ridley. ‘The government plans to extend relationships with agencies and rigorously evaluate campaign spending under the new centralized Government Communications Service’. *Campaign*. 15/10/2013.

and outlining “very significant savings in departmental communications”. By the time the paper was published, he had already announced that he was leaving and his post was closing (Cartmel, 2010; Cartmell, 2011; Tee, 2011).

Arriving just after the May 2010 election, Nick Hillman, Conservative Special Adviser (2010-13) to the Minister for Universities in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), David Willetts (2010-14), felt largely welcomed, but met some resistance from top officials in the department who deployed what he considered to be “a stupid strategy”, because its only impact could be to weaken the department:

We were told, me and the two Lib Dems, ‘don’t get above yourselves. You cannot go round Whitehall acting as a powerful figure the way those Labour SPADS did’. That was the message we got ...the sense of bringing SPADs down to earth (S23).

Much of the reaction to the challenge of the incoming Coalition government, was met by responsiveness rather than resistance <sup>60</sup> on the part of government communications staff, as we shall see in Chapter 7, but there was some comfort in withholding ‘the last ounce of commitment’ (Norton-Taylor, 1985). A Director of Communication who left government in 2011 after a 20 year career, was critical of “the level of hostility through media briefings or in person from new ministers” following the 2010 election, and explained how he advised junior members of his team who had only ever worked under one government, to accept, adapt to and internalise the mind-set of the new government:

The kind of change you have to do is understand their mind-set, change it, but not swallow it whole, because it’s not your job to believe the political imperatives that the new government believe. You just have to understand where they are coming from (C11).

### **5.3 Challenging Ministers**

“Our advice from Comms is that it should be removed and these are the reasons why”

As we have seen, resistance on the part of the GIS leadership to the incoming government’s attack on the shortcomings of the service after May 1997 was muted,

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<sup>60</sup> Where there has been criticism of media relations in government since 2010 this has focused on controversies relating to the media activities of special advisers – a continuing concern of the Public Administration Select Committee (2012).

and failed to slow down the pace of change. What effective resistance there was came largely from media and parliamentary sources. The experiences of Bernard Ingham in challenging ministers after 1979 suggest, firstly, that he felt secure enough to challenge ministers, and secondly, that although political concerns about media scrutiny were growing, they were nothing like as powerful as they became after 1997.

Recently released archive material dating from the 1980s displays what might appear today to be an astonishingly frank approach by Ingham, not only towards ministers, but with the Prime Minister herself. At one point he even scolded Mrs Thatcher for failing to challenge dissenting ministers, telling her in a memo that “this is no way to run a railway”(9/11/1981: MT/BI Archives). He used alliances with senior figures and his own government information network to resist what he saw as the scapegoating tendencies of ministers in relation to the GIS and to pre-empt moves by ministers to ‘interfere’ in publicity matters. From the moment of his arrival as the Prime Minister’s press secretary on 1 November 1979, Ingham enlisted the support of the No 10 Policy Unit director John Vereker, and his own Heads of Information economics group<sup>61</sup> (MIO(E)) to make clear in forceful terms that the cabinet needed to work together to sell the economic message at difficult times.

In 1983 he conducted a successful ‘coup’ against proposals by political advisers at No.10 to promote the new and relatively inexperienced Party Chairman John Gummer as minister in charge of government presentation, joining forces with the Cabinet Secretary Robin Butler to put the case for the more emollient Lord Whitelaw, but without being seen to criticize the current incumbent, John Biffen. A delicately-phrased memo from Butler drafted jointly with Ingham, dated 30 November, supported the case for Whitelaw, working in tandem with Ingham, who would continue to chair the weekly meetings of Chief Information Officers, previously a ministerial responsibility. Later that day, Butler confirmed in a ‘note for the record’ copied to Ingham and the political advisers that the Prime Minister had agreed not to appoint Mr Gummer. Lord Whitelaw would take on the task, and “would rely on the Prime Minister’s Chief Press Secretary for support”. Ingham had no qualms about using semi-political means to get his own way but it is likely that both he and Butler were in tune with the Prime Minister’s preferences, even if she hadn’t actually had to state them. In this sense, while resisting party pressure, he was also being responsive

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<sup>61</sup> Known as MIO (E), as an echo of the economics Cabinet Committee, known as E.

to his ultimate boss. This illustrates the intricate relationship between what at first appear to be contrasting dynamics – resistance and responsiveness.

In his interview for this study, Ingham explained his views on the role of ministers in government presentation, implying that he preferred to work with people who left the important decisions to him, and providing some insight into his preference for Lord Whitelaw:

Ministers have their agendas (...). If you could keep ministers, well a certain sort of minister, out of government information is probably a plus point for information; for objective information. A plus point for more objectivity and less propaganda (C01).

He used the example of a request by a minister to produce a government leaflet about the poll tax for distribution through local party offices to illustrate his ability to resist ministers' attempts to blur the distinction between government and party political information:

Cecil Parkinson was in the Department of the Environment and wanted an interpretation of the rules on producing a popular...exposition of the poll tax, with the clear idea that you produce this and it would go out to local parties for distribution. I said, "I don't think you can justify this at all. I said I think you can justify a general leaflet a popular version if you like of the legislation you're bringing forward and you can most certainly let any interested constituency have copies, probably up to 20 copies to inform the Committee but you certainly can't send it out wholesale. And I wasn't fired for being obstructive. It was accepted (C01).

Contemporary papers relating to the governments of 1997 and 2010 have not yet been released, so it is impossible to compare like with like when addressing the issue of resistance to ministers on the part of government press officers after 1997. However, there is nothing in my interviews or documents that comes close to Bernard Ingham's plain-speaking. That does not mean though, that government press officers were not prepared to stand up to ministers; many consider this as an essential part of their role, but it was done individually, rather than collectively, and concerned largely day-to-day operational rather than strategic matters. Campbell's assertiveness with Tony Blair is well-known, but the difference is that although technically a temporary civil servant, he did not work in the interests of the civil service, but of the party, and specifically the party leader. We have seen how Ingham protected Margaret Thatcher

from both internal and external enemies but he was also dedicated to the GIS and consistently fought for its interests<sup>62</sup>.

A departmental press officer working for the Coalition government (2010-14) provides a fairly typical example of how potential problems with ministerial lines are spotted and challenged in practice:

We were doing a press release and one of the special advisers wanted to insert a text about the Somali community - and it just sat uncomfortably with me as a reputational issue, because it was going to go out in the name of the minister, and I thought, 'really you're overstepping the line here and it's going to cause issues for us as a department', and so I checked it with senior colleagues and my head of news and they agreed and we put a submission in to the ministers' office, saying, 'this is what you are being given by your special advisers, but our advice from comms is that it should be removed and these are the reasons why'. And the ministers agreed. Relations were a touch frosty between the two offices for a couple of days but it was fine after that (C13).

Siobhan Kenny, a former Director of Communications and No 10 press officer (until 2005), remembers Heads of News removing ministers' quotes from press releases, and leaving it up to those with the closest relationships with ministers, usually senior information officers, to negotiate new quotes:

If you've got a good relationship you just negotiate the words that will work and if the minister concerned really wants to issue something else that's a bit more crunchy then that can go through Conservative Central Office or his special adviser or whatever it is so you can kind of work out a deal like that (CO3).

She remembers how passive resistance at No 10 put paid to the Deputy Prime Minister, Michael Heseltine's request in 1995 that, with the growth of 24-hour media, the government should have "at least as good an outfit as the Labour party in Opposition" by introducing 24 hour media monitoring:

The civil service spent two years trying to prove how difficult it would be and how it wasn't possible. I don't think that was one of their finest hours actually. The media monitoring is a good sort of microcosm about how the machine had been slightly

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<sup>62</sup> Bernard Ingham has also been accused of becoming too close to Margaret Thatcher. Scammell has argued that although his "neutrality was maintained formally", as time went on he "became less concerned about breaches of the rules" (Scammell, 1991, pp. 281, 283).



‘that’s too difficult’ when actually it wasn’t too difficult, they just didn’t want to do it (C03).

For those who didn’t feel able or in a strong enough position to challenge ministers personally, being unhelpful to special advisers was a way of achieving the same thing by stealth. The Liberal Democrat special adviser, Katie Waring (2010-2013), became close to the Director of Communication in her Department, describing her, and the Head of News as “critical to me, to how I was able to perform in the role”. However, for her, the worst part of the job was the “obstruction” she experienced from other civil servants who “disagreed and thought they knew better”:

Civil servants not replying to your emails; not giving you advice; not providing the data you want; going behind your back briefing people; saying things that are supposed to be internal, part of a departmental negotiating position, to other departments, undermining negotiations (S24).

#### **5.4 Policing the ‘line’ between impartial and partisan communication**

“It’s the old elephant – you know it when you see it”

The most controversial area of government communications is how to promote the policy objectives of the ministerial team without engaging in party political publicity, a balancing act that is frequently depicted by respondents as a *dividing line* between proper and improper public communication. The idea of the ‘line’ is also used in propriety guidance and parliamentary and government reviews which often blame impropriety in government communications on a failure to observe appropriate boundaries between objective and party political communication.

The wording of propriety guidance on government communications was almost identical in 1997 and 2014, as **Table 5.1** shows. The need to resist ministers’ tendency to engage in personal image-making or cross ‘the border of propriety’ is also consistently enshrined in propriety guidance over the years, although changes in wording can be seen which may reflect the many controversies that have arisen since 1997 regarding ministerial approaches to media management (See **Table 5.2**

overleaf)<sup>63</sup>. The onus is on the press officer to ensure that ministers do not undermine their impartiality, not by saying ‘no’ but, if necessary, giving a “polite refusal”.

**Table 5.1: Propriety guidance on objectivity - 1997 and 2014**

<p>Government Communications Propriety Guidance (2014)</p> <p>“The following basic criteria have been applied to government communications by successive administrations. The communication should be relevant to government responsibilities, should be objective and explanatory, not biased or polemical, should not be, or liable to be, misrepresented as being party political, and should be able to justify the costs as expenditure of public funds.”</p>	<p>Guidance on the Work of the Government Information Service (1997)</p> <p>“The basic conventions, which successive Governments have applied to Government Information Services, require that these activities should be relevant to government responsibilities, should be objective and explanatory, not tendentious or polemical, should not be, or be liable to misrepresentation as being party political, and should be conducted in an economic and appropriate way, having regard to the need to be able to justify the costs as expenditure of public funds.”</p>
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**Table 5.2: Propriety guidance on resisting ministerial pressure – 1997 and 2014**

<p>Government Communications Propriety Guidance (2014)</p> <p>“Ministers don’t always acknowledge the distinction between government communicators and their own party political spokespeople. Consequently, ministers may sometimes ask the Press Office to issue...through departmental channels speeches or statements that cross the border of propriety. In such cases...if no compromise can be found, then it will be necessary to give a polite refusal which, if necessary, will be supported by the department’s Permanent Secretary”.</p>	<p>Guidance on the Work of the Government Information Service (1997)</p> <p>“While such information will acknowledge the part played by individual Ministers of the Government, personalization of issues or personal image-making should be avoided. Government information or publicity activities should always be directed at informing the public.”</p>
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<sup>63</sup> Haslam recounts an early disagreement with the minister at the Department of Education, Stephen Byers, who asked a press officer to issue a press release that was openly critical of the previous government. Haslam “pushed back,” arguing that this was party political. Byers complained to the Permanent Secretary, Haslam was interviewed and his stance vindicated. He saw the incident as “a test about how far civil servants could be pushed” which “towards the end of my time in the civil service those sort of pressures became more apparent.”

In practice, most respondents felt confident about policing the boundary, or the line, between impartial and partisan communication, with comments such as “it’s in the DNA”, “anyone who’s in there knows what it is”, “I never had any difficulty”, and “I don’t remember that ever being a problem”. All the civil servants interviewed said they knew where the line was and how to operate within it. If the line was put under pressure it was almost always by ministers or special advisers.

Jonathan Haslam described the line as:

the old elephant, you know it when you see it...I don’t ever feel I was asked to do anything which strayed beyond what I understood to be the boundaries of the civil service role...you certainly had the strength of the civil service to stand up for you if you were asked by politicians to do the wrong thing (Co7).

According to Robin Butler, maintaining impartiality is “part of the job; it’s in the genes; there are professional lines which you know you shouldn’t cross”:

The civil service press officer of course puts over the Minister’s side of the case, as indeed a permanent Secretary appearing before a Select Committee will do, so they are acting for the Government but they act objectively and truthfully and not party politically (Co2).

He acknowledges, however, that maintaining ‘the line’ has become harder:

Because the political battle is conducted through the media on a 24/7 basis, then ministers and politicians obviously give more attention to that battle and they put pressure on civil servants to support them in that, and it’s more difficult therefore for all civil servants but perhaps particularly media frontline civil servants not to cross the line.

The *Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction* (2004), which Butler chaired, identified such “dividing lines” as the key to winning public trust, concluding that:

If intelligence is to be used more widely by governments in public debate in future, those doing so must be careful to explain its uses and limitations. It will be essential that clearer and more effective dividing lines between assessment and advocacy are established when doing so.

Changes in departmental leadership of the Government Information Service after 1997 made it difficult for those newly-recruited into these roles from journalism, such as Martin Sixsmith and John Williams, to spot the pitfalls in what was expected of them, let alone resist them. As we saw in the Prologue, as part of the struggle between No.10 and the Foreign Office to determine policy in relation to Iraq after 9.11, Williams, the newly-appointed Director of Communications at the Foreign Office, was asked to produce an early draft of the dossier, something he didn't feel was especially significant at the time but which he now regrets (Herring & Robinson, 2014; *John Williams: Statement for the Iraq Inquiry*, 2010).

Similarly, the Public Administration Select Committee's report on an earlier controversy, the so-called Jo Moore affair at the Department of Transport (2002) saw the department's failure to recognise and maintain boundaries as part of the problem:

In the absence of a clearer lead from the top, and of any training, Ms Moore crossed over a number of boundaries, but they were not clearly drawn boundaries and the signposting was poor.

A departmental press officer (1999-2004), who watched the controversy unfolding from another department, said that press officers needed to know where the boundaries were and that there would be senior backup in case of improper demands:

It shouldn't be a problem; they should be able to resist special advisers' demands if they are inappropriate and also resist demands from other civil servants, and know that someone down the line will back them up for it (C05).

A Director of Communications (1991-2011) who had plenty of experience advising junior colleagues on propriety issues, used the notion of 'discomfort' as an indication of when a line was in danger of being crossed:

It is a deliberately grey area. Actually, in the vast majority of cases, you know when a line is crossed and you know what to do about it. It does involve you taking a deep breath and having a difficult conversation, but everyone knows when their level of discomfort has moved from 'I haven't done this before' to 'actually, I'm not doing this' (C11).

A departmental press officer (2010-2014) saw "a clear dividing line between what you should and shouldn't be doing as a government press officer" and yet felt it was also "quite a grey area because of the nature of the job being slightly political, presenting

the agenda of the government of the day”. It was up to the team leader to maintain the balance:

We had a very good head of news and deputy director of communications that were always very good at that balancing act of making sure that ministers were content and not running roughshod over propriety guidelines (C13).

Far from being a weapon in a power battle with ministers and special advisers, propriety codes and norms relating to ‘the line’ have a profound public purpose. One of the Cabinet Office communications officials specialising in communications propriety issues, now retired after more than two decades in the service, saw propriety as a means whereby government communications could “communicate for the government, not for the advancement of individual ministers” (C15).

For Nadine Smith, a Chief Press Secretary based in the Cabinet Office who worked for “seven or eight” ministers during the New Labour period, maintaining impartiality required the individual press officer, to ‘push back’ on day to day issues:

There were times when I had to say to a minister ‘that’s putting me in a very difficult situation now. That’s something that you are going to have to get your special advisers to do’.

It was a daily judgement as to how much of this is supporting the minister and how much do I have to push back on the minister because we are in a situation that’s untenable, that the public now had the right to know or they are going to make sure they know, one way or another, isn’t it better that we put this out there? So actually it was a daily kind of judgement call and I think most ministers relied on your own radar and your judgement on a day to day basis often about what was the right thing to do and they relied on our advice (C09).

This is consistent with propriety advice in use at the time, that “press officers have individually to establish a position with the media whereby it is understood that they stand apart from the party-political battle” (Government Information and Communications Service, 2000).

Although most civil servants did not see policing the line as a problem, many felt that it had become more difficult over time as ministers became more anxious about the potentially career-defining role played by media coverage. According to a

Departmental media manager with 12 years' experience, who left a year after the 2010 Election:

A lot of pressure was exerted on Directors of Communication to just do what ministers wanted, some of which was pushed back against more effectively and some of which not, but I do feel that over the course of the time that I was in government there was an erosion of those standards (C04).

A Director with experience of strategy and communications across five departments during the Blair/Brown years, and who left government in 2010, had the same feeling:

I remember Cabinet Office civil servants changing stuff that couldn't go out – press releases, speeches, saying 'as a government minister you can't say that'...I don't know where that is now. I just feel a little bit that that sense of the line has shifted a bit in the last couple of years (C06).

When asked to give examples, he referred to media coverage of stories which, to his practised eye, had clearly originated from within government and which showed an increasingly casual approach to the facts:

I'm surprised now, outside of government, with some of the things that are said now, that would never have been tolerated when I was a civil servant. I mean, I look at my old department (name withheld), and I see statistical briefings going out from comms staff into newspapers that are not true and I know they're not true and that would not have been tolerated when I was a civil servant. It would not, whatever the kind of spin and what was going on in pubs and all the handling of journalists under the table, you didn't brief incorrect statistics; you told the true story.

These concerns are echoed from an unexpected quarter – journalists. Nicholas Jones, the former BBC industrial correspondent who became a critic of government 'spin', has noticed an increasing number of stories about 'benefit scroungers', which he believes cannot have come from reporters:

There aren't the journalists in the courts - we're not calling the shots any more. To me it's the government machine that is feeding the stories. Perhaps I'm wrong but the more I look at it ...they've got the story about this latest benefit thing, they've put a picture out and now all the papers have got it, it must have been given to PA or something (J20).

A business journalist with 22 years' experience explains how the 'line' should and usually does, operate:

We just accept that sometimes there will be an official line that a civil servant will deliver quite competently and some of them will push it a bit more than the others but on the whole they are going to give you the line, and if it gets a bit too political they'll say 'you must talk to the minister's adviser as I can't give you the political line' (J18).

He believes that journalists feel that there is now "more spin", especially from the Treasury:

Under Gordon Brown the Treasury had the reputation for re-announcing things. For presenting things as news that weren't. One of those questions journalists always have to ask ministers is 'is this new money? Is this money that was already in the budget and you are just representing it putting a new ribbon round it and saying it's a new investment but it's not new money?' The Government has always done that to some extent but I think there's a general feeling that it has got worse and under both the last two governments.

David Brindle, a specialist correspondent with 36 years' experience on broadsheet newspapers, who is now public services editor at *The Guardian*, also senses that "the day to day boundary has become a bit more blurred":

I sometimes see comments from Whitehall press officers which I query and say, 'that must have come from a special adviser' because it seems so political, and on checking I've found that in fact it has come from a press officer. There was one recently. In respect of Treasury, something to do with Labour spending plans and there was a very on the record damning comment from a Treasury spokesman and I was sure this couldn't have come from a Whitehall press officer but it turned out that it did...a department like the Treasury ought to be impartial on, for example, the credibility of Labour spending plans and it would not be for them to comment. I do think it is an important line to hold and one that we seem to be losing (J21).

Some journalists have even taken to policing the propriety boundaries themselves, as this departmental press officer (2010-2014) recalls:

Journalists would phone up and say, 'look some of the stuff you are putting out as a department is pretty close to Tory party propaganda' and our Head of News would always look at it and take it on board and there'd be discussions as to whether this would be appropriate to go on civil service documents and you win some and you lose some; sometimes it would stay in and sometimes it would be amended (C13).

The ultimate constraint on government communications, whether on the part of ministers, civil servants or special advisers, is a concern with "fact and reality" as the

key ingredient of “credibility”, as Bernard Ingham told the Public Administration Select Committee in 2003:

The constraint upon the civil servant, certainly I would argue, and actually it is also a constraint on the political adviser if you are going to carry credibility, is that it must always be that his gloss must not lose touch with fact and reality because if he does he ceases to become a credible informer (*Witness evidence session, 2003*).

Issues relating to trust, truth and credibility are discussed further in Chapter 7: *Representing the Public*.

## **5.5 Resisting news media deadlines and demands**

“Don’t just respond to every bit of tittle tattle that appears in the newspapers”

In Chapter 4, I outlined the role of government communications planning, objective-setting and monitoring in presenting a coherent, robust and long-term public face across all forms of media, and attempts by the communications leadership to resist ministerial preoccupation with the next day’s headlines. The quote at the head of this chapter, from a serving Director of Communication - *“The media can create its own dynamic, but sometimes you have to be quite resistant to that”* – encapsulates the task that has faced government press officers at least since the days of Bernard Ingham. How should government press officers respond to the daily demands of the news media, while maintaining effectiveness, where effectiveness means long term credibility and the commitment to serving the information needs of the public?

This former Cabinet Office official, who had also worked both in the COI and in departments, sees effective government communication as a product of specialist knowledge about the communication process:

It’s about knowing what you are trying to do, knowing who you want to influence, and how you are going to do it. It was all based on insight, that detailed understanding of your audience and what might persuade them to change their behaviour (C15).

The corollary of this is that a preoccupation with short term communication advantage, achieved through a single medium and targeted towards the perceived needs of ministers rather than citizens, is *de facto*, in-effective communication. In their 2008 review of the implementation of the Phillis Report, the House of Lords



Communications Committee felt that too little progress had been made on one of the seven main principles underpinning government communications: “Use of all relevant channels of communication, not excessive emphasis on national press and broadcasters” (2008). They concluded that:

Although the term ‘Government communications’ embraces both media handling and direct communication with the public, the Review was concerned that the Government had concentrated its time and resources too much on the national media.

Similarly, the government’s own recent independent capability reviews of the communications function<sup>64</sup> reveal a continuing preoccupation with short term media handling at the expense of “audience driven” communications and evaluation. For example, a review of Cabinet Office communications conducted in March 2013, praised some of the integrated campaigns such as GREAT Britain, but concluded that:

At leadership level, there is an understandable focus on the daily and weekly news cycle. This means that the focus is on managing the grid and the Lobby. These vital tasks, reportedly performed well...would benefit from more direction setting...Many of the professional communicators interviewed were from a media handling background. As a group their natural focus is short-term reputation-management. This has resulted in a modus-operandi which is focused on the day to day (para.1.13, 1.14).

There is insufficient systematically-planned communication of the kind intended to have a lasting, cumulative, impact over time. As a result the government’s key messages do not land effectively. Associated with this is insufficient outcome-based communication objective setting, use of insight and evaluation. The limited number of communication metrics used, tend to measure outputs (such as media coverage, re-tweets and web hits) rather than more meaningful communication out-takes and outcomes (i.e. changes in how audience groups think, feel and act). Also largely absent is communication which has been developed in an audience-driven way (para.1.10) (Government Communications Network, 2013, pp. 4, 3).

The BBC’s former home affairs correspondent (until 2002), Jon Silverman, now an academic, questions the tendency in government over the past 20 years or so to take action in “reaction to media hysteria about certain issues”. This goes against the grain

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<sup>64</sup> The Capability Review programme was launched in 2005 by the Cabinet Secretary Gus O’Donnell as part of the wider Civil Service Reform Agenda. The reviews assess departmental capability and identify progress and next steps. <http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/about/improving/capability>.

for policy civil servants who “in it for the long haul, they don’t think it’s their job to be working on something that is, today’s headline or yesterday’s headline, and in 18 months’ time is going to be forgotten”:

The whole agenda has speeded up, creates more pressure, and my impression is that the civil service do not necessarily like (that)...I think today’s civil servants are probably more attuned to working on things at shorter notice on things that are less well-formed, than the previous generation (J22).

Bernard Ingham agrees:

We’ve got information overload and policy continuity under load and if I were back in No.10 I’d say ‘for Christ’s sake let’s stop it; let us decide what we’re going to do, let us work out how to do it properly and then announce it but don’t for heaven’s sake just respond to every bit of tittle tattle that appears in the newspapers and feel you have to do something’ (Co1).

A Director of Communication who left government in 2011 agrees that the intensity of the pressure which government press officers face in the struggle to ‘land the government’s key messages’ arises from a combination of media demand and ministerial response:

The level of scrutiny and the speed with which problems are created for you that distract ministers from their day job is huge, so actually the centrality of the print media even as the population move away from it, which it is doing, they are still in kind of Whitehall and Westminster terms, overwhelmingly more important than anything else. They are the people who make or break individual careers and can guide policy decisions just by sheer muscle (C11).

He adds that the increasing importance within the civil service of Directors of Communication led to closer integration into the upper echelons of the department<sup>65</sup>:

Communications directors started being on the boards of government departments<sup>66</sup>. And there came some downsides that you were just awash with corporate responsibilities that we could probably have done without but it did at the same time mean that at that level communications was seen as like finance or HR, you couldn’t do without it, and it wasn’t just people who barged into your office and

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<sup>65</sup> This is seen (by Strömbäck and others) as an example of mediatization.

<sup>66</sup> Since 2010, Directors of Communication have been invited to sit on Departmental boards.

said ‘the minister wants this done by Friday’, and I think that was quite a big turning point.

Permanent officials are not the only ones who, in principle, prefer to work for long-term and sustainable goals rather than short term political advantage even if it is difficult to achieve in practice. It is striking how the special advisers interviewed here acknowledged the pressure to react quickly to media demands, but felt strongly that it was their role to resist this pressure, and had the confidence to do this.

According to Katie Waring, media special adviser to the Business Secretary (2010-13):

Some advisers were very much ‘give the media what they want’. I was not like that. Frankly I was really happy to block all the time and only speak to them if I had something constructive to say. If they wanted a story I’d be like ‘you’re not drawing me on this’. Quite often just not give them anything (S24).

Nick Hillman, Katie’s opposite number in the same department, working to the Conservative Minister of State for Universities (2010-13), noticed that, overall, departmental press officers were more cautious with journalists than he or his minister, and that they had their own priorities:

The interests of the communications department are different to the interests of the individual minister. The minister wants to get as much press coverage as possible so long as it’s not negative. The interest of the department, certainly my sense, is to have a more controlled approach. You know, turn down. There were moments when my minister would be asked to do an interview, and the firm advice from the press office would be ‘don’t do this interview’ and we would think that was overly cautious (S23).

Bill Bush, Labour special adviser to the Secretary of State at the Department of Communications, Media and Sport (2001-05), argues that “the danger always is that the reactive, because it’s urgent and unexpected, takes over from the important”. But although this ‘space’ must be managed, a balance can and must be achieved, however difficult:

You cannot be Olympian and Utopian and not police this space. It is very very dangerous because at some point the chief whip or the Prime Minister or very senior advisers at No.10 will just say ‘I’m sorry we can take three or four of these hits under the waterline, but this is the sixth or seventh or eighth.’ They may all be explainable

and unfair, but it doesn't matter. Because each hit takes away a lump of credibility, and there's a limit to how much credibility you can chip off. So ministers are absolutely right to be concerned but they shouldn't let it take over their lives, and some do. Some do. (S25).

## 5.6 Resisting news management by No.10

“No. 10 are always those irritating people who interfere and don't understand”

Much of the criticism directed at New Labour's approach to government communications focused on the supposed centralization and control through Alastair Campbell at No 10. As discussed in Chapter 2, the centralization of power within a departmentalised system like Whitehall is an expendable 'leadership resource' which is related to the leadership style, political capital and personal qualities of the Prime Minister (Heffernan, 2006). As accounts of Gordon Brown's oppositional approach to media management while Chancellor reveal, this resource is open to challenge by powerful ministers operating within their departmental 'fiefdoms' who make use of their own departmental news management resources to influence public narratives (Bower, 2005; M. Foley, 2009; Heffernan, 2006; Karvonen, 2010; Langer, 2011; McBride, 2013; Norton, 2000; Rhodes, 2011). What kinds of resistance to the news management role of No 10 and the Cabinet Office can be observed, and how has this changed over time?

Bernard Ingham complained constantly about ministers' "malicious leaking"<sup>67</sup> and their inability to work with No 10 on coordinating messaging on government policy, especially on the economy, eventually taking his complaint straight to Margaret Thatcher, as we saw above. As Private Secretary to five Prime Ministers and Cabinet Secretary to three, Robin Butler agrees that ministerial resistance to and envy of the media management resources at the disposal of No 10 is almost inevitable:

There were certainly occasions when ministers, secretaries of state, felt things were being driven too much from No 10 and that their story was being told from No. 10 when they would have preferred to tell it themselves (CO2).

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<sup>67</sup> See Bernard Ingham note to the Prime Minister's Private Secretary 16/12/1981 – *Presentation: where we are failing*. Ingham Archive/Margaret Thatcher Foundation.

Special advisers working personally to departmental ministers could and did present alternative narratives through selective briefing:

They may not just act on behalf of the government or even the party but on behalf of their minister individually and that can lead to their briefing against other ministers. Witness Damian McBride. And this may help their ministers but damage the government because it causes the government to be divided against itself. And it gives an opportunity to shrewd media correspondents to play off special advisers against each other (C02).

A weakened Prime Minister becomes more susceptible to ministerial intrigue via the media. As political secretary to John Major between 1994 and 1997, Howell James remembers that:

Because of the fragile political ecology of the time, ministers and others had their own different agendas and they used their special advisers very actively to brief the media...every Friday you could guarantee that John Redwood would stand up and say something unhelpful about Europe (C08).

Vince Cable's special adviser, Katie Waring (2010-2013) was initially surprised at "the subtleties of playing the Whitehall game. I probably wasn't as sensitive to which department you were being briefed against or which department was being briefed and built up by the No. 10 general machine". Eventually, she did a bit of negative briefing herself:

I've briefed a couple of times against other departments on regulation. I got a really good page two big story spread in the FT once. I was just sick of all the other departments briefing against BIS...and I thought, 'right, I've had enough of this. I've had enough of the Tories making out the Lib Dems are stopping this and that', so I just pointed the finger at other departments that BIS was frustrated with. It put the department in a bit of a firing line (S24).

It is not just ministers and their aides who create a narrative that might not suit that of the government as a whole. In Katie Waring's view, the press office at BIS consistently worked to position the department against the cuts and in favour of business – a long-term stance held by the department, whichever minister was at the

helm<sup>68</sup>. One Director of Communication argues that the default position for officials in Whitehall departments is one of suspicion of the Centre:

There will always be suspicion of No. 10, quite rightly because of the departmental mind-set for want of a better expression. No. 10 are always those irritating people who interfere and don't understand (C11).

However irritating, when No.10 chooses to get involved, in practice there is little that press officers can do to resist unless they have the support of their Secretary of State. A departmental press officer (1999-2004) says that although No. 10 had no formal power to instruct departmental press officers, "If the minister wanted it done then probably you had to go with it". Conversely, a minister could support a press officer in resisting inappropriate instructions:

The government was really desperate to make a big thing of its winter fuel payments to pensioners every winter and we had to get a story in the paper of a happy pensioner who was going to get this £200. It came around the second or third time while I was in charge of that policy area from a press relations point of view and we were told by No. 10 that we had to find a couple or an individual that was going to benefit and get a jolly big cheque and have somebody handing it over (C05).

Her minister thought the idea was "ridiculous", and offered to call Alastair Campbell to "tell him to back off", but in the end, against their better judgement, they organised the "silly photo call". She recalls another request from No. 10 that was seen to be "news generation for the sake of news generation":

We got a call from Lance Price<sup>69</sup> at No. 10 saying 'right it's the UEFA Cup – how are we going to compete with it in terms of generating news? We've had this idea that you should maybe say that people who are claiming Job Seekers Allowance who knock over to Bulgaria or whatever it was if we find that they've not signed on because they've gone to the footie we'll get them for benefit fraud'.

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<sup>68</sup> This is consistent with the press release announcing Fiona Cookson's appointment as Director of External Affairs at the BFI (10/9/2014), which said that she "had helped to position the Department as an advocate for business and enhanced its reputation with leading business organisations and companies large and small".

<sup>69</sup> Lance Price, Alastair Campbell's deputy from 1998-2000, has written an account of his period at No. 10 (Price, 2005)

This blatant attempt at what she referred to as “cooking up the story” about “clamping down on benefit cheats” that would never be actually implemented was thought by civil servants to be “appalling and wrong,” yet they still felt obliged to comply.

Where resistance on the part of civil servants did occur, it was, again, of the more passive variety and associated with what they saw as a definite crossing of the line into party politics. Nadine Smith, then Chief Press Secretary at the Cabinet Office, describes a “really tricky” situation when she was asked to set up meetings with departmental civil servants in connection with Tony Blair’s policy review leading up to the 2005 election. Because this could have been construed as involving civil servants in electioneering, “a lot of civil servants disengaged a bit with me and the press office because they felt that we were getting too close to politics” (C09).

A strategic communications adviser working closely with ministers at the Department of Health and Home Office (2008-10) found that that intervention from No. 10 was minimal when departments were thought to be well run:

If you’re in a department where there’s quite a lot of confidence in the ministers and the team, and the direction, and it’s quite steady state, then No. 10, in my experience, they’re quite relaxed in letting you get on with it (C12).

If there were problems, No. 10 would step in, as David Cameron did in 2010 when Andrew Lansley encountered difficulties in Parliament and the media with the NHS reforms<sup>70</sup>. Conversely, if No. 10 was felt to be strategically weak, departmental teams could withdraw cooperation, as this Head of News recalls:

Back in 2000, No. 10 were incredibly powerful. They set really clear agendas about what their expectations were... Under the Tories (sic) it’s a car crash...it’s a constant sense of panic and difficulty so in the end you just stop listening to them. It was ridiculous, really naïve, really stupid, really short-termist, and really just irritating actually... Even SPADs and ministers would kind of be like ‘look, we’ll let them win that one but we’re going to go to war on the next three’. You’d end up not sharing information with them, or you’d wait and give it to them at the last minute (C14).

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<sup>70</sup> See <http://www.totalpolitics.com/print/158227/lansley-pushed-aside-on-the-nhs-reforms.shtml>.

## 5.7 Conclusion

Resistance by government press officers and their leaders to both mediatization and politicization appears in various forms, from passive resistance and obstruction, to day to day 'push back' and administrative interventions like reviews and enquiries. Overall, however, resistance appears to be lessening, especially when comparing reactions to the 1997 and 2010 elections, and the actions of the various heads of profession. Bernard Ingham's confidence in criticizing ministers, in which he pits the Government Information Service against ministerial rivalry and political intrigue, are not replicated by other leaders; indeed, the last Permanent Secretary, Matt Tee, appeared to acquiesce in his own loss of position. He recently told an interviewer that, given that 35-40% of professional communicators in government left or changed job after the 2010 election, "It was quite difficult for me to justify doing this permanent secretary job when the budget I was overseeing for advertising was 15% of what it had been, and the number of staff that came under me professionally was also significantly lower" ("Interview with Matt Tee - press regulator," 2016).

Where resistance does take place, it is more likely to be tactical than strategic, with the onus on the individual press officer to identify issues and stand up to ministers and their aides, if necessary invoking support from senior colleagues. However, as the guidance states, it is not a case of saying 'no' to ministers: discussion takes the form of 'negotiation', 'compromise', 'finding a deal' or at most 'polite refusal'. A former senior official at the Cabinet Office explains how a press officer is expected to communicate with ministers:

You can't turn round and say 'don't' but you can say 'ok minister, we can do that, but that might not help and actually the Daily Mail's been on to that and they will run this story'. 'Ah'. 'Ok, what are you trying to do minister? Can I suggest an alternative way of doing it?' There are ways of saying 'no' that doesn't get you into trouble. The current guidance on Government Communications talks about compromise to reach an end (C15).

The notion of the dividing line between party political and impartial communication, or between the promotion of government policy and ministerial 'image making,' appears frequently in parliamentary and government documents and in the recollections of civil servants. The propriety guidance is vague and yet consistent,



even repetitive, over the years; requiring government communicators to be objective and explanatory not biased or polemical (Government Communications Service, 2014b, 2015a; Government Information and Communications Service, 2000), as if to state it is to bring it into being. Interviewees describe the ‘the line’ as being obvious to those in the know, and yet refer to it as a ‘deliberately grey area’, which seems logically inconsistent: how can a line be a deliberately grey area? This illustrates the ambiguity and contingency of the concept of ‘crossing the line’ which is described in these interviews a sense of ‘discomfort’ or ‘unease’ when ‘tricky’ or ‘crunchy’ media issues arise, requiring them to have ‘difficult conversations’, and possibly refer higher up the command chain. Decision-making takes place quickly and is based on individual sensibility and implicit internal collective wisdom around what is acceptable or appropriate.

This pragmatic application of judgement within fluid and fast-moving situations can be characterised as a particular characteristic of the cross-field, and therefore as a cross-field effect. In other words, under the pressure of increasingly intense political and media scrutiny in response to, first, 24 hour news and, more recently, constant news through digital media, judgements about what is proper or appropriate are taken in seconds, and on instinct. Career survival may depend on it, but without clearly expressed and externally validated criteria, established forms of challenge and redress, or sanctions for misconduct, the process of applying propriety within this setting seems fragile. What is to stop the line from moving imperceptibly over time to the extent that what was once unacceptable, becomes commonplace, as some of the interviewees seemed to be suggesting?

Enforcing obedience to the line is ultimately laid at the door of the departmental Permanent Secretary, and in more extreme cases, the Cabinet Secretary, on behalf of the Prime Minister, who investigates breaches of the Ministerial Code of Conduct. In 1997, outgoing Directors of Communication spoke of feeling abandoned by the senior civil service, although Robin Butler was mentioned as one civil service leader to publicly express disquiet at the loss of so many politically sensitive posts. By commissioning the Mountfield Review the year before his retirement in 1998, Butler facilitated a pause in a situation that seemed to be running out of control, and prompted a dialogue between the ambitions of ministers and the values of the Government Communications Service that could still be observed through interviews with former press officers employed during the Coalition period (2010-2015).

In his own interview for this study, Butler acknowledged that the growing importance of media in politics exposed government press officers to more pressure to ‘cross the line’. Later, the so-called Butler Review of 2004 examined the difficulties facing officials who resisted the dominant political narrative, in this case over Iraq’s WMDs, and recommended that, in future, the Chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee should be “someone with experience of dealing with Ministers in a very senior role, and who is demonstrably beyond influence, and thus probably in his last post”; in other words, someone who was not afraid to speak truth to power (Butler, 2004). This acknowledges the extreme sensitivity of government communications, and the career-threatening risk of challenging a ministerial narrative. And yet, on day to day reputational matters which could be of existential significance to ministers, it is the more junior members of the communications team – press officers – who are expected to challenge them. In this unequal relationship they face pressure from “democratic politicians (who) are engaged in a ruthless zero-sum competition for power and, while in office, face constant incentives to cut legal and ethical corners in order to main their hold on power”. This means that “politicians cannot be relied on to refrain from corrupt behaviour” (Mulgan, 2008, p. 350). Under these conditions, how realistic is it to expect press officers to fulfil the ethical and political obligations expected of them?

## Chapter 6: Responsiveness

“The bureaucracy is supposed to be both neutral and responsive – a delicate task under the best of circumstances and an almost impossible one when those who oversee administration have different views about what policy should be.” (Aberbach, 2000)

### 6.1 Introduction

*Responsiveness* as a trait, or a value, is directly linked to democratic ideals in that elected politicians are required to be responsive to the preferences of the people, a requirement on which the legitimacy of Parliament and the party in government rests (Dahl, 1971; E. Page, 2012). Unlike the concepts explored in the previous two chapters, *resilience* and *resistance*, *responsiveness* is an established term that is commonly used by public administration and politics scholars to describe relations between actors and agencies within democratic political systems, whether between ministers and bureaucrats, or politicians and the public. Our concern here is specifically with changes over time in the way that the government communications service and those working within it, respond to ministers’ media needs, and the demands of the media. As we observed in the introduction to the previous chapter, resistance and responsiveness are not necessarily mutually exclusive concepts: an act of resistance against the demands of a particular minister for example, may be an act of responsiveness in favour of the Prime Minister or the government as a whole, as we have seen with the actions of Bernard Ingham in criticising ministers who threatened Mrs Thatcher’s hegemony.

In their studies of Swedish public service communicators, Pallas and Fredriksson identified responsiveness to the media concerns of ministers as an indicator of ‘politicization through indirect mediatization’ (Pallas, Fredriksson, & Schillemans, 2014). As a means of pleasing politicians, and trying to reduce their interference in media relations, officials became more proactive in raising the media profile of their organisation, a practice observed in relation to Bernard Ingham in the previous chapter. Mediatization is therefore doubly determined: firstly, since it acts directly on government officials through increased media scrutiny, and secondly through the responsiveness of officials to ministers’ preoccupations with media. Whitehall officials are already primed to respond and display loyalty to ministers through the

Haldane doctrine<sup>71</sup> which holds that civil servants are accountable only to ministers, who are, themselves, accountable to Parliament.

Within the corridors of power, however, officials are expected to balance loyalty with the need to uphold rule-based administration (Mulgan, 2008), a “delicate task” and even an “impossible one” (Aberbach, 2000). Being tied down to process and procedure, colloquially known as ‘red tape’, on the face of it seems to contradict the idea of ‘responsiveness’, especially in relation to the voracious demands of 24-hour media. This argument is challenged by Aberbach and Rockman, who interviewed 476 senior US federal civil servants and sub-cabinet level political appointees between 1970 and 1992 (Aberbach, 2000). They argue that within liberal democracies, good government requires a balance of politics and policy, responsiveness and restraint, because “an exclusive premium on the value of responsiveness may clash with other ways in which we want the bureaucracy to perform – with equity and respect for precedent” (p88). They describe this as the “yin and yang” of government, where “politicians tend to provide the dynamics and bureaucrats the ballast. Leadership, drive and vision are essential to government, but continuity, connections to the past, and an appreciation of policy practicality and political feasibility are equally important”, (p91).

Unlike the UK’s system of unitary government, the US system of divided powers enables public servants to put space between themselves and the political governing class which allows them to establish a balance between the two sources of power, if necessary by enlisting the support of the legislature in battles with Presidential officials, and vice versa. Lee contends that the outcome is a constrained system of government communication which serves the public by applying standards: information *not* advocacy, truthfulness and accuracy, and, above all, a fair, reasonable and explicit definition of what government should be (Lee, 2011).

This statement from the 1968 Fulton Committee which conducted the most recent parliamentary review into the fundamental structure, recruitment and management of the Civil Service, described Whitehall as providing:

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<sup>71</sup> The doctrine of ministerial accountability established in 1918 by the Machinery of Government Committee, known as the Haldane report, is still in operation although the Public Administration Select Committee called for it to be reviewed in the light of the greater level of scrutiny from 24/7 media, Parliament, FOI and public demands for more openness and transparency (Machinery of Government Committee, 1918; Public Administration Select Committee, 2013c).

A permanent civil service occupying a position duly subordinate to that of the ministers who are directly responsible to the Crown and to parliament, yet possessing sufficient independence, character, ability and experience to be able to advise, assist, and to some extent, influence, those who are from time to time set over them. (*Fulton Report on the Civil Service*, 1968, pp. Appendix B, 108).

The extent to which central bureaucracies respond to or resist the will of “those who are from time to time set over them,” is central to the debate about political spin in government communications. Mulgan defines responsiveness as: “the readiness of public servants to do what government ministers want” (Mulgan, 2008, p. 346), and considers it to be a core democratic value since it is ultimately a form of responsiveness to the electorate. But what happens when government ministers want public servants to not only explain but actively *promote* and *justify* government policy? Like Butler, whose interview was cited earlier (p.140), Grube argues that the demands of modern media management put government press officers under greater pressure to engage in “partisan advocacy.” He questions whether communications officials can or should be held to the same “public standards of constrained partisanship” as other public servants (Grube, 2014, p. 350).

This chapter uses the experiences and perceptions of government press officers, augmented with those of journalists and special advisers, to examine their everyday struggle to balance responsiveness with their own professional ethics, norms and values. We have seen how, with the transformation of the media landscape since the 1980s, the UK government communications service faced increasing demands by ministers for more control over media messaging. Government press officers are doubly exposed to ministerial scrutiny, firstly because of the inherent political sensitivity of media relations, and secondly due to their somewhat marginalised position within the civil service as a separate profession working in close temporal and spatial proximity to the ministerial team. This exposure is likely to incentivise professional traits associated with ‘political responsiveness’ (Sausman & Locke, 2004), such as deference, personal loyalty, empathy, and a commitment to corporate goals, such as government narratives.

As we saw in Chapter 2, it has been argued that the drive by politicians in recent decades to increase control over central state bureaucracies has been targeted most powerfully at communications functions (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2010). A comparative study of democratic responsiveness in Denmark, the UK and the US found that politicians operating within the ‘executive dominance’ model (UK) were more likely

than those in consensus (Denmark) or divided governance systems (US) to “prioritize pivotal voters over the general public”, suggesting that they may be less democratically responsive (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008, p. 330). In this sense, a greater responsiveness to ministers’ media agendas may actually *conflict with* rather than *support*, responsiveness to the wider public, a question this chapter touches on and the next will consider in more detail. As we saw in Chapter 4, government press officers bore the brunt of anti-bureaucratic sentiment on the part of incoming ministers after both the 1997 and 2010 elections.

This chapter will examine responsiveness in relation to both politicization and mediatization, asking how resistance and responsiveness on the part of government communicators has changed since 1997, and examining the links between political responsiveness and media responsiveness. Has the UK government communications service become more concerned with advocacy and persuasion over time? Have government press officers become more responsive to political pressure to deliver partial messages? What impact has the media role of special advisers had on the role of government press officers? These questions will be examined under the following three themes:

1. Advocacy as an outcome of responsiveness
2. The responsive press officer
3. Special advisers as “a direct manifestation of responsiveness” (Greer, 2008)

## **6.2 Advocacy as an outcome of responsiveness**

Successive propriety guidance on UK government communications emphasizes the need to uphold impartiality while explaining the government’s programme and priorities, and accepts that, in explaining policy, some promotional advantage will inevitably accrue to the government of the day. As we saw in Chapter 5, ever since the service was conceived in 1945, ministers understood that “the boundaries between information, explanation and advocacy were tenuous” (National Archives: Cabinet Papers CAB 78/37, 1945). This doesn’t mean that the boundary doesn’t exist, and that it can’t be seen to change over time, as this chapter will show. The latest version of the GCS code, however, asks government press officers to go beyond simple explanation or advocacy, to *promote* and *justify* government policy, however controversial:

It is the duty of press officers to present the policies of their department to the public through the media...the press officer must always reflect the ministerial line clearly...the Government has the right to expect the department to further its policies and objectives, regardless of how politically controversial they might be.

Press officers should: Present, describe and justify the thinking behind the policies of the minister; be ready to promote the policies of the department and the government as a whole; make as positive a case as the facts warrant (Government Communications Service, 2014b).

Grube is critical of this most recent guidance, claiming that: “It would be hard to think of a clearer definition of spin in modern politics,” since the need to justify the thinking of the minister is self-evidently not an impartial activity. The responsibility to make as positive a case as the facts warrant is, he argues, the institutionalisation of the responsibility to ‘spin’ (Grube, 2015, p. 314). In practice, there is no clear dividing line between *explanation* and *promotion* but these terms describe different forms of representational speech along a spectrum: to explain is to provide enough detail and clarity so that something may be understood by someone else; to advocate is to provide active support for a cause or position; to justify is to provide a credible reason why something is being done; and to promote is to publicise something so that someone else will buy (or buy in to) it, as illustrated below:

**Explain - > Advocate - > Justify - > Promote**

The pressure on civil servants to actively promote ministerial priorities is not new, especially when governments perceive themselves to be in crisis<sup>72</sup>. For example, government archives from the 1980s show how, at a low point in its popularity in December 1981, the Thatcher government increased the pressure on government press officers to push its controversial economic policy more forcefully. This was a point of maximum crisis, as the government faced high inflation, unemployment above three million, a backbench rebellion that threatened to split the party over economic policy, and the lowest poll ratings for any government since the war. A memo from the Chancellor, Geoffrey Howe, complained that government press material was not sufficiently clear or persuasive, and questioned “whether Whitehall’s

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<sup>72</sup> In a celebrated case, the Cabinet Secretary Sir Robert Armstrong even appeared in the Supreme Court, Sydney, Australia, in June 1988 to defend the Thatcher government’s ban on the publication of *Spycatcher*, a revealing memoir by the former M16 officer, Peter Wright.

information forces are ideally deployed for the proper presentation of the overall economic message” (Howe, 1981).

As we saw in the previous chapter, Bernard Ingham resisted this critique and defended the GIS wherever he could. In practice, he encouraged his staff to become more proactive, more coordinated and thereby more responsive to ministers, pushing departmental Heads of Information to work harder to put over the government’s policy and legislative programme, and using the weekly meetings with them as a means of co-ordinating the overall government narrative. In his interview for this study, he described his first responsibility as being “not to get her into trouble, to keep her out of trouble.” This meant protecting the Prime Minister not only from the media, but from political enemies within her own party. The fact that he managed this task for 11 years to her satisfaction, while leaving the lobby on good terms in 1990, is a remarkable achievement after an estimated 5,000 lobby briefings, but the question remains as to whether he crossed the line into personal advocacy, and paved the way for an entirely partisan Director of Government communications in the shape of Alastair Campbell (Seymour-Ure, 2003; Watts, 1997). This question has been covered widely elsewhere, and is not the main focus of this chapter, but Scammell concludes, from her analysis of government news management during the Thatcher years, that, given the complexities of the role, Ingham maintained his impartiality almost until the end (Scammell, 1991). The fact that the three-headed role formerly held by Ingham and Campbell as Chief Press Secretary, namely, Prime Minister’s official spokesman, Head of the Press Office at No.10, *and* Director of Government Communications, have been split into three separate posts since the 2004 Phillis Review, is an acknowledgement of the impossibility of the task given modern media pressures.

The obligation on the part of government press officers to actively promote, or advocate on behalf of, ministerial priorities was almost universally and unquestioningly accepted by my civil service interviewees. Robin Butler regarded them as having:

The same professional relation to the Minister as a barrister is to the client. The Civil Service press officer of course puts over the Minister’s side of the case, as indeed a Permanent Secretary appearing before a Select Committee will do, so they are acting for the Government, but they act objectively and truthfully. (C02).



Bernard Ingham also saw advocacy, up to a point, as inevitable when briefing journalists but felt that the precise form of words was important:

Well, you're advocating it if you're explaining it, you could argue. What you don't do is indulge in, some would say, the hyperbole in the propagandist way of the politician. Let me give you an example. After 1984/85 you could argue that Margaret Thatcher had been the best thing since sliced bread for strikes, I mean they fell, they tumbled. I couldn't say that (...). All that I could say is 'well, you'd better look at the figures' (C01).

He saw limits to advocacy, though. As a government spokesperson, he said, "you serve the government of the day. You don't join in party political polemic, and you distance yourself from the party of the government of the day" and "you don't knowingly lie".

The arrival of the 1997 Labour government, and the wholesale departure of nearly all Heads of Information, provided a further ratcheting up of the degree of responsiveness expected of the GIS, reflected in its almost immediate re-labelling as the Government Information and Communication Service (GICS). The Mountfield Review of 1997 tried to take some heat out of the internal disruption caused by the departure of the so many Heads of Information by providing time for both civil servants and ministers to reflect on the core values of the service. The review's report reiterated the importance of impartiality but stated that this was entirely compatible with a service that "vigorously" advocated on behalf of ministers:

These rules do not constrain information officers from providing the kind of service Ministers can properly expect. Vigorous exposition of Ministers policies and of the reasons Ministers themselves use as justification for those policies are properly functions of effective GIS staff (Mountfield, 1997).

According to a Strategy Director (1999-2010) who worked with more than eight ministers under Blair and Brown:

It is the one thing that divides being a civil servant from being a politician. Ultimately your duty and your position is that you must stick to the facts. You can't make facts up. Fine, if you've got it wrong, go back and correct it and say 'sorry I've got it wrong' (C06).

It is unclear where this leaves special advisers, but the implication here is that their political masters do not have the same obligation as civil servants to "stick to the

facts”. This raises questions in relation to special advisers’ growing role as official or semi-official sources, which will be dealt with later in this chapter. As we saw in the previous chapter, a Director with experience of strategy and communications across five departments during the Blair/Brown years felt that even this basic founding principle was now coming under attack (C06).

This civil servant who was brought into a government department in 2008 as a strategic communications adviser, after a long career in journalism, identified almost seamlessly with her Secretary of State, whether briefing externally or internally. Externally, she explains:

You are there to convey the minister’s view and the ministers’ priorities, so you are giving the briefing (...) from a ministerial perspective. (C12).

While internally:

It was to help strengthen and improve the communications in the department in such a way that it would support his (the minister’s) priorities. You are there as an adviser partly to explain to officials and others the ministerial need and how they see things.

Nadine Smith, who worked as press secretary to the Minister for Public Health, also found herself advocating on behalf of her minister, sometimes against her own civil service colleagues:

It was a very exciting time because Yvette Cooper was on the up as a junior minister. She was bright and hungry to get on. I really liked her, as did her whole press team, because she was the most plain-speaking, frank person I could ever have asked to work with. I was always grateful that I worked with somebody, especially a woman, who was very no nonsense with the civil service... She would invite me to sit next to her as her press secretary when she was dealing with issues like Sure Start Centres opening and asking ‘why are we not going to get the money for this, and why are we not tackling teenage pregnancy and where’s that sexual health strategy?’ (C09).

There were certain points, she acknowledges, when, as press secretary, she became little more than “a bag carrier”, the person who was “literally just trying to make sure that they looked and sounded okay (...) turning up to the right place at the right time.” Unlike the Strategic Communications Adviser cited above, however, her identification extended beyond her minister at key moments when her professional commitment to public service trumped service to an individual minister:

When your minister was dropping down the pecking order and you were a civil servant dealing with a crisis on national security or a public enquiry where now your loyalty has changed. You can suddenly switch to you know, public interest, public safety number one, ‘sorry minister, you’re now out of this, this is a civil service matter’. It’s quite interesting how the civil service can suddenly take control of a situation. (C09).

The display of personal loyalty that was demanded by incoming ministers after the 2010 election meant paying close attention to the finest detail of language, as this press officer (2010-2013) recalls:

We were given, via our head of news who had personal one-on-one meetings with ministers and special advisers right at the start, what their general approach was that they wanted to media handling, right down to minutiae about how they liked the use of plain English: acronyms being banned, certain words weren’t allowed anymore, so ‘stakeholder’ was a banned word in our comms environment post-Labour government. Stakeholder engagement was never something we did any more. We spoke to partners. (C13).

He found that the more ambitious, ‘media savvy’ junior ministers had high expectations of government press officers, requiring them to come up with “three or four things every week, news releases that they would feature in, even if there wasn’t the policy to back it up”. More seriously, and linking back to the core requirement of the civil servant to “stick to the facts” and “not knowingly lie”, he was asked to release information to friendly media outlets which, while not untrue, was selective, and intended to challenge the austerity claims of other public sector bodies by criticizing their management. As he explained: “You wanted to limit the damage from the (austerity) narrative and at the same time promote your own”.

He was in no doubt that, whatever indicators were used to assess his own performance, he had to keep ministers happy. A bad headline in the *Guardian* didn’t matter, as government voters were unlikely to read it, but a bad headline in the *Daily Telegraph*, which might put at risk the support of potential Conservative voters, was serious. More time would therefore be spent on serving the needs of *Telegraph* journalists. This would appear to be explicitly against the current GCS code, which states that “to work effectively, media officers must establish their impartiality and neutrality with the news media, and ensure that they deal with all news media even-handedly”(Government Communications Service, 2014b). To have challenged ministers’ concern to influence *the Daily Telegraph* would have been an act of

resistance which, in failing to make ministers happy, would have been considered a form of professional failure.

As we have seen, the Fulton Report required that civil servants maintain “sufficient independence” to “advise, assist, and to some extent, influence, those who are from time to time set over them” (*Fulton Report on the Civil Service*, 1968). An experienced Director of Communication (1991-2011), who had previously been a Head of News, argues that a measure of distance is essential for the conduct of good government, but believes that it is easier now for ministers to surround themselves with “the pure in thought”. He considers it reasonable for incoming ministers to expect immediate loyalty on the part of civil servants to the government’s “mind-set”, whatever their own beliefs, but this does not mean becoming a “believer” or “fellow-traveller”. The seasoned civil servant knows how to engage “the professional scepticism part of their brain alongside the mind-set” (C11).

In the next section, I examine how ministers’ valorisation of the national news media, combined with the acceleration of time-scales in government media relations, has led to a premium being placed on officials who can manage media/political crises, leading to a change in the type of official most likely to succeed. And to return to the case of the Iraq dossier of September 2002, were some civil servants too responsive in relation to its production and promotion?

### **6.3 The responsive government press officer**

“Today, the road to the top is populated by those who can sense a political crisis or problem and who can help in managing it” (Peters & Savoie, 2012).

In chapters 1 and 2 we showed how politicians feel driven to respond quickly to mediatized controversies which could arise from anywhere, at any time, and to anticipate them and be prepared to go on the attack themselves, deploying blame before it is directed against them. With the expansion of media outlets since the 1980s, and the 24/7 exposure governments now face, media crisis handling has become increasingly important, even institutionalized, within the public sector and other high profile organisations. As the secret deliberations of the Liaison Committee on Government Presentation during the 1980s show, politicians were quick to spot the dangers and exploit the opportunities arising from the expansion of media; a process which intensified after 1997, and which applied to both governing parties. In

this section I ask to what extent the largely hidden organizational changes in government communications which arose from these media and political pressures privileged those who thrive in a crisis, and who could adapt to the speeding up of the policy and news cycle.

Crisis narratives have long provided a rallying cry for change – right wing Conservatives during the 1970s appealed to a sense of crisis to justify their radical policies calling for the transformation of what they saw as the over-extended state (Richards, 2014; Richards, Smith, & Hay, 2014). The Blair government used claims about the 45-minute threat of Saddam Hussain’s WMDs to win support for the invasion of Iraq (Herring & Robinson, 2014). It has been argued that in contemporary politics, we see a cheapening or devaluation of the language of crisis (Hay, 2014); crisis, or imminent crisis, is now an accepted part of political life. To manage the risks, whether real or perceived, politicians want the freedom to select people around them that they can trust to foresee, and manage, a political crisis or problem (Peters & Savoie, 2012). The incentive is not to sustain an informed public, or even inform the media, but to protect the personal and political reputation of the minister.

For those interviewed for this study, taken together with impressions from numerous contemporary accounts and memoirs, *politicians exist in a perpetual state of potential extinction*, or, as Lee has put it in the American context, as a political system which is “always teetering” (Lee, 2011, p. 231). Somewhere over the horizon, a largely unknowable public can, at any point, withdraw its consent, either at the ballot box or on the street. Similarly, traditional mainstream media outlets, like the national broadcast and print media, live in fear that their readers or advertisers will disappear. This is the context within which the mediatization scholars, Kunelius and Reunanen, developed their concept of ‘attention’ as a shared currency within both the political and media fields, and how Lingard and Rawolle conceived the notion of the ‘cross-field’, an area subject to particular rules, customs and practices where media and politics interact (Kunelius & Reunanen, 2012; Rawolle, 2005). This area, the interface between government and media, is where beat reporters and press officers engage in a power struggle, as discussed by Cook in relation to US federal government communications, to define problems and solutions, and determine what is or isn’t a crisis (Cook, 1998). Politicians draw readily on a narrative of crisis both to express their own subliminal fears, and to wrong-foot opponents, while journalists reach for crisis narratives to attract the flickering attention of their readers. As the testimony from both government press officers and special advisers will show, this cross-field is

turbulent, unstable, often uncomfortable – but exciting.

It is clear from the interviews that even the most junior of press officers from the New Labour years onwards, spent a lot of time interacting directly or indirectly with ministers and their teams. A press officer (2010-13) says that: “For the ministerial team media was extremely high on their agenda. Their office or their special advisers were in touch multiple times every day”. A former Director of Communication who joined as a press officer at the Home Office in July 2001 had an extraordinary induction:

The big thing that happened when I was still very new was 9/11 in September 2001. In the Home Office, that was immense (...) It just changed everything and obviously the volume of the work, and the pitch of what we were doing, we were just in the eye of a storm. It was a fascinating time. (C16).

It wasn't just the events unfolding that was exciting; it was the challenge of presenting to the public the proposed controversial legislation that followed:

David Blunkett brought in lots of what some people would see as anti-liberal measures to protect our national security so there were huge political issues around anti-terrorist legislation. It just meant that the Home Office ratcheted up to a whole new level of importance so it was a very fascinating time (C16).

‘Fascinating’ was a word that recurred. As a junior press officer arriving in London from a reporting job in the West country to work on the BSE Inquiry in 1998, Nadine Smith described the new role as “fascinating, because it was like being part of a continual political thriller watching the story unfold and watching the public’s reaction to all the information we were putting out there”. For her it was a human story, and one of failure on the part of the government to communicate the science; a failure that ended with the preventable loss of young lives (C09).

Jonathan Haslam vividly remembers the thrill of being a press officer at the centre of events during the Major years:

It’s very exciting and I think I must have a personality that thrives on deadlines; having to make judgments quickly, working hard getting to grips with briefs very quickly, understanding the ways of the media, understanding the message that your client, in this case, the government, wants to get across (C07).

Even as a self-confessed “bit player” he felt an “enormous satisfaction from being at the centre of events”, which was denied to most civil servants:

Within press offices, or media offices as they would properly be called these days, within these sort of offices you have, for your grade in the civil service an absolutely privileged position. When I worked at the Department of Industry, my first outing, as a secondee, I worked with the Secretary of State. Now you’re not going to find another civil servant who has that kind of access.

This suits those who can absorb lots of complex information quickly, remain calm under pressure, and thrive on stimulation. This press officer (2010-2013) enjoyed: “the constantly changing nature of it. No two days were the same so you never got bored, and I get bored quite easily, so a 24-hour rolling news agenda suits me quite well” (C13). A Head of News (2001-14) recalls the media frenzy surrounding her minister when her house was surrounded for days by a media scrum, leading eventually to her resignation and departure from politics. This was one of “the really fun times when the adrenalin’s pumping and anything you say can make or break a career and the pressure is immense given that you are in your 20s but actually it’s amazing” (C14). The ‘fun’ comes from the feeling of being at the centre of events, when the civil service ‘takes over’, and the government press officer plays a career-defining role at a moment of national high visibility.

A former Head of News and Director of Communication (1991-2011) recalls the special intensity of the relationship with ministers. Senior members of the media team “see ministers every single day, all day. They spend weekends with them. They are the last person they speak to; they are the first person they speak to in the morning.” (C11). It was not just the constant contact but ministers’ interest in and familiarity with, the detail of media relations that facilitated this closeness. As this Strategy Director (1998-2010) explains: “I don’t know any minister, certainly not any minister that wanted to be around for any length of time that would not want to be all over the way that their messages would be handled in the press” (Co6).

Only one respondent, who had served two Conservative and three Labour administrations, referred to right-wing press partisanship, identifying it as a factor that compounded the insecurity of Labour ministers:

There is a very clear difference I think between working for a Labour government and working for a Conservative government. Which is the attitude of the bulk of the print media, and it explains a huge amount... Labour governments, even if they have

reached an uneasy truce with a newspaper, with the exception of, I don't know, the Guardian, FT and the Mirror, they know that the next assault is only round the corner and when those other papers decide to go after an individual or the policy, the full frontal assault you get out of it is completely overwhelming. It's like having a wave break over you. There's not very much you can do and I think Labour ministers live in fear of that (C11).

Some ministers' attention to detail was seen as excessive. Nadine Smith became press secretary to one Cabinet Office minister in 2004, and found that he wanted her to take charge of the press office as he had doubts about its efficacy (C09):

As the minister who is responsible for everything that comes out of the department, I thought it was fair enough. Some say he had too much control and the 'clearing of lines' was holding up effective communications. Perhaps he did have too much control but ultimately he was accountable for his words and they were in his name, but it can come across as a lack of trust that can undermine the team and their morale, and frustrate the hell out of the media too, who don't have all day to wait for an answer, and won't. There was always this tension between how much control is too much?

The Prologue to this thesis highlighted the role of John Williams, Director of Communications at the Foreign Office, who produced the first draft of the dossier on *Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction*. His submission to the Chilcot Inquiry<sup>73</sup> portrays his sense of powerlessness. Despite being "instinctively against the idea of a dossier" because the exercise "seemed to me to rest on uncertainties," he accepted the government's decision to place intelligence information in the public domain. The idea of challenging the Prime Minister, even indirectly through his own Secretary of State, Jack Straw, or Alastair Campbell, seemed inconceivable:

I returned from my own holiday just as the Prime Minister publicly announced that there would be a dossier (...)74 I followed the policy laid down by the elected Prime Minister, and had no objection to it other than my own instincts, which I felt were outweighed by his (*John Williams: Statement for the Iraq Inquiry*, 2010).

Is this sense, Williams was being responsive to his political masters. However, according to Mulgan's definition of responsiveness, whereby civil servants *anticipate* their ministers' needs and help them to avoid bear-traps, with hindsight it might have

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<sup>73</sup> The full statement is available at [www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/50500/JohnWilliams-witness-statement.pdf](http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/50500/JohnWilliams-witness-statement.pdf).

<sup>74</sup> Tony Blair made the announcement at a speech in his constituency on 3 September 2016.



been more responsive of Williams to have followed his instincts and more actively resisted the drive to publish a dossier. This might have protected the longer-term interests of the government, and indeed the reputation of the Prime Minister himself (Mulgan, 2008).

#### **6.4 Special advisers as “a direct manifestation of responsiveness”**

“A single media scandal may put an end to a lifelong career in just a few days. (Politicians) must create a deep backstage...in which they can trust their closest allies and friends in private” (Hjarvard, 2013)

The drive by politicians to protect themselves from disgrace or failure might explain at least part of the general tendency for state bureaucracies in liberal democracies to become more responsive to the will of ministers over time (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2010; Meer, 2011; Page, 2007; Page et al., 2012). In the UK this has been most manifest in the inexorable rise of special advisers in the civil service who can manage both politics and the media (Greer, 2008). The number of special advisers has nearly tripled since just before the 1997 election, and it is claimed that, far from being mere bag carriers, or the demonized ‘spin doctors’ of popular legend, they are significant media and political operators in their own right who together form a ‘political civil service’ (Hood & Dixon, 2015). This has led some to argue that the UK now has a “dual government communication system” (Sanders, Crespo, & Holtz-Bacha, 2011).

The media relations practices of special advisers are little researched, although, as we saw in Chapter 2, former advisers are starting to explain and reflect on their work, and recent research has tried to place them in historical context and systematically audit their activities (Blick, 2004; Blick & Jones, 2013; Gay, 2013; Hazell et al., 2012; Hillman, 2014; Wilkes, 2014; Yong & Hazell, 2014). In their in-depth ethnographic study from within a UK government department, Rhodes and Bevir “were struck with the centrality of the SPADs” who they felt were “too focused on spin” (Bevir, 2010). Like other political science commentators, they don’t develop this theme, and the notion of ‘spin’ is neither theorised nor operationalized. Most recently, the former Head of the Civil Service, Sir Bob (now Lord) Kerslake, told the trade magazine CSW that, “information is routinely leaked by special advisers and ministers. There is a double standard going on (that) we should just acknowledge. The public see this and feel that information is controlled”. He defends FOI, saying that it “tips the balance

towards openness and that is absolutely fundamental”, given the “yawning gap between the governing and the governed in this country”(Foster, 2015).

This damning view of the media relations activities of ministers and their special advisers is supported by this senior information officer at the Department of Health during the early Blair years, who told the author Nicholas Jones that special advisers were:

Obsessed with what stories would be appearing in the Sunday papers. They would spend real time deciding which exclusive should be leaked to which newspaper and then which minister should get the chance to do follow-up interviews on television and radio. As professional information officers we all thought this was terribly wasteful of ministerial effort (Jones, 2006, p. 162).

#### 6.4.1 Post-1997 change in the ‘rules of engagement’

The civil servants interviewed for this study criticized some special advisers but felt they were essential in helping ministers to manage their workloads. The journalists, however, experienced special advisers as having had a major impact on their own work after 1997. The charge is significant because the media relations activities of special advisers are not transparent, and indeed, are deniable by ministers, as we saw with the resignations of Damian McBride in 2009<sup>75</sup>, Adam Smith in 2012, and Fiona Cunningham in 2014. Special advisers are temporary civil servants, whose salaries are paid for by the taxpayer, yet they are accountable to no one but the minister who appointed them and, ultimately, the Prime Minister. As we shall see later, the interview evidence shows that it is not always clear on whose behalf special advisers are speaking to the media, for example, whether it is the minister, the department, or both, or whether their statements are official, semi-official or unofficial.

Traditionally, the departmental line was the attributable, official statement delivered by the official departmental spokesman, the Director of Communication or Head of News, or a member of the media team delegated by them. The official statement combined the agreed positions of the administrative and political leadership of the department, and was brokered, cleared and placed on the record by the departmental press office. The advantage for ministers of allowing their aides to place government

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<sup>75</sup> Gordon Brown’s letter of 13 April 2009 to the Cabinet Secretary, Gus O’Donnell, following the departure of McBride, said that “no Minister and no political adviser other than the person involved had any knowledge of or involvement in these private emails”. He said he had taken full responsibility for the matter “by accepting Mr McBride’s resignation”.

news on the record semi-officially is that it is their version of the story which is presented and placed with a particular media outlet at a time that suits them, while as a government announcement it carries more credibility than a ministerial statement. Alastair Campbell's insistence at the Hutton inquiry that "the credibility of this document (the 2002 dossier) depended fundamentally on being the work of the Joint Intelligence Committee," is an example of this (Hutton, 2004)<sup>76</sup>.

When the responsibility for drafting and presenting the official line passes from the departmental media team to the minister's own office, and is delivered selectively and/or off the record, the scope for bias and misinformation becomes greater. Privileged government information becomes a resource to be traded with selected journalists in return for favoured coverage, not a means to inform the public through the media, as the former civil service head Douglas Wass warned in his 1984 Reith lectures (Wass, 1984). Within this growing, unregulated space where ministerial aides brief the media, there is scope for activities that are not strictly consistent with propriety codes, which are vague in any case. Government communications therefore becomes less an administrative function aimed at informing the public, and more a channel for political and personal advocacy.

Media engagement has emerged in this study as an important part of the role of special advisers, even for those who are policy rather than media advisers. The journalists interviewed here explained how the arrival of this 'new breed' of political operative offered rich pickings for them in the form of a steady stream of newsworthy, story-led, crisis-rich understandings of the game of politics. As specialist correspondents they had a responsibility to report on and analyze government news and, more importantly, to break their own stories. The government line was never more than a starting point for a wider and more complicated and nuanced story. Chris Moncrieff (Press Association 1962-present), who retired from the lobby in 1998, before special advisers became entrenched within the civil service, but continues to report on politics, saw a clear distinction between the official line and unofficial sources. The official line came from the department; the unofficial story was derived

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<sup>76</sup> 'Campbell: I did not add 45-min claim', *The Guardian*. 19/8/2016. <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2003/aug/19/davidkelly.uk>

from leaks or personal briefings, mainly from civil servants and ministers or their aides:

They (unofficial sources) used to be uninhibited and you got a huge amount of information from them; more than from the official line. They were chalk and cheese, the proper press officers and unofficial sources. I mean, you used to get, still do I expect, get masses of information and you could trust them as well (J17).

He recalls how, until the arrival of Alastair Campbell, it was easy to meet and speak to MPs, even ministers, simply by hanging around at Westminster, where “you used to pick up an enormous amount of stuff. There were always ministers dodging in and out of the lobby and they were as keen to see us as we were to see them”. He holds Campbell responsible for ensuring that “there were no bloody ministers coming through....when they voted (he) made them go round the back behind the speakers’ chair where we are not allowed, so he kept us apart”.

David Brindle of *The Guardian* (1988-date) agreed that civil service press officers might be the “genesis of a story” but then “the idea would be to take that version and play it off other sources to synthesize a version for the reader which in one’s own judgment was the best assessment of the situation”. Before 1997 senior Whitehall press officers like Romola Christopherson at the Department of Health, “had the ear of the minister” and could provide further information ‘off the record’ for background use.

If you had a big story pre-97 you would go to Romola and say ‘Romola, we are going to run with this tomorrow, I’ve talked to the press office who aren’t as forthcoming as they might have been, can you give me anything further?’ Nowadays the default is to go to the special adviser (J21).

Similarly, Nick Timmins, who reported on politics and policy for *The Times*, *Independent* and *FT* (1987-2012), had “relatively few great sources in the civil service because most civil servants behaved properly” but his trick was “to sit there a bit like a spider in the web working out who they’d have talked to in developing policy and then you go and talk to them (...). By and large you watched the waves once they dropped something into the pond”. This more considered approach to reporting a government story was “entirely possible” then in the age of traditional press deadlines.

Timmins also singles out Romola Christopherson as someone who had both the ear and trust of the minister, and could be relied on to tell the truth, if not the whole truth:

Someone like Romola, you know, she was excellent at holding her minister's hand for the media. She was just a perfect bridge between the two. She'd make judgments. I remember going wrong with some story I'd got and I'd got two thirds of it right but the third I hadn't got right was probably quite damaging and she made a judgment (...) If Rom said to me 'I wouldn't write that if I were you', I'd think very hard before writing it. She wouldn't tell you why you shouldn't write it. So that's a relationship of trust (J19).

Jon Silverman, home affairs correspondent for the BBC between 1989 and 2002, recalls how, at departmental press conferences, there was a "complete divide between the civil servants and the politicians", where "you were not able to speak to the civil servants" (J22). Occasionally, experts were allowed to brief journalists, but only with the prior agreement of ministers. Professor Paul Wiles, for example, who was in charge of compiling crime statistics, was allowed to brief journalists once the minister had left the room and was "extremely helpful". What ministers didn't like were specialist opinions which clashed with political and media imperatives, for example over drugs policy. Silverman recalls how Professors Michael Rawlins and David Nutt, successive Chairs of the Advisory Council for the Misuse of Drugs, both got into trouble when they expressed opinions concerning the de-criminalisation of certain drugs.

Silverman was in regular touch with the Home Office press office, as well as special advisers, sometimes as often as two or three times a day. He noticed a change after 1995 when the new Home Secretary, Michael Howard, demanded a "more aggressive, more adversarial" approach to crime and "began to try and shake things up". The Head of Information at the Home Office, Mike Granatt, responded by creating a "much sharper operation," complete with the daily coordination of stories through a news grid, although this had nothing like "the ruthless efficiency" it had after 1997. Howard himself was hands-on as far as media was concerned, phoning the BBC Radio 4 Today programme, for example, to challenge their take on stories, but neither of his special advisers, Tessa Keswick or David Ruffley, took much interest in media engagement and both later became MPs. In actively trying to meet the media ambitions of the Home Secretary, Granatt was seen as an 'outsider' in comparison by the more traditional Home Office 'mandarins', with whom Howard had a "really

fractious relationship”. Along with Romola Christopherson, Granatt was one of only two senior survivors of the “clear-out” of 1997.

Like the other journalists interviewed for this study, Silverman cited two developments which had a major impact on his work: the arrival of 24/7 media, and the rise of special advisers as primary government sources. Journalists now had to file stories at any time of the day or night, across a range of platforms, giving them less time to develop complexity and nuance. At the same time, the arrival of this new, proactive, informed and well-connected network of government media intermediaries helped journalists to ‘feed the beast’ by providing not only a news subsidy but an authoritative comment and narrative subsidy as well. By the time he left the BBC in 2002, correspondents were expected to:

File across a whole range of platforms and with 24 hour news and everything else you were under pressure to be on air an awful lot of the time and if you are actually on air, you can't really do reporting. You can't find out what's going on with a story if you're actually on a programme spouting off about it.

He found that he could ring the Home Secretary Jack Straw's special adviser, Ed Owen, as late as midnight to pick up a story for the 6.30am ‘two-way’ on the next morning's Today programme,

I found that I could get 90% of what I wanted out of Ed Owen after the 97 election rather than the press office. I mean, the press office was very useful for the mechanics of how a story was going to be issued, when a minister was going to be available for interview, so the logistics, but if you really wanted the sort of thrust of it, especially to get it the day before so you could put it out in the morning and help set the agenda, then the special adviser became the main conduit.

It was in Ed Owen's interest to get the angle he wanted on the story, even when “sometimes that would not be exactly what the official news machine wanted or thought was appropriate”. The political background to this, says Silverman, was that No.10 was putting pressure on the Home Office to crack down on asylum; even to the extent of Blair making public announcements off his own bat that were against official Home Office policy; Owen's activities were part of the Home Office ministerial fightback.

One freelance business journalist who works with a number of editors says that they see the official line as “relatively limited because it's the official line. There's no colour

in it. The official quotes would be flat because they have to be". Editors prefer either an interview with the minister or a briefing from the special adviser who knows "what this is really about" and can provide "added value". He cited Damian McBride, as someone who, even as a civil servant "felt the need to push a line that is perhaps more forceful, muscular, more coloured than would be appropriate" (J18).

The downside, he says, is that as a group, special advisers are "very, very hierarchical (...). They have their pecking order in terms of who they'd really want to take a call from and get on to". In practice, this was usually the political lobby. For David Brindle, as for Nicholas Jones, this selectivity "changed fundamentally the rules of engagement and continues to do so." According to Brindle, special advisers administered the grid, and would take responsibility for the story of the day:

in some cases working with the civil service press people, but typically around them, over them, dealing with handpicked journalists who were being fed the story and the rest of us on the press side, the journalists who were not favoured, and on the Whitehall side, the press officers who were left out of the loop, would be trailing in the wake of this (J21).

He remembers the change starting "almost immediately" after the 1997 election "after Campbell cleared out all but two of the directors of communication in Whitehall". Once press officers accepted that they too were obliged to follow the grid, even those with whom he had a good relationship were less responsive to him:

The main media business was being transacted in a quite different sphere altogether, between my lobby correspondent colleagues and the SPADs, and where they were trying to collaborate with that, the Whitehall press officers. As a specialist I felt increasingly marginalized and ill-served; poorly served, compared to what it had been before (J21).

The mechanics of this "different sphere", where special advisers traded exclusive nuggets of information for targeted coverage are described in detail by Nicholas Jones, the BBC's industrial correspondent during the miners' strike (1984-85), who then worked for many years as weekend duty editor. The author of a series of books about New Labour's political spin, Jones characterises the relationship as "collusion", which, although it served both partners in the deal, was fundamentally undemocratic because it lacked transparency. His job on Saturday nights was to collate news stories which had been trailed ahead in the Sunday papers and contact government departments to "find out which one had legs, which one was actually the imagination

of the journalist, and which one was a real one from a briefing.” He too noticed a fundamental change after 1997:

In the 80s into the 90s when you tried to get hold of someone from one of the government information offices that was in one of the Sunday papers, they would then play it with a straight bat and say ‘we don’t know where that story came from. There’s an announcement coming on Wednesday and obviously we can’t pre-empt what the minister is going to say in the Commons’.

Post 1997, there’s a much greater willingness on the part of the government information officers (...) when you said the magic words ‘well, I’ve spoken to special adviser X, Y or Z’, suddenly you’ve unlocked the door and you would get them coughing up the information (J20).

Now, he argues, everything is trailed ahead. In this “change in the balance of power” it’s “the special advisers calling the shots increasingly”. This is symbolized by the grid, a ‘political tool”, which:

has the civil service stamp, this is up to civil service standards, this can be accommodated within the civil service structure, but what has driven it has been a political agenda in my opinion.

With their hunger for news, journalists are put into “an invidious position” in which they collude with the source in “only giving one side of the story”, without explaining to the reader the provenance of the source. Since 1997, he argues, there has been a blurring of the boundary between ministerial and departmental sources. As an example of the change he cites the behaviour of Peter Walker, Energy Secretary during the 1984 miners’ strike, who secretly met selected correspondents in his room at the department to brief them on the political view of the story. Observing proprieties, the civil service press officers would leave the room. Today, he argues:

Even if the civil servant isn’t in the room, the special adviser is, and that is now the conduit that will ensure that the civil service is in tandem with what the whole lot is saying, so they are all singing from the same hymn sheet (J20).

David Brindle does not see a problem in special advisers “pushing their own agendas” so long as “that information that comes from them, and lines that come from them, are clearly seen as such”. Departments, on the other hand, “ought to be impartial”. Increasingly, he argues, the civil service is failing to hold the line between official and unofficial news, and risks losing credibility (J21). A former Director of



Communications (1991-2011) agrees that a blurring of boundaries between political and civil service operations in media management has taken place. This has led to an uneasy “hybrid system” where “we’ve effectively taken the Northcote Trevelyan kind of system” and “overlaid on it the European cabinet system” (C11).

#### 6.4.2 Confusion over who represents the official line

The issue of sources, and specifically the designation of who is or is not an official government source, while not the explicit focus of this study, emerged during the interviews as an area where lines of accountability were becoming blurred. Successive inquiries have tried to establish and codify how different voices within government should be cited but propriety guidance and codes of conduct barely mention it. The GCS propriety guidance simply advises press officers, as far as possible, to speak on the record rather than non-attributively. The Special Advisers’ Code of Conduct does not refer to the issue of attribution at all except to say that they can “represent the views of their minister”. A succession of official reports recognized the sensitivity of this issue and by and large recommended that the government press officer should be designated as official spokesman:

- **Mountfield Review 1997:** “We recommend that Heads of Information be identified as ‘the official spokesman’ for their departments...Any special adviser who briefs the press should be described as ‘a political adviser to’ the Minister”.
- **Public Administration Select Committee 2002:** “The difficulties that have emerged from time to time with special advisers since 1997 have arisen in large part with media briefing that has gone wrong.”
- **Phillis Review 2004:** “Wherever possible, (government) press officers should speak on the record as ‘the department’s spokesperson”.

The three special advisers interviewed for this study all had regular contact with journalists, often bearing the brunt of a media storm, but were not always clear how to designate their positions as sources. The relationship with the departmental press office varied. Bill Bush, policy adviser to Tessa Jowell at the Department of Culture, Sport and the Media (2001-2005), had previously held senior roles at No.10 and the BBC. He and the minister:

...decided that there was a very good press office. I had worked in the media and I’d been used to working with journalists for a long time so I didn’t mind turning my hand to it, although I’d concentrate primarily on policy issues. She was a very proper minister who felt that the vast bulk of the press queries should go through the press

office. So there were a few things where she'd want me to handle it, but it was the exception rather than the rule (S25).

This division of labour allowed the two special advisers to concentrate on policy but he still had intensive contact with the press office, talking “pretty well every day”:

When things were quiet and there was no particular need, then we might not speak to each other for two or three days, whatever. When stories were running, particularly when two or three stories were running at once, we might speak eight or nine times a day, three face to face, two phone calls, five texts, that sort of organic relationship (S25).

He was also in frequent regular contact with journalists, some of whom knew his number and called him direct:

Having said that we didn't deal with them that much, on a quiet day, it would be two or three a day and on a busy day ten or a dozen. You'd write off two hours and you'd just sit and churn the calls through. Three minutes, four minutes, five minutes – make the call, make the call, make the call (S25).

He described Tessa Jowell as “old fashioned” in her respect for propriety and due process, and a willingness to make use of “the formal machinery”, contrasting this with the more confrontational “high energy, hairy chested machismo approach” of some ministers. The use of the term ‘old fashioned’ hints at a culture change in what ministers considered to be an appropriate relationship with their civil servants. Within the high-pressure environment of mediatized politics, a government department may appear obstructive because it “quite rightly, puts more weight on accuracy than speed” while “most government ministers and the outside world want speed. They say they want accuracy but what they really want is speed. Keep the story alive.” Attribution at DCMS was usually to the official spokesperson, but where a briefing was given by a minister or special adviser this would be cited as “sources close to”. Bush's approach illustrates the dangers of simply assuming that politically-appointed special advisers' approach to media relations is solely partisan when in practice they may also be acting according to impartial or professional values in order to build credibility and trust, a factor noted in one of the only empirical examinations of partisan commitment in special advisers, Fisher's interview study of MPs' media advisers in the Australian parliament (Fisher, 2016).

Katie Waring, special adviser to Vince Cable (2010-2013), came into government with little experience of reactive media relations. She too worked closely with the press office, describing their contribution as “critical”. It was agreed that while they would handle the specialist press she would deal with the political lobby, an experience she described as “like having a pack of wolves at you all the time”. She spoke to political journalists every day, estimating that dealing with the media took up 40% of her time. She “would never be quoted as a spokesperson” but sometimes became a “spokesperson for Vince Cable” or even “a liberal democrat source”. On one occasion, she briefed a departmental story about executive pay to the *Independent*, *Sunday Times* and *The Guardian*, and when it appeared, there was no way of knowing whether it had come from her as special adviser, or from the department. She agrees that the source of much government news is “not clear, no. I don’t think it’s clear to the reader. Not to the uninitiated” (S24).

Nick Hillman, special adviser to David Willetts (2010-2013), explains that “no-one trains you to be a SPAD, so you approach the job how you and your minister want you to approach it.” If asked for a quote by a journalist, he would usually email it over in the name of David Willetts. He worked on the assumption that the special adviser should “never really be quoted on the record” but could be cited in various ways, for example as ‘a spokesman’, or as ‘the BIS view’ (S23).

The issue of source attribution was not especially stressed by former civil service respondents although, as we saw in the previous chapter, some felt uneasy about the role of currently serving civil servants in issuing what appeared to be partisan statements during the Coalition period. One Director of Communication (2001-2014) agreed that there was a lack of clarity about the source of government statements which presents an accountability gap:

It’s certainly not clear to the public. And, I think its opaqueness allows - is the gap through which - off the record briefing meets because quotes would appear and it wouldn’t always be clear whether they were advisers, officials leaking, possibly No.10, possibly Treasury (...). It would be clear when there was an on the record spokesperson, but it would be a civil servant, outside of that, probably not. (C16).

Conventions about how various spokespeople should be attributed were subject to implicit understandings within the department but despite concerns over the lack of clarity, she was not aware of any official guidance on this. Bernard Ingham argues that ministers want the “flexibility” to make use of an official government voice when

it suits them, rather than being tied down by process and procedure:

They want the flexibility of a Head of Information who can move effortlessly from information to propaganda and back again but you can't do that and regain credibility. And the question is, do they want a credible information service or don't they? All the evidence is that they don't want a credible information service; they want a propaganda service (Co1).

## **6.5 Conclusion**

The former journalists and civil servants interviewed for this study provide witness accounts of significant change in the way UK governments manage the media, most particularly after 1997, but also continuing at least into the later years of the Coalition government. As reflected in the most recent GCS propriety guidance, government press officers have been encouraged, indeed expected, to move further along the spectrum from simple explanation to active promotion of government policy. A combined process of politicization and mediatization has been observed whereby government press officers are required to align their priorities more closely with those of ministers, further reinforcing the gulf between them and the wider civil service. In addition, since 1997 there has been a rapid injection of a small but steadily growing and increasingly coordinated team of media special advisers, ultimately reporting to the Prime Minister, but immediately answerable to the departmental Secretary of State, and operating largely under the radar.

The journalists interviewed here valued the fact that special advisers could provide a steady supply of ready-digested news but spoke regretfully of the loss of informal direct contact with politicians, and the development during the Labour years and beyond of a selective and partial approach to briefing journalists. One-to-one briefings from special advisers provided 'colour' but did not give them the time or the scope to gather a broad enough range of information to enlighten their readers. It also excluded those considered to be low priority, including those who had previously had good, if critical, relationships with government departments. The ideal of impartiality towards journalists, as in Bernard Ingham's claim that, "you don't have favourites; you are there to serve all equally" (Co1) gave way to selective briefing in the interests of particular ministers.

Many of these changes relate to ministers' perceptions of the increasing risks and opportunities afforded by media scrutiny, and their demands for more protection and access to and control over the ways in which government manages the media. Sanders referred to the Whitehall communications structure as being a politico-administrative *dual service*; in fact, the working practices described here more closely resemble an *integrated service*, where both political and non-political operatives dovetail their working arrangements in line with ministerial priorities (Sanders et al., 2011). Even policy special advisers spend a significant amount of time on media-related activities, and appear to have taken over much of the news-led agenda-setting and strategic communications work that was previously the domain of the Director of Communication. Similar developments towards what has been referred to as 'cabinetization' have also been noted in other Westminster systems such as Australia and Canada (Faulkner & Everett, 2015; Gouglas & Brans, 2016; Hughes, 2015).

As media scrutiny intensifies, we can observe through the interviews that government press officers are increasingly drawn into the drama of day-to-day news management, a testing experience which many have found exhilarating. Indeed, the experience of observing a minister 'hanging by a thread', and finally falling, was described by one respondent as one of "the really fun times" (C14). This appears counter-intuitive, even callous, but this comment is an honest reflection of the professional satisfaction of playing a key role at the heart of a fast-moving political story. The experience of exhilaration in response to a high profile political media frenzy is so specific to the mediatized realm of the cross-field that it could even be described as a specific cross-field effect. The excitement of having a ringside seat at the heart of public affairs, and observing the rise and fall of power, is one which animates the working lives of journalists just as much as it does those of media intermediaries such as press officers. Drawing on my own experience working with VIPs (mainly celebrities), there may also be an element of *schadenfreude* at the vulnerability of a once-powerful and demanding individual that provides a contrast to your own less exposed and exalted position as a permanent official.

Dowding sees impartiality as being less about maintaining boundaries, than about who wields power within the executive, and this depends on the institutional arrangements of which the civil service is a part. He regards "supposed neutrality or impartiality" as a form of "constitutional double speak. Ministers want and have always wanted, partiality" (Dowding, 1995), and within the UK's system of executive dominance, they appear to have the power to achieve this. In a parliamentary debate

on civil service reform in April 2014, Francis Maude, the main architect of the EMO, defined “the essence of impartiality” as “a passionate commitment to delivering the Government of the day’s priorities” (Maude, 2014). Implicit in this definition is the assumption that, since politicians are elected, they alone embody the principle of representativeness, and hence democratic values, within the executive. According to this logic, *responsiveness to ministers*, must, by definition, equate to *public responsiveness* since the will of ministers is the will of the public.

An alternative definition of public responsiveness sees a responsive government as one that seeks to enlighten all citizens, served by an independent and pluralistic media, and resulting in an informed public that can hold its representatives to account (Buhlmann & Kriesi, 2013). For the former No. 10 political adviser Matthew Taylor, the balance of power in favour of ministers and away from senior Whitehall civil servants has become a “critical fault line damaging departmental effectiveness” (M. Taylor, 2015). Mulgan believes that the sort of responsiveness that enables public servants to act in accordance with what they perceive to be the wishes of their political masters, and to act on their own assessment of the longer term needs of the government as a whole, comes into conflict with the “partisan advocacy” required to sell the government’s narrative through the media, which has become a “core function of government” (Mulgan, 2008, p. 350). Rather than questioning partisan advocacy, he questions whether, given the pressures against it, government media specialists should be held to the same constraints of impartiality as other public servants. However, the danger is that, within a majoritarian system of executive dominance such as that of the UK, granting ministers the freedom to appoint their own director of communications to an enhanced team of special advisers would remove one of the few checks and balances within the system – the obligation to speak truth to power.

The former Home Office permanent secretary Helen Ghosh argued in a recent interview with the Civil Servants’ magazine, *Civil Service World*, that since 2010, civil servants had been too responsive to a “confrontational” civil service minister and had collectively failed to influence the reform agenda:

I do think the civil service, from the coalition government onwards, lost self-confidence. We had a very confrontational civil service minister in Francis Maude. I regret the fact that we didn’t, as an organisation, as an institution, grab the reform agenda ourselves and run with it more than we did. We allowed ourselves to be kind of responsive rather than come forward as collectively as we could well have done. We

lost the agenda, we gave it up, and I think that disillusioned some people (McCrory, 2016).

These tantalisingly vague comments beg more questions: on what grounds could and should civil servants have challenged Francis Maude's reform programme, why did they not do so, and what have the consequences been as a result? Who are the "people" who have become disillusioned? Yet despite Ghosh's slightly veiled criticism, there are similarities in her critique to the comments made by Jonathan Haslam in relation to Campbell's demands for change in May 1997 which appeared in Chapter 4: Resilience. He regretted that the leadership of the Government Information Service had not been "sufficiently forceful" to warn the incoming team that their approach to media briefing would ultimately threaten the government's integrity and "destroy quite a lot of public confidence in central government". While not being explicit about this, both Ghosh and Haslam appear to be suggesting that civil servants owe a duty of care to the public beyond the immediate political requirements of the government of the day.

In the next chapter, *Representing the Public*, we examine how civil servants see their public service role and purpose, through their perceptions of what public representativeness means to them. What is, and should be, the particular contribution of government communications to the public accountabilities of government?

## Chapter 7: Representing the Public

”In our system you can get to run a government on 42 per cent of the vote<sup>77</sup>. That means there’s a chunk of people out there who did not necessarily vote for the government of the day but are impacted by and are owed a professional comms function about what’s going on. I think the civil service communications function fulfils that in a rather honourable way.”

Howell James, Permanent Secretary, Government Communications (2004-2008)

### 7.1 Introduction

The ideal of the well-informed citizen, facilitated by the watchdog role of the media, is almost universally considered to be a pre-requisite and safeguard of representative democracy, but it is also one which is considered by many political communications scholars to be in trouble (Blumler, 2001; Blumler & Coleman, 2010; Dahlgren, 2009; Hallin, 2004; Kellner, 2005; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; T. Meyer & Hinchman, 2002; Zaller, 1999). National government and its web of associated executive agencies and arms-length bodies plays a dominant role as a prolific source of news (Graber, 2003) but, as we have seen, a quickening cycle of blame, and a suspicion of what is popularly known as ‘political spin’, is thought to be responsible for undermining public trust in what governments say and how they say it (Allen & Birch, 2015; Hansson, 2015; Hood, 2011).

Indeed, long-term opinion surveys such as the 31<sup>st</sup> British Social Attitudes Survey (2014) found a marked increase over 27 years in the proportion of citizens who think that governments ‘almost never’ “place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party”, from 11% in 1986 to 32% in 2013 (Park, Bryson, & Curtice, 2014). The annual Ipsos MORI Veracity Index that asks people which professions they trust to tell the truth, has identified a growing gulf in trust scores between politicians and civil servants between 1983 and 2016. In 2016, the survey recorded a positive net rating<sup>78</sup> for civil servants of 27%, lower than doctors, teachers and the

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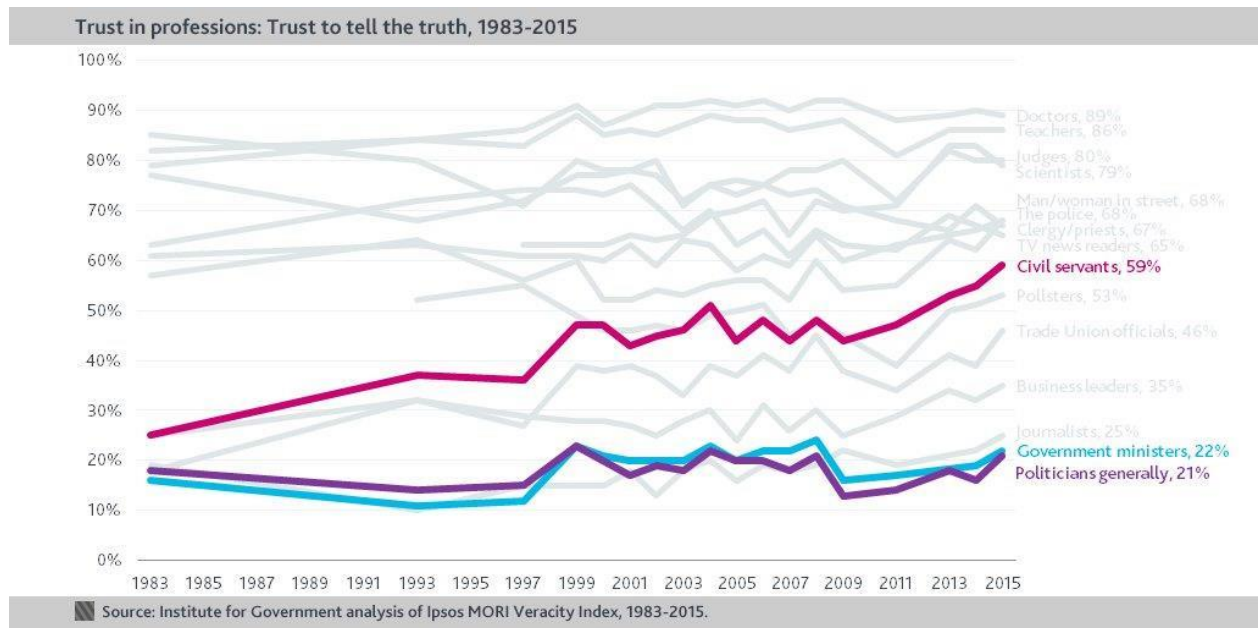
<sup>77</sup> Since 1979 no UK government has been elected on more than 43.9% of the vote, with the exception of the 2010 Coalition government, which received a total of 57.5% of the national vote. The Conservative government of 2015 was elected on 36.9% of those who voted, which equates to about 25% of the potential parliamentary electorate. See <http://www.politicsresources.net/area/uk/uktable.htm>.

<sup>78</sup> The proportion of respondents who trusted a profession to tell the truth minus those who didn’t.



police but higher than estate agents, journalists, and, at the bottom, at minus 53%, politicians (IpsosMORI, 2016) (See **Figure 7.1**). This increase in trust scores in civil servants suggests that claims that the public has become increasingly anti-establishment rather than simply anti-politics may be simplistic (Barr, 2009; M. Flinders, 2015; Serazio, 2016).

**Figure 7.1: Politicians and civil servants - who is trusted to tell the truth?**



The main question of this thesis, whether the government's response to *mediatization* after 1997 challenged the capacity of the UK government communications service to deliver a public communications function consistent with its own stated purposes, has so far been addressed through the non-normative concepts of resilience, resistance and responsiveness. In this chapter we examine more normative questions, such as: what are the stated values and purposes of government communications, how robust are they, and how have they changed over time? What kind of representative claim is implied by these values, and what makes good public communication in a democracy?

Taking the central governing executive as not just a servant of government, but as an institution with both administrative and political dimensions, this chapter will examine some theoretical approaches that try to explain the dual nature of government within a democracy and the role of impartiality within it. The earlier findings chapters showed how the process of mediatization, interacting with politicization, undermined the autonomy and resilience of government

communications, challenging the capacity of the service to resist political demands, and bypassing or even contradicting any role beyond that to serve the government of the day. Since 1997 there have been consistent attempts through the use of propriety codes and a succession of critical inquiries - most notably the Independent Review of Government Communications (the Phillis Review) of 2004 - to protect the government communication service from 'political contagion' and, through the increasing deployment of politically appointed special advisers, to manage the increasingly mediated reputational fears and ambitions of ministers and governing parties.

However, this attempt to hermetically seal the impartial role of the government communication service from 'party political contagion' has been only partially successful. Indeed, the promises made following the Iraq WMD fiasco and the ensuing Phillis Review appear to have been erased from the public record and are not included as part of the stated aspirations of the current Government Communications Service (Government Communications Service, 2015a). As we saw in Chapter 6, government press officers have become more responsive to ministers, while special advisers have occupied and transformed the domain that constitutes official news – an area where senior government press officers formerly held sway. At the same time, a lack of transparency about the source of government news has led to a blurring of the line between the official and unofficial, and between government and party political information.

Without clear signposting, the consumers of news, the public, do not, and indeed, cannot be expected to easily distinguish between forms of communication deriving from the GCS or directly from ministers and their aides. When considering the extent to which the *citizen* is being adequately served, *the totality* of government communications needs to be taken into account, not just the activities and outputs of the GCS. What is at stake here is more than simply the performance or professionalism of government communications, but the extent to which the government as a whole, through ministers, special advisers and civil servants, serves the communications needs of the public. The information exchange between government and the public can be seen as part of the 'chain of delegation', which incorporates the idea of responsiveness: voters designate representatives who instruct executives, who activate bureaucracies (Saward, 2010). One of the links in the chain between citizens' preferences and policy decision-making is a pluralistic media which enables the circulation of diverse and reliable sources of information,

and facilitates an enlightened public (Buhlmann & Kriesi, 2013) but it is not the only one. The UK government’s increasing prioritising of news management as opposed to direct communications (advertising and marketing) has narrowed the range of channels through which public communication takes place (Hood & Dixon, 2015).

It is not easy to define the public purposes of UK communications since they are rarely, if ever, explicitly stated except in the most general terms, as we saw in Chapter 4, *Table 4.2* which is shown again below.

**Table 4.2: Public purposes of government communications**

To inform citizens about government policy to help them reach informed judgements on public affairs
To use specialist technical skills to conduct publicity without incurring charges of propaganda
To provide clear, truthful and factual information
To maintain the dividing line between party political and public information
To plan centrally in order to provide a unified and coherent public information service
To provide information in a way that serves the public interest
To ensure both administrative management and political oversight

Sources: (Cho & Benoit, 2006; Government Communications Service, 2014b; Government Information and Communications Service, 2000; House of Lords Select Committee on Communications, 2008; Mountfield, 1997; Public Administration Select Committee, 2002), see also (National Archives: Cabinet Papers CAB 78/37).

As discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, *Resilience* and *Resistance*, although outwardly stable since its inception in 1945, in practice, the GIS (later the GICS, GCN and now GCS) has been weakened and marginalized since 1997, lacks accountability and stated purposes, and has contradictory and even unachievable objectives. Where public purposes have been explicitly stated, for example, through the Phillis Review, these have been disregarded in practice since 2010. The most important contribution of the service is ostensibly to ensure *impartial* government communications, as stated so confidently by Sir Robert Armstrong when he described “the professional civil service communicator” as a “bulwark” against threats to impartiality (2008). Through interviews with government press officers, special advisers and journalists, this chapter examines the extent to which these respondents share Armstrong’s

perception, how far this idea is being realized in practice, and how impartiality relates to 'good' public communication. What can and does government communication in its current form contribute to the ideal of the informed citizen? Finally, if the ideals of an informed public are to be more fully realized, what should happen to government communications to make this more achievable?

This chapter will examine how civil servants, and particularly government communicators, consider their role in relation to the public, and to what extent this has changed under the pressures of mediatization and politicization. In the first section, I examine the views of the respondents interviewed for this study about how they perceive their roles as public communicators, and compare these with stated purposes as declared in official documents. In the second section I critically relate these to theories and observations about the role of public bureaucracies within representative democracy in relation to mediatization. Finally, I examine what might constitute good democratic government communication and evaluate current practice in relation to this.

## **7.2 How government press officers' perceive their public role**

The quote from Howell James which opened this chapter implies that there are considerations which government communicators must abide by that go beyond the needs of ministers and the government of the day, and the agendas set by the media, to a notional wider public. This public includes the numerical majority which did not vote for the incumbent government. In a speech in 2005, James re-stated the Phillis principles of good government communication and declared that the new Government Communications Network would "put the public at the centre of government communication activity", so that its future would be "one driven by the views and needs of the public" (James, 2005b). Giving evidence to the Public Administration Committee in 2006, James contrasted the rights of "individual ministers (...) about whom they choose to do business with", with the need for government departments to "ensure we are offering a fair service to all players". Government departments, he stated, represent the "wider public interest" and must "provide information in a fair and balanced way to all people who come to us whether the public or the media" (Public Administration Select Committee, 2006). This would call into question many of the activities outlined in the previous chapter, where

specific journalists were targeted by both special advisers and press officers, according to the party political gain accrued by coverage in particular media outlets.

James' concept of the public role of government communications acknowledges the possibility of a space within the public bureaucracy that is autonomous from politicians, where strategic communication priorities are not determined by the partiality of political or media actors, but derived from a notion, albeit ill-defined, of an impartial 'public good'. At its simplest, a public good can be defined as "a commodity or service provided without profit to all members of a society" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2016), while *the* public good is something which serves the benefit or wellbeing of the public as a whole. In this sense, James' conception is derived from the same notion of impartiality as that outlined by his fellow senior civil servant Martin Donnelly, who saw the independence of the official as the starting point for impartiality and good government (Donnelly, 2014), and see Chapter 1, Section 1.2.1.

Given what came before Phillis, and indeed, brought it about – the controversy over the WMD dossier, the row with the BBC and the death of Dr David Kelly – the suggestion is that the post 1997 Labour government had erred by occupying the space accorded to the practice of impartial judgement, in pursuit of party political goals. Within this space ethical and normative considerations relating to 'public good' apply, such as equity, fairness, impartiality, accountability and, as a precondition for these, due process (Du Gay, 2005; Mendus, 2008). In turn, these considerations inevitably place limits on the extent of responsiveness to ministers. If this is the case, the question arises: what has become of this space post-Phillis, and what is the current direction of travel? And if civil servants require some measure of autonomy to exercise judgement within this space, what theoretical justification can there be for non-elected officials to act apart from, or even in conflict with, elected officials?

In his foreword to the 2015 GCS document *The Future of Public Communications*, the current Head of Profession, the Executive Director of Government Communications, Alex Aiken, explains that, in response to rapid social, economic and technological change, the purpose of the GCS is clear: "We are here to deliver world-class communications that support the government's priorities and helps deliver its programmes". In contrast to James, this deliberately functional definition places government communications firmly *within* the parameters set by the government of the day. The report refers to "developing new relationships with our audiences", and "building trust through two-way and open engagement with key audiences" – both

elements of the classic “two way symmetrical model” of public relations which could just as equally apply to business or consumer PR (Grunig, 1984). It should be noted, however, that these comments appear in the foreword to what is a strategic document aimed at explaining and promoting the work of the GCS, so it should not be seen as a fully-explicated examination of Aiken’s vision for the service. What is not evident in the document are specific references to the additional ethical and constitutional *accountabilities* required of government communications, beyond a stated recognition of the “core duty to enable people to make informed choices”.

The ideal of the informed citizen is one that frequently appears in official pronouncements about the democratic purposes of government communications, but with little or no explanation or recognition of the difficulties and challenges of achieving this. In 1998, the Cabinet Secretary Richard Wilson told the Public Administration Committee that it was the duty of every government to “communicate its policies and its themes effectively to the public so that they understand it and so that the electoral process, the democratic process, can take place” (Public Administration Select Committee, 1998). In its review of the Jo Moore fiasco, the Public Administration Committee similarly referred to “the need for the Government to provide honest, reliable, accurate information at all times” (Public Administration Select Committee, 2002). The House of Lords Communications Committee concluded that “one of the most important tasks of government is to provide clear, truthful and factual information to citizens”, describing “accurate and impartial communication of information” as “critical to the democratic process” (House of Lords, 2008). The report added that if government communications were to be truly ‘citizen-focused’, it had to provide a “continuous dialogue with all interested parties”. This aspiration for a seamless, two-way communication with all audiences contrasts with the reality of the selective, top-down, news-led approach to media management that has emerged from the findings of this thesis, with its episodic discontinuity following changes of government. For ‘continuous’, we can also read ‘permanent’ or ‘impartial’ – again, a subtle turn of phrase deployed by the Committee - since it is only continuity of service and the application of enduring values that can ensure a “continuous dialogue”.

The most senior of my respondents, the former Cabinet Secretary Robin (Lord) Butler (Co2), similarly described the public role of the government press officer as being “to inform the public through the media”, a task which sounds straightforward but in practice is fraught with difficulty, since the media do not merely transmit government

information but are active and sometimes disruptive participants in the process of public communication. For Bernard Ingham, the public duty of the government communicator required that, among journalists, “you don’t have favourites; you are there to serve all equally”. Jonathan Haslam agreed that “all the media ought to be treated equally” and added that journalists should expect something unique from the civil service press officer, namely “a non-party political steer on things – more factual – making the minister’s case but making it in a way that is balanced and objective” (Co7). Siobhan Kenny, who had served the Major government but reached seniority during the Blair era, both at No.10 and leading a departmental communications team, added a further obligation of clarity and accessibility, so that “my mum and her mates would be very clear about what it was that the government was trying to do”. There was “a duty to the public (...) because you are working for the taxpayer after all” (Co3).

A former Director of Communication who joined in 1991 and continued into the early years of the 2010 Coalition, saw the role as one that serves and tries to reconcile two powerful and sometimes conflicting client groups – ministers and ‘the department’.

Officials:

... have to be wholly loyal to the whole department and wholly loyal to what an individual minister or Secretary of State wants, which is rarely the same thing<sup>79</sup>. Coming to an accommodation where everybody gets what they want, requires a degree of diplomatic skills that both have to learn (C11).

Given a conflict between the two, many respondents expressed a primary responsibility to the general public, rather than solely to ministers, albeit a distant public whose needs, whether stated or unstated, were best met through the administration of ‘good government’:

It’s about the role of government communications to communicate for the government, not for individual ministers, not to play party politics, and also to be a reasonable use of government money (C15).

The administration of ‘good government’ required a form of public guardianship in order to provide “an appropriate check on what ministers want to do”. A Director of Communication for the Coalition government (2001-2014) warned of the dangers of

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<sup>79</sup> This immediately sets up a dichotomy between what the department wants, and what the minister wants – one that is obscured but not obliterated by the notion of ministerial loyalty. How can you be “wholly loyal” to two masters, especially when they come into conflict?

giving in to ministers coming into government with no experience, determined to push their own untested and un-costed policy ideas:

Having a partisan civil service that is essentially there to do exactly the minister's bidding, who are politically sympathetic to that minister, you would not get that scrutiny, you wouldn't get that challenge and that's where, still, bad decisions get made (...) wasteful things happen (C16).

A press officer during the Blair years agreed that ministers "need to be challenged, they need to have it pointed out to them when they may not be doing the best thing, from the government point of view, not the party political point of view" (C05). Another press officer, who left government in 2011 after 12 years' service, saw the role as trying to balance the needs of at least four client groups simultaneously – the department's policy makers, ministers, the public and journalists:

You want to do justice to the policies that are being developed in the department and by extension the people who are developing them; you want to do justice to the ministers' vision of how he or she wants to deliver on the part of his or her department. You want to ensure that you are informing the public of the information that they need in order to be equipped to make decisions. You also need to deal with the journalists fairly and honestly and openly and professionally (C04).

Loyalty to the minister was important but you also had a public duty in that: "in your heart, you enter the career because you want to do the best job you can to explain what the government is doing to the public". A former Director of Communication who left government for a leadership role in an executive agency in 2014 felt that the public role of government communicators, and the trust and credibility this required, were threatened by a combination of "noisy media" applying blame, and frightened ministers. This potent mix had become so overwhelming, she felt, and politicians so frightened of media criticism that "it just spirals into this huge gulf between the public and government and ministers", leading the public to "disengage from politics" and conclude that "you can't trust anything they say". The notion of the civil service communicator as a guardian of honesty, truth and "sticking to the facts", is seen by both the government press officers and journalists interviewed for this study as essential to the role but there was "a constant tension", as this press officer (1999-2004) explained:

Researchers might have been commissioned to go away and review a policy...something that the minister really likes, and actually the policy is found to be



ineffective or not very effective or it's not as effective as they thought and of course ministers didn't necessarily want the information out there (C05).

Decisions about how and when to place 'inconvenient' information within the public domain is not straightforward. In one of a series of Reith Lectures on *Opening Up Government*, given in 1983, the former joint Head of the Civil Service, Sir Douglas Wass, argued that governments should strive "on a systematic basis to publish the information that they possess that will contribute to public understanding on those issues". Such decisions should not be left to ministers as this would make them "judges in their own court" (Wass, 1984).

One respondent remembers an unusual decision taken during the Blair years not to publish the findings of a report commissioned into public attitudes towards immigration, describing it as a "time bomb":

We financed some research amongst the general public and the research showed that virtually everybody in the country whether they were ABC1C2DE or they were *Guardian* readers, *Mail* or *Express*, had concerns about the level of immigration, whether they were immigrants themselves – that's long standing immigrants – all had concerns about it. Now the government had a policy which was pro-immigration and they had lots of reasons why they felt it was a benefit but they didn't go out there and promote it... that research was put under lock and key. It was never used (C10).

The decision not to make these findings public was unprecedented in this interviewee's experience, since custom and practice at the time held that information funded by the taxpayer should always be made available in some form. In her view, it also led to policy failures because, without acknowledging the fact that a significant majority of the population had concerns about immigration, it was harder to address or challenge them.

The question as to whether, over time, decisions not to publish publicly funded research have become more common, is beyond the scope of this study, but news stories have occasionally surfaced about similar omissions, for example, in 1994, when it was claimed that eight Home Office research projects were "being systematically shelved by ministers" because their findings contradicted the Home Secretary Michael Howard's policy agenda (Travis, 1994, p. 1). In 2014, two stories appeared accusing Downing Street of suppressing a report that fewer jobs were taken by immigrants than had been claimed by the then Home Secretary, Theresa May (Cook, 2014; Perry, 2014). In a recent report, the independent campaigning charity,

*Sense about Science*, uncovered evidence of delays in the publication of government-funded research, and called on the government to comply with its own protocols that ensure that the public has the chance to see the product of external research. There were several examples of delay due to findings which contradicted previously stated government policy:

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) explained delay in the publication of food banks research in 2013 as resulting from the peer review process. However, the authors of the study said that the initial peer review was positive and that concerns were raised subsequently about how the findings would impact on policy.

In the case of research into immigration and the labour market it appears that government was happy to publish previous research that supported what ministers had been saying, but held back analysis that challenged it. In the case of a study into drugs policy in other countries, this inquiry was unable to find any reasons other than political ones for why publication was delayed.

The report concludes that without a comprehensive register of such research, delays or even suppression, are more likely since the process is not publicly transparent (Sedley, 2016, p. 16). Although beyond the scope of this study, this issue would be worth further research in order to see whether delays or omissions are becoming more common. One would expect this to be the case in an environment where ministers are more exposed to media scrutiny. As ministers become more sensitive to the potential risks of mediated reputational damage, they increase their control over what, when and how information is placed in the public domain.

Given the sheer difficulties of devising, drafting and delivering complex policy and introducing contentious and difficult legislation within an adversarial media and political context, respondents felt that it was important that ministers trusted the media team to protect them. According to Howell James, this was a subtle process which required “an understanding of the tone and the manner in which to operate in order to support (them)” (Co8). This protective role goes beyond that of the ‘bag carrier’ as referenced in the previous chapter and owes more to the origin of the civil servant as courtier or counsellor, than as a guardian of the public good. Supporting ministers sensitively at difficult times is to uphold ‘good government’ by providing a negotiated ethical and procedural framework within which politicians can apply

political judgement. The idea that ‘the line’ between partisan and impartial communication is subject to compromise or negotiation is enshrined in government communications guidance with this advice to government press officers that “it is right to explore whether a compromise can be reached that will not breach propriety. If no such compromise can be found, then it will be necessary to give a polite refusal” (Government Communications Service, 2014b). In the heat of the moment, with the risk of reputational damage ever-present in the ‘cross-field’, the whole truth, or even a partial truth, may be a fragile beast in this environment.

Journalists interviewed for this study identified government press officers as aligning themselves more closely to the truth than special advisers or ministers. However, this former Director of Communication who left government in 2014 argues that government media relations specialists have both “huge responsibility and some culpability in being a contributor to that breakdown in trust because of the lies that get spun”, implying that culpability lies in preventing untruths from others, as opposed to uttering them personally (C16). One journalist went off the record to state that he had dealt with special advisers who “I knew for a fact would lie to me, so I would stop talking to them. It’s pointless if they are going to lie to you.” In contrast, he recalled, “I’ve never had a press officer lie to me (...) and it’s kind of crucial. Because what do you believe?”

Journalists too, are perceived as having an attachment to the truth, however flimsy. Bernard Ingham found that they “stretch things; they reach heroic conclusions on the basis of the flimsiest evidence (...) but in the end they do not make it up” (C01). Bill Bush, special adviser to Tessa Jowell at the DCMS (2001-2005), agrees that outright invention by journalists was rare but felt that this was almost beside the point. He frequently dealt with stories that had “a kernel of truth but it’s basically so overwrought and de-contextualized that it’s as good as a lie”. Much time, effort and psychic energy was taken up with “dealing with distortions, and exaggerations; so distorted that it has the effect of being dishonest”. What mattered to journalists was a story, albeit based on truth that could entertain: “lots of journalists, they don’t care about the truth very much. What they care about is impact, they care about bums on seats, eyeballs attracted” (S25).

As discussed in chapter 3, the mediatization scholars Kunelius and Reunanen would argue that this preoccupation with claiming public ‘attention’ applies equally to politicians (and their aides) as to journalists (Kunelius & Reunanen, 2012). Yet, far

from claiming a watchdog role in relation to government, when asked how they saw their public role, the journalists interviewed for this study all expressed a pragmatic and rather prosaic view about what they were there to do. Their responses were brief and to the point, shown in full below:

**Table 7.2: How journalists saw their role**

Bringing stories back to base. Explaining to people what was going on and not being frightened to report what was embarrassing. <u>J20.</u>
A reporter is there to go out and get facts and report from an event, a disaster, war or whatever it is, and send back news that is as accurate as you can possibly get, and as balanced as you can possibly get. <u>J22.</u>
The guts of journalism remains being an eye witness really. What's happened factually, and why...the very basic questions that you should answer for readers or listeners, and that hasn't fundamentally changed at all. <u>J18.</u>
Just to get big stories all the time. <u>J17.</u>
It's about finding things out and telling people about it. Simple as that. <u>J19.</u>
It is telling a story, pleasing an audience. It is a sort of performance journalism. Journalism in a way is a sort of branch of show business. It's certainly a business. <u>J18.</u>
You are fighting every week for space against the other journalists, it's a very individualistic culture. <u>C12.</u>
One gets a huge adrenalin rush from a scoop, in defiance of agencies that don't want you to make that revelation but I think that's a bit overstated...the analysis and explanation can be almost as satisfying professionally <u>J21.</u>

This discrepancy between the idealised role of the journalist as 'watchdog', or Fourth Estate, and actual practice, has been widely observed in the literature (Barnett & Gaber, 2001a; Hampton, 2010; Lewis, Williams, & Franklin, 2008; Mellado & Van Dalen, 2014; Tambini, 2013), and it could be that the experienced group of journalists interviewed for this study is more realistic, reflexive and self-critical than average. However, we would have expected these interviewees to have been particularly well-oriented towards the watchdog role. As specialist beat journalists they were relatively autonomous, as long serving professionals they 'came of age' during the 'high modernist' period of journalism (1960s-90s), and, working for quality newspapers or broadcasters, they were expected to get close to power but to question it (Eriksson & Ostman, 2013).

Given the difficulties and pressures to “bring stories back to base” (J20), and although vital in uncovering information essential to an honest democracy, it has been argued that journalism cannot be guaranteed to provide *consistent* checks and balances against the powerful (Dahlgren, 2009). Graber argues that journalists are “miscast” as watchdogs since their powers are too limited to match politicians’ powers to conceal or exaggerate (Graber, 2003). The role of media outlets as businesses which must attract readers, users or audiences to survive, also means that they cannot operate *purely* or even *predominantly* in the public interest, even supposing that they could ever be informed enough about internal government processes to do so.

Petley argues that the freedom of the press is just one side of the equation, and that democratic public communication requires more than simply journalists’ freedom from law and regulation. From the point of view of the public, and democratic society, readers need the freedom “to access the kinds of information which they need to function effectively as citizens of a democracy”. This requirement is not well served by a media that routinely “impoverishes public debates” and “gives rise to a particularly poisonous form of anti-political populism” (Petley, 2012, p. 537). Getting the story, and helping audiences to understand complex policy and political matters may be a prerequisite for an “informal accountability” but it does not replace “formal democratic accountability” (Bovens, 2007). For Graber, what is crucial is “the spirit in which political elites conduct the affairs of government” (p156); a conclusion also reached by Leveson who placed the responsibility for improving the relationship with between politicians and the press with politicians rather than journalists (Graber, 2003, p. 156; Leveson, 2012).

As we saw with the case of the UK’s WMD dossier of September 2002, within the context of a powerful government’s influence on not just the news agenda, but on the narratives that influence what is defined as news, journalists alone cannot prevent the abuse of communicative power at the centre, and indeed, may become accomplices in it, albeit inadvertently or reluctantly (Herring & Robinson, 2014). As we saw in the previous chapter, the selective briefing of exclusives by government insiders increases the dependence of journalists on certain privileged sources (Barnett & Gaber, 2001a; Franklin, 2004). To simply accuse politicians and governments of ‘political spin’ is to misunderstand the depth of the problem, as touched on in Chapter 1. If the government’s commitment to providing citizens with enough of the right kind of information about government policy to help them reach informed judgements on public affairs is compromised, weakened and subject to inadequate forms of

accountability and redress, journalists will struggle to see the whole picture, let alone report it.

### **7.3 Public bureaucracy, representative democracy and mediatization**

“Part of democratic theory’s crisis right now has to do with the seeming incapacity, unwillingness, or outright refusal of contemporary democracies to embrace, promote, and invest in public or shared things. A perfect storm of privatization and austerity politics (the latter arguably a consequence of the former and its deregulation policies) undermined an earlier nineteenth and twentieth century commitment to democratic governance as a generator of public goods.” Bonnie Honig (Honig, 2015)

We have already considered the public good as a concept that applies to the public as a whole, not just the electorate, or those who voted for or are expected to vote for, a particular party. This concept accepts the government of the majority according to shared and understood electoral rules, operating accountably under a transparent form of due process. It is clear that the former government press officers interviewed for this study believe that they are ultimately working for this conception of the public as citizens, not just voters, and that they have a responsibility, in theory at least, to do more than simply “the minister’s bidding” (C16). Indeed, Howell James, who has performed both partisan and impartial roles in Whitehall, considers the public service obligation to serve all citizens equally as an “honourable” fulfilment of the role of the government communicator.

More specifically, the interviewees believe that the demands of ethics, equity and propriety require that they can and should intervene as professionals to provide a check on ministerial activity, not only to serve the public in an abstract sense but to ensure the proper administration of tax-payers’ money. The last resort of leaking government information however is rare among communications officials<sup>80</sup>, according to the journalists interviewed here, and, as we saw earlier, was described in one interview study with senior civil servants as totally unacceptable, even “contemptible” (Barker & Wilson, 1997). The public appeared to disagree. In the celebrated 1985 trial of Clive Ponting, the senior civil servant who leaked the truth

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<sup>80</sup> The former civil servant-turned-special-adviser to Gordon Brown, Damian McBride, is referred to by many interviewees as a rare exception which proves the rule.

about the sinking of the Argentinian cruise ship, the *Belgrano*, to an opposition MP, the jury found him not guilty on grounds of public interest. This was in spite of the judge, Sir Anthony Cowan, indicating that the jury should convict him and that “the interests of the state” can only be “the policies of the government then in power” (Norton-Taylor, 1985, p. 110). Although it is rare for civil servants to publicly disagree with ministers, the former Cabinet Secretary, Lord (Gus) O’Donnell, described challenge as a core part of the job, when he told a Select Committee that: “The vital function of the civil service is to implement the programme of the democratically elected government but it is also our job along the way to challenge that” (Public Administration Select Committee, 2013b).

In this section we consider what the notion of the public might mean in the context of government communications, and ask on what basis public bureaucracies in general, and the communications function in particular, can and should claim a degree of autonomy to act in the public interest. At the heart of this discussion are two key concepts: firstly, the meaning of *public opinion*, and secondly, the notion of *impartiality*, an idea which is valorised throughout the political domain, even as the conditions for its successful implementation are placed under threat. Dahlgren has claimed that the aim of all parties within a democracy should be “to engender a more democratic, equitable, and accountable power balance for citizens” (Dahlgren, 2013, p. 168), but where should this balance lie? On what grounds can government communicators in general, and press officers in particular, as civil servants, claim to represent the public?

### 7.3.1 The meaning of public opinion

It has been claimed that politicians misrecognise media coverage as a proxy for public opinion, while the public misrecognises news coverage as an accurate reflection of the world of politics (Hjarvard, 2013). Couldry, following Champagne, describes a ‘circular logic’ whereby “journalists and politicians ‘react’ to a version of public opinion which they have largely constructed” (Couldry, 2014, p. 233). For Graber, the idea that the media give voice to public opinion is a myth, since they do not have the capacity to systematically survey it. Most news stories are sourced from ‘media beats’ covering selected elite public and private institutions, and certainly not the general public (Graber, 2003). The former Conservative government minister, Ann Widdecombe (1992-97), for example, had no hesitation in conflating media coverage with public opinion, as she revealed in this interview in 2007:

We never discussed a policy without discussing the media impact, ever, because you would be very blind if you just launched policy and didn't work out exactly what people were likely to make of it. (Davis, 2007a, p. 188).

A similarly revealing comment comes from the former Liberal Democrat Business Secretary, Vince Cable (2010-2015), who recently told an interviewer that, as an overworked cabinet minister:

I have to say we got quite remote from Parliament – that was one of the slightly surprising things about the job (...). It was much, much, much more about the media. Every day I would be having three or four conversations with my special adviser about radio, television, and what we were trying to say. I was quite active in the media and that was how I communicated rather than through Parliament (Cable, 2015).

Ministers' sensitivity to news coverage, and their fear of media scrutiny, has been widely noted elsewhere in this thesis, as has their frustration with the spiral of distrust that it generates (Blair, 2013; Leveson, 2012). The attempt to distance themselves by delegating to special advisers the task of the daily battle over the news agenda runs the risk of rebounding on them. Journalists react to what they see as the collusion and manipulation inherent in non-attributable selective briefing by accusing politicians of political spin, and maintaining a steady narrative of the untrustworthy politician. At the core of this distrust is the popular assumption that politicians always act in self-interest or in the interests of their party, rather than the interests of the public, an erroneous assumption that leads to Cappella and Jamieson's corrosive 'spiral of cynicism' (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Dahlgren, 2013). In their own accounts and those of observers, politicians appear to be caught in an "autonomous dynamic" of a media and political arms-race that is beyond their control, from which they cannot escape and in which they are always in the wrong, whether they seek media attention or avoid it (Farrell & Schmitt-Back, 2002; Norris, 2000b).

In recognition of its self-sustaining nature, scholars depict the lure of media attention for politicians in almost sexual terms as a form of 'temptation'; a powerful force that they are unable to 'resist'. Yeung, for example, in her otherwise cogent and sober analysis of the regulation of UK government communications, refers to "the irresistible pressure on ministers to clothe their policy choices in the most attractive media-receptive wrapping", adding that: "the temptation to engage in spin becomes almost irresistible" (Yeung, 2006, pp. 55-56). Where politicians do resist the temptation, it seems unusual, even quirky. The former special adviser Bill Bush had



this to say about his minister Tessa Jowell's distinctively 'proper' approach to government communication:

I'm not saying that other ministers were, but she's not the kind of person who wanted to us to spin night and day, talking to the press, guiding stories, getting her name in when she wanted it, getting her name out when she wanted it. She was slightly old fashioned (S25).

Much has been written about the decline in democratic participation and public distrust of politicians and political institutions, and it is not my purpose here to summarise this or offer a definitive account of the concept of public opinion. However, it is worth identifying some long term trends that try to explain where public disquiet lies. As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, the trend during the last 30 years has been for a large and growing gulf between the public trust accorded to civil servants and politicians to tell the truth (See **Figure 7.1**). It is not clear why but possibly partiality, or the political process itself, are increasingly negatively associated in the public mind with the likelihood of truth-telling.

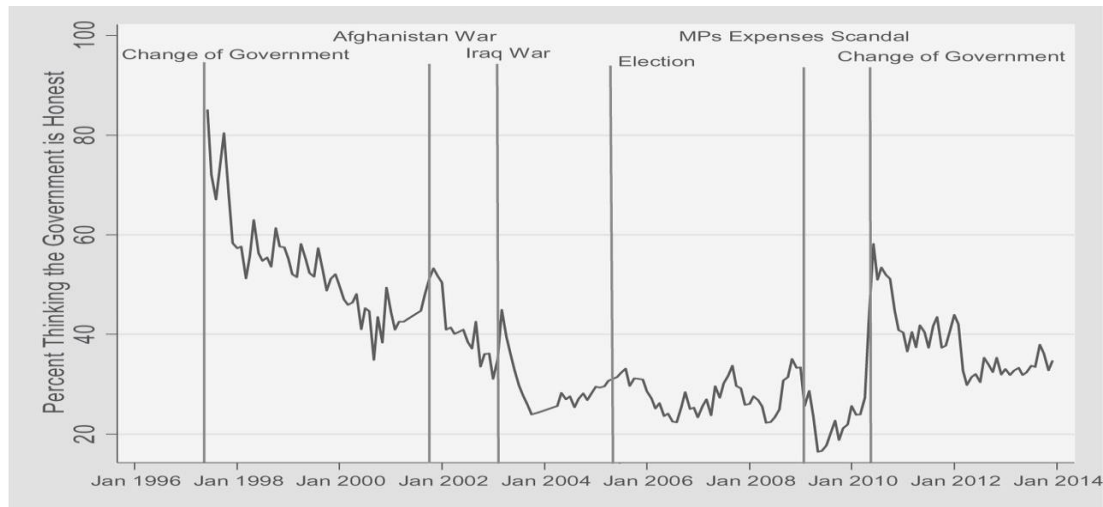
Such distrust is not necessarily translated into a lack of trust in democracy. The 2012-13 European Social Survey looked at public perceptions about how successfully governments engage with the public, and found that rather than being disillusioned with the idea of democracy, British respondents showed widespread support for its main tenets, namely: free and fair elections and equal treatment by the courts. There was agreement among people from across the political spectrum and all levels of education that government should explain its decisions to voters but that public information provision is also the area where respondents perceive the greatest deficit. Nearly a quarter thought it very important that the government explains its decisions to voters but that the government was fulfilling their expectations in this respect (Park et al., 2014). Interestingly, a recent academic survey conducted through the pollster, YouGov, found that support for direct democracy was associated with a perception of dishonesty and lack of empathy on the part of politicians rather than dissatisfaction with policy (Allen & Birch, 2015). The authors suggest that "strengthening existing representative practices and protecting them from abuse would have a more positive impact on public opinion than expanding the use of referenda" (p407). They are not clear about what they mean by "representative practices" but I would argue that government communications could be considered to be just such a practice.

What, then, are we to make of the contradiction that, as ministers and their aides strive ever harder to deliver government messages through the prism of an increasingly fragmenting and unpredictable media, the public tell pollsters that they are not kept informed and yet are over-exposed to what they consider to be self-serving and partial information? One obvious answer is that the public feels it is being given too much of the wrong information. If so, this has been going on for some time. Whiteley et al. analyzed answers to the same question asked every week during the 16 years between 1997 and 2013: *do you think the (British) government is honest?* (Whiteley et al., 2016). As **Figure 7.3** (overleaf) reveals, the results show regular variations in perceptions of honesty (as displayed in the small peaks and troughs) but a definite and overwhelming long-term decline in assessments of honesty related to key events such as the Iraq War and the MPs expenses scandal. The changes of administration in 1997 and 2010 provided a short term boost to the perceived trustworthiness of governments but over the long term this was followed by even steeper declines.

Ingelhart analyzed the rise and fall of democratic systems globally in the light of a range of variables and argues that the stability of democratic systems has been shown to depend on “what ordinary people think and feel”. If these opinion surveys represent genuine long term change in the “cultural orientations of citizens” away from support for democratic institutions, we could be entering a new era of democratic instability (Inglehart, 1999, pp. 119, 101). A cross-national study found that citizens’ perceptions of electoral misconduct reduced citizens’ voting propensities, while perceptions of MPs’ integrity were found to have influenced turnout in the British election of 1997 (Allen & Birch, 2015).

From the point of view of the claims of civil servants to represent the public, it is notable that, over time, they are perceived as being increasingly trusted to tell the truth. Saward has argued that, where such claims can be credibly sustained by a reasonable number of constituents over time, there is a strong case for assuming that the claim has some democratic legitimacy (Saward, 2010). According to this argument, and supporting Howell James’ notion of the public role of civil servants, some “non-elective representational claims” are possible, even desirable. It is not only politicians who can claim some form of democratic legitimacy within government (Alonso,

**Figure 7.3: Perceptions that the British government is honest and trustworthy (1997-2013)**



Source: (Whiteley et al., 2016).

Keane, & Merkel, 2011). The Fourth Estate ideal of journalism, albeit tarnished in practice, and frequently challenged, has allowed journalists to claim some independent legitimacy in public life. Could the same claim be made of civil servants?

### 7.3.2 The two faces of democracy

We referred in chapter 2 to the dual nature of government as a simultaneously administrative and political entity. My intention here is not to explore the vast literatures on representative democracy but to look at those aspects of democratic theory that relate to claims by public administrators that they serve a public interest beyond that of the government of the day. Such claims go back to the origins of the modern state bureaucracy in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century but to what extent are they being challenged by the process of mediatization? As we saw in Chapter 2, Aucoin has argued that modern administrations have become increasingly mediatized and politically aligned; giving rise to the “promiscuous partisan”, an official who *enthusiastically* serves the needs of ministers at all times and, most crucially, *actively promotes* the government agenda to external stakeholders (Aucoin, 2012). For Aucoin, the government’s communications function is one that most risks becoming “the black hole of public service impartiality” (p183), especially when explicitly required to promote the government’s message by advancing and defending its merits. Grube argues that, with the latest Propriety Guidance from the GCS requiring just this, that point has been reached, and there is now “little room for civil servants

to resist pressure to actively justify government policy” (Government Communications Service, 2014b; Grube, 2015).

These conclusions rest on an understanding of executive government in liberal democracies as a dual form of legitimacy where two dimensions – the administrative and the political – are held to be in a form of “dynamic equilibrium”(Bovens, 2007, p. 463). Within representative democracy both arms of government claim to represent the citizen, but each claim is partial, and both are assumed to be capable of abuse. The key to public representation is a balance between the two claims, but this balance is historically contingent and subject to periodic crisis, often in response to external social change (Manin, 1997). The democratic theorist, Rosanvallon, argues that there is a further gap in representation because majority rule rests on a “dual fiction”, firstly, that the election process, whatever form it takes, *stands for* a mandate; and, secondly, that the dominant (or winning) faction, *stands for* society as a whole (Rosanvallon, 2011) (*my emphasis*). More complete public representation therefore, is achieved when partisan rule by democratic mandate is countered by “non-partisan, bureaucratic rationality” (p45). With the arrival of universal suffrage and mass democracy in Britain between 1867 and 1918, a partnership between party democracy and an increasingly powerful public bureaucracy, allowed for the institutionalisation of conflict and its resolution. In the older liberal democracies in Europe and the US, the public bureaucracy became a “countervailing institution” which checked and moderated the powers of political patronage and majority rule, while parliament became “an instrument that measures and registers the relative forces of clashing social interests”(Lee, 2011; Manin, 1997, pp. 231, 198).

These assumptions came under threat from the 1980s onwards, as New Public Management (NPM), and the rhetoric surrounding it, undermined the status and legitimacy of public administration. With the rise of the mass media, and challenges to both political and administrative legitimacy, Manin argues that the balance of public accountability, albeit informal rather than formal, has shifted away from parliament and towards the media, while executive responsibility, and hence blame, is shared between central government and the welter of regulators and executive agencies that characterise modern systems of “divided governance” (Schillemans, 2012). Party democracy has given way to audience democracy, where “the electorate appears above all, as an audience which responds to the terms that have been presented on the political stage” (Manin, 1997, p. 16). For Rosanvallon, in this new

era of ‘reflexive democracy’ the demands of “round the clock news and generalized transparency” make it harder to be impartial because:

To be impartial is to avoid being swayed by public opinion, to avoid compromise and to pay attention to everyone’s needs by treating all issues according to the dictates of law and reason....

Today’s politicians may appear to be affable communicators and skilled performers but (...) their accomplished performances may in fact conceal the revival of old and terrifying perversions of democratic rule”. (Rosanvallon, 2011, pp. 98, 177, 202).

This appears over-dramatic but in essence, Rosanvallon’s argument is that democratic rule itself is put under threat by politicians’ acceptance of media logic, or, to use a term more consistent with the ‘embedded media’ approach taken in this study, their participation in a “culture of mediatization” (Hepp, 2013b). The diffusion of media-related norms within public bureaucracies is a growing area of interest for northern European mediatization scholars, who are using observational methods to penetrate the discreet corridors of power and ask how, in everyday practice, officials reconcile the ethical norms of impartiality and due process, with politicians’ growing appetite for media attention (Couldry, 2003; Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, 2015; Fredriksson et al., 2015; Pallas & Fredriksson, 2014).

In their ethnographic study from within a PR team in a Norwegian government department, as cited in Chapter 2, Thorbjørnsrud et al observed a struggle between “legitimate bureaucratic governance” and “arbitrary rule”, concluding that media norms are driving civil servants towards the latter through a “diffuse, porous and informal” infiltrating rationale (Thorbjørnsrud et al., 2014, p. 7). The authors argue that the traditional norm that “bureaucrats have a rationale of their own”, is being challenged by the more recent notion that public bureaucracies are simply an “extension of politics.” Echoing some of the findings in this study, their interview with a senior communications official suggests, at the very least, a decline in autonomy for the information function:

Today, in contrast to previous years, one puts way more emphasis on the fact that the ministry is a secretariat of the political leadership. Earlier one claimed to be a general information and communication umbrella, independent of the political executives (Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, 2015, pp. 1955-1956).

In their observational study of a Swedish executive agency, Pallas et al similarly noted a change in the practices of public officials as media logic competed with bureaucratic logic, leading to a speeding up of the policy cycle, attempts on the part of officials to anticipate media reaction, and a simplification of policy presentation, which appear to be driving a wedge between public-facing and backstage officials. Their finding that communication officials “struggle to strike the right balance between providing correct, neutral and comprehensive information, and promoting what political leaders need and journalists want” is borne out in the interviews carried out for this study (Pallas, Strannegard, & Jonsson, 2014, p. 4).

Esser sees the process of mediatization as the intrusion of media logic within non-media domains. This poses a challenge for democracy where the dominant mass media come to see themselves, and are seen as, “the (better) representative of the public will” (p169). He cites the warning from Mazzoleni and Schulz that, the “absence of accountability” on the part of the media “violates the classic rule of balances of power in the democratic game, making the media (the fourth branch of government) an influential and uncontrollable force that is protected from the sanction of public will” (Esser, 2013; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999, p. 248). As the comments from the journalists interviewed for this study suggest, the idea of the media as ‘fourth estate’ is one which they may be happy to utilise in their struggle to get the story, but it is not a role they claim, or one which they feel obliged to account for.

To return to one of the questions posed at the start of this section, what is the particular contribution of civil servants working within government communications in realizing the ideal of the informed citizen? Ultimately, as we saw in chapter 6, *Resistance*, challenging a ministerial mandate involves risk because it takes place within the context of an asymmetric relationship. If, as we have seen, politicians are driven to seek legitimacy and protect their reputations by engaging with media, any challenge by officials is likely to require a battle on two fronts: against the ministerial mandate itself and against the minister’s drive to engage with media. Yet there is a long tradition of challenge on the part of public servants. Paul’s insight into 16<sup>th</sup> century thought in relation to the role of the princely adviser identifies the Greek concept of *parrhesia* - a truthful speech act within an unequal power relation, where the courtier is obliged to give advice that would benefit the public, even at risk to himself (Paul, 2015). Here, *service* is distinguished from *servitude*. The question is, to what extent do given institutional arrangements make it feasible for such challenge to take place?

The concept of *parrhesia* is relevant today, not because the ruler has absolute power and needs to be protected from him/herself, but because the ruler is overburdened with responsibility, exposed to career limiting public blame, and constantly struggling to ensure his or her short term electoral survival. The Weberian ideal of ‘the bureau’ facilitates democratic governance through two ostensibly opposing activities: bureaucratic ‘rule’ to ensure “the collective control which makes democracy possible”, and electoral ‘response’ to enable regular “adjustments to that order (Goodsell, 2005, p. 19). ‘Rule’ requires that “discretion is not abused, that due process is the norm and not the exception, and that undue risks are not taken that undermine the integrity of the political system” (Du Gay, 2005, p. 4). Both the Chilcot and Butler enquiries conclude that such safeguards were not in place during the months leading up to the publication of the September 2002 dossier *Iraq’s Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Butler, 2004; Chilcot, 2016a). I would argue that they are not upheld, either by the most recent Propriety Guidance (2014), or the latest Code of Conduct for Special Advisers (2015), because these fail to acknowledge that civil servants have fundamental obligations that go beyond simply the government of the day.

#### **7.4 What makes good government communications?**

We saw earlier that the Secretary of State Tessa Jowell’s approach to government communication was described by her former special adviser as “old-fashioned” because it heeded the division of labour between administrative and political civil servants and paid attention to due process. The fact that such considerations are considered to be old fashioned supports claims that during the Blair years at least, ministers had become less constrained over time by ideas of ‘due process’ (Chilcot, 2016a; Foster, 2016). Earlier we examined the arguments of Aucoin, Manin and Rosanvallon that a more complete realisation of public representation in government is achieved when both administrative and political dimensions are brought into play. This is especially critical where the communications function is concerned because of the potential for public misinformation and deceit, and the link between public trust and the stability of democratic systems. The Phillis Review of 2004 was one attempt, albeit abortively as it turned out, to achieve a more effective synergy between the public responsibilities of politicians and civil servants by aligning government communications more explicitly to the needs of the public.

In the light of these arguments, it is worth looking again at recent contrasting statements about civil service impartiality from two rival Conservative politicians that were first cited in Chapter 1, Bernard Jenkin and Francis Maude. Both speak from a position of ‘situated agency’: Jenkin as chair of the parliamentary scrutiny body which holds departments and ministers to account; and Maude as minister for the Cabinet Office (2010-2015), the sprawling department which, among other tasks, has jurisdiction over government-wide communications, propriety and ethics. Maude was responsible for chairing the Government Communications Service Board, a committee described in the GCS Handbook as “the most important decision-making body in the GCS”, which “governs the activity of the GCS” (2015a). These two politicians’ interpretations of the meaning of civil service impartiality must be seen in relation to their roles as incumbent politician and parliamentary scrutinizer respectively:

Governments come and go, and, in the absence of a codified constitution or formal separation of powers, it is this body of permanent officials that underpins the constitutional stability of our country. That is why a permanent and impartial civil service was established. *Bernard Jenkin (April 2014)*

The essence of impartiality is not indifference to the Government of the day but the ability to be equally passionate and committed to implementing a future Government’s priorities and programme...It must be a passionate commitment to delivering the Government of the day’s priorities. *Francis Maude (April 2014)*

Jenkin’s is the classic view of the UK civil service as a public-minded body of officials that has obligations within the constitution that are upheld through the practice of impartiality from a position of job security and permanence and go beyond the government of the day. Maude equates lack of passion with indifference, and seeks to bind civil servants to the priorities of the government of the day, painting a picture that looks much like Aucoin’s notion of ‘promiscuous partisanship’. It is the latter perspective, which appears to drive much reform in government, including the New Labour approach to government communications after 1997, and Maude’s own, albeit aborted, proposals for Extended Ministerial Offices after 2010 (*Civil Service Reform Plan*, 2012). This begs the question as to what safeguards are or should be in place to ensure that the public interest is not undermined by partisan reform posing as ‘modernization’, or the law of unintended consequences; a subject dealt with in the final chapter.



#### 7.4.1 Models of good government communication

It is not difficult to find criticism about what makes bad government communication, but there are few models for what makes good communication between a government and its publics. For Bernard Ingham, government information must above all be credible, but this is only possible by “upholding standards” at the highest level, something which he believes is not popular with some ministers because “they want the flexibility of a head of information who can move effortlessly from information to propaganda and back again” (C01). As we saw in Chapter 6, ministers have resisted setting clear standards in relation to the media role of special advisers, probably for the same reason.

An extensive study looking at PR excellence in government communications in 15 liberal democracies examined performance according to attributes such as training, recruitment, propriety conventions, transparency and e-government. Examining administrative documents relating to the staffing and operation of each government communication service, the audit found that, together with Australia and the US, the UK was relatively transparent and citizen-focused as opposed to party-oriented, and was among the least partisan. The authors conclude, somewhat surprisingly in view of the evidence presented here, that “only civil servants are spokespeople,” a situation they regard as unique to the UK. They concede, however, that “an informal system of political government spokespeople functions through the network of special advisers” (Canel & Sanders, 2013, pp.296, 303). It is this informal special advisers’ network which this study has shown has had a crucial impact on the process by which government news is mediated; a finding that, as stated earlier, suggests that any consideration of government communications, and especially media relations, must include the activities of this network, both within departments and centrally at Number 10. Canel and Sanders’ conclusions are interesting, and heartening, but they represent a snapshot rather than a period of change, are based largely on evidence relating to the period between 2008 and 2011, before the closure of the COI. They also rest on available documentary evidence such as propriety guidance and official staffing figures, which as we have seen, cannot be relied on to accurately reflect the actual everyday processes of the Government Communications Service. I would argue that this approach, although valuable, does not sufficiently address the political, ethical and media constraints within which government communicators have to operate, and which have a bearing on issues of public trust. The authors characterise the ‘spin debate’ as “a healthy indicator of a press sector prepared to hold politicians

to account” (p309) but this does not take into account the complicity of journalists in the process of spin, as discussed in Chapter 1. It also does not take account of more substantive critiques of UK government communications since 1997, such as the one presented in this thesis, which go well beyond debates about ‘political spin’. These include the shift away from citizen-focused communication such as direct communication and towards more mediated communication; the reconfiguring of government news management through the prism of special advisers; the blurring of the distinction between official and non-attributable sources within government; and the increasing use of media as a channel for public accountability as an alternative to parliament.

Informed by broader considerations of how members of the public engage with politics and policy decision-making, Blumler and Coleman recently proposed three founding principles of democratic communication which recognise the power asymmetries between governments and citizens and seek to build in genuine accountability:

1. Everyone is equally entitled to be well informed and taken into account when decisions are made
2. Holders of significant power must account for the way they exercise it and ensure that "a public interest is being served"
3. Effective channels of exchange and dialogue between citizens and decision makers are required (Blumler & Coleman, 2015).

The idea that citizens are entitled to receive information about policy decisions, to be consulted about them, and to question the holders of ‘significant power’ (presumably ministers and senior civil servants) about how they exercise it in the public interest, is a long way from the cloistered, self-regulating world of media management in Whitehall. This would require a machinery for accountability, with externally validated criteria for what represents the ‘public interest’, and the power to apply sanctions where breaches occur. Yeung’s review of government communications regulation from a legal standpoint argues that the current system of internal self-regulation on the basis of propriety conventions does not protect the system from its greatest threat, namely, “ministerial overreaching”, leading to pressure on civil servants to “stray beyond legitimate policy exposition into the territory of illegitimate party propaganda”(Yeung, 2006, p. 89). The exercise of discretion in deciding what and how to communicate and when, is a politically-sensitive process, and if the public interest is to be served, Yeung concludes, “Parliament is the only institution that has

the democratic legitimacy to exercise this judgment” (p91). This recommendation is considered further in the next chapter.

The idea of externally-validated criteria for evaluating public communications by governments brings us back to the seven principles of good communications which the Phillis Review outlined in 2004, which, as we have seen, were wholly endorsed by the UK government after 2004 but disappeared from view after 2010. The review stated that the seven principles should underlie *all* government communication:

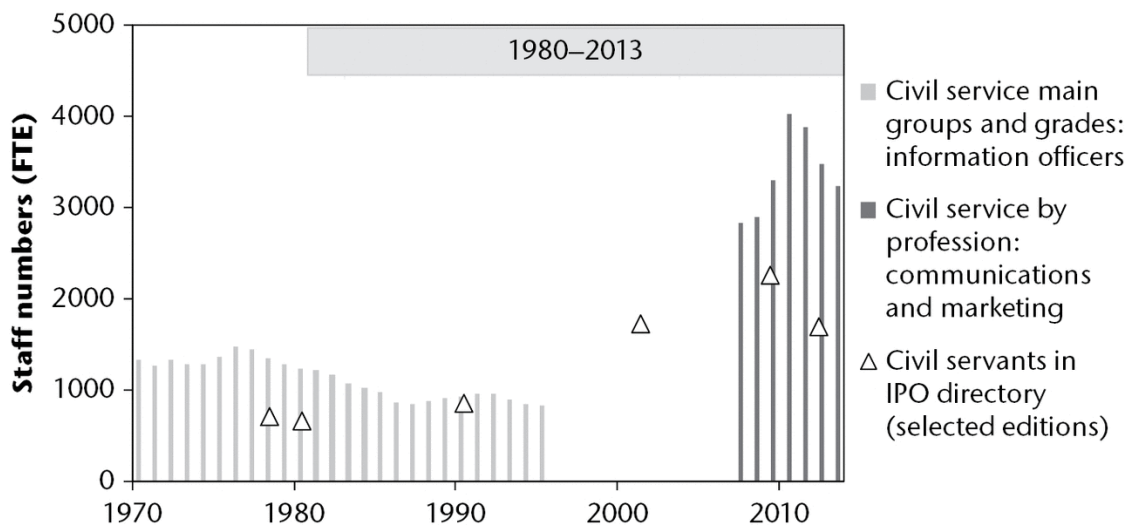
1. Openness, not secrecy.
2. More direct, unmediated communications with the public.
3. Genuine engagement with the public as part of policy formation and delivery, not communication as an afterthought.
4. Positive presentation of government policies and achievements, not misleading spin.
5. Use of all relevant channels of communication, not excessive emphasis on national press and broadcasters.
6. Co-ordinated communication of issues that cut across departments, not conflicting or duplicated departmental messages.
7. Reinforcement of the civil service's political neutrality, rather than a blurring of government and party communications.

On the basis of the findings presented in this and earlier chapters, UK government communications falls short on many of these principles, including the recommendation that they should underpin *all* government communications. For this to apply, the media and communications activity conducted by special advisers would have to be subject to the same levels of quality control and accountability as civil service communications, although its very different function would have to be acknowledged and understood. The capability reviews and annual communications plans produced by the GCS since 2011 support an audience-based approach and are critical of an over-reliance on reactive approaches to the news agenda. However, principle 2, calling for more ‘direct, unmediated communications’ is contradicted by the decision post-2010 to dramatically cut expenditure on advertising and direct communications following the closure of the COI, and to focus instead on ‘earned media’: that is, obtaining free publicity through promotional efforts in mass media outlets (Government Communications Service, 2015b).

As discussed in Chapter 4, *Resilience*, Hood & Dixon identified a move which began in the 1970s away from a common service agency running public campaigns towards

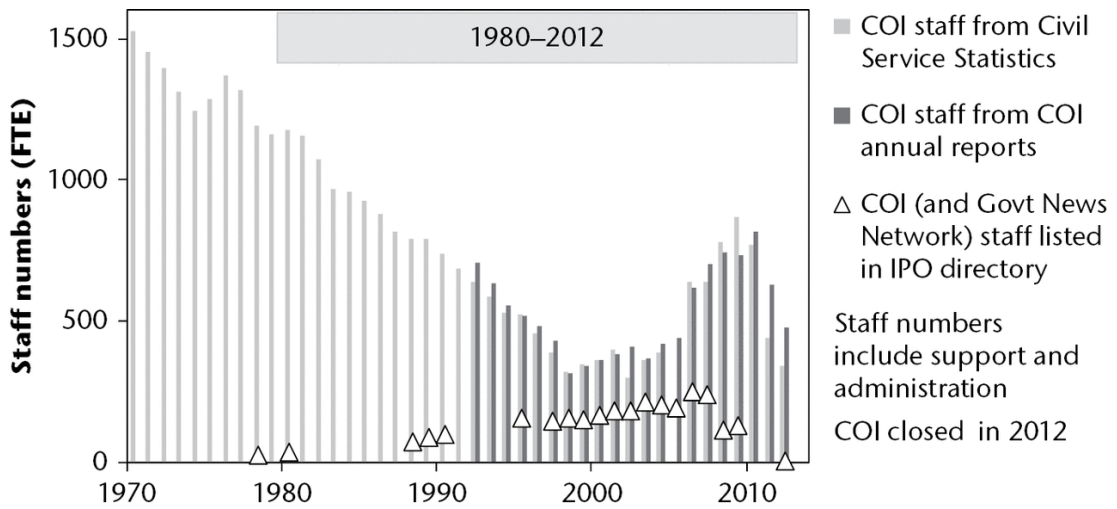
what they refer to as “a pattern of ‘spinners’ clustered in central agencies and around ministers in departments”, which brought government communications more closely under ministerial control and created a new government profession, communications and marketing (Hood & Dixon, 2015, p. 174) (See Tables 7.4 and 7.5 below). Corner concurs, concluding that “the pitch to the media has started to become of greater importance than the push to the public directly”, although “the web may be marginally changing this situation” (Corner, 2010, p. 65). The management of government communications via the web is fast-developing and beyond the scope of this study but would be a fruitful area of research, see (Mickoleit, 2014).

**Table 7.4: Government communicators in post: 1980-2013**



Taken from: *Figure 8.7. Civil Service Staff in Communications Roles 1970–2013. Sources: Civil Service Statistics and IPO Directories* (Hood & Dixon, p173)

**Table 7.5: Staff employed by the COI (1980-2012)**



Taken from: *Figure 8.8. Central Office of Information Staff Numbers 1970–2013. Sources: Civil Service Statistics, IPO Directories, and COI Annual Reports (Hood & Dixon, 2015, p, 174)*

In any case, the current GCS plans and capability reviews, impressive though they are as statements of professional intent, are largely functional rather than ethical, and are primarily concerned with the integration, delivery and evaluation of messaging in line with the government’s programme, admittedly a difficult enough task in itself. What they do not provide is an approach to communication based on the concept of public accountability. Even supposing the Phillis principles had been adopted wholesale within government communications, and the media activities of special advisers had been included within their remit, the problem remains that the principles displayed in these documents are institutionally-oriented, rather than value-oriented.

## 7.5 Conclusion

This chapter set out to answer the question: what are the stated public values of government communicators, how have they changed over time, and what kind of representative claim is implied by these values? To answer this question I have attempted a difficult synthesis between ideas of mediatization, theoretical approaches to representative democracy, and the theory and practice of government communication. Through this synthesis, I have tried to establish some parameters for what makes good, democratic public communication within the context of the particular culture and history of the British civil service in recent decades. I argued

that the intensification of mediatized politics within the ‘cross-field’ where media, politics and bureaucracy intersect, has narrowed the scope for public representation, marginalising the citizen, and posing challenges for the stated and democratic purposes of government communications.

The civil service communicators interviewed for this study delineated an area of responsibility that was unique to them: communication in the public interest which they deemed to be separate, and sometimes in conflict with, their role serving the government of the day. These perceptions appear to be increasingly at odds with governing politicians from all ruling parties, who insist that the civil servants closest to them demonstrate an enthusiastic commitment to any ideas espoused by ministers, however controversial. These perceptions are consistent with the findings of mediatization scholars who have carried out observations within public bureaucracies and found that the bureaucratic ideals held by public servants are under challenge both from ministers and the media.

Gus O’Donnell’s insistence that challenge is an essential part of the civil servants’ repertoire (2013b) rings slightly hollow in the context of Matthew Taylor’s observation of senior civil servants during the Blair era as “self-censoring in the face of political determination”, even when they felt ministers needed “a reality check” (M. Taylor, 2015). If the civil service is to live up to its aspirations to provide a check on the role of the political party and the politician within government communications, they must, firstly, provide and uphold a long-term vision of what government communications should be which goes beyond the narratives developed by individual ministers or particular governments. Secondly, they must ensure that a range of communications tools, techniques and approaches aimed at reaching all citizens are deployed.

The journalists interviewed chose not to adopt the mantle of ‘watchdog,’ preferring instead the perhaps more modest aim of ‘getting the story’. In doing this, they may or may not be serving the public interest. Indeed, no public interest can be served without the kinds of information that news outlets provide, but this cannot be relied upon and this type of informal accountability is no substitute for formal accountability. Bernard Ingham claimed in his interview that “when they formed the GIS in 1945 they didn’t give it a code of practice, it was to behave as good civil servants behave”. In his archival history of post-war government communications, Moore argues that, over and above the insufficient civil service code of neutrality: “the

government entirely failed to make its communication accountable” (Moore, 2006, p. 216).

I have argued that to work in practice, and therefore to serve the public interest, the exercise of impartiality requires some autonomy on the part of public servants to decide when it is most appropriate to challenge ministers. This autonomy cannot be taken for granted; indeed, the direction of travel appears to be against this, both in the experiences recounted by government press officers, and in the changes in governance that have been taking place steadily since at least 1997. I have examined the implicit representative claim made by government communicators that, as civil servants, they operate according to principles which go beyond the government of the day to a wider public, in order to ensure ‘good government’ in the long term. The increasing public trust in civil servants to tell the truth, and the public demand for impartial information, as revealed in public opinion surveys, would support, albeit provisionally, the representative claim of non-elected officials such as civil servants, according to criteria proposed by Saward (Saward, 2010). The question remains though, as to how this unelected, anonymous body of officials could be held to account.

What might public accountability in government communications look like? Bovens, a legal scholar, defines accountability as “a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgement, and the actor may face consequences”(Bovens, 2007, p. 450). Ultimately, the only incentive to those in public office to refrain from an “inherent tendency’ to hoard and abuse power, is to provide “a visible, tangible and powerful” forum of accountability (p465) through an official and publicly recognised forum. This forum cannot be one in which ministers or civil servants are both judge and jury in their own court, or one in which the government accounts for itself largely through the media. Indeed, honesty and impartiality are considered to be almost synonymous in the public mind insofar as this can be divined through surveys. The danger for politicians, and political parties, is that partial, or partisan, information is seen as the opposite.

## Chapter 8: Discussion and Conclusion

### 8.1 Introduction

In the Prologue I used the example of the ongoing controversy over the UK government's 2002 dossier *Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction* to argue that a government with a huge unassailable majority, in charge of a powerful narrative, in control of the official tools through which to disseminate the narrative, and without sufficient challenge, is capable of delivering a form of public information which is, at best, partial, and at worst, deceptive (Herring & Robinson, 2014; P. Taylor, 2013). I raised the question as to whether this had any bearing on the routine workings of government communications after 1997, and whether the narrative of 'political spin' provided a credible explanation for changes in the way the UK government communicated with the public through the media. The activities of PR intermediaries within government in routine times are little studied, especially in the UK, where 'political spin' has come to symbolise much that is corrupted and untrustworthy about modern mediated politics. The continuing use of the term 'spin' is an indicator of the extent of public disquiet with mediated political and government communication but I have argued that, rather than analyzing or challenging the underlying process, this narrative apports individual blame on particular agents, typically politicians and their supposedly all-powerful 'spin doctors'.

This thesis set out to open up the black box of government communications to provide an in-depth, empirically grounded study of the practices and principles of government media management, and to assess the significance of changes in the structure and culture of government communications after the Labour landslide election victory of 1997. To do this, the study aimed to explore what lay behind widespread charges of political spin, and to consider what the long term implications might be for public trust and the democratic process. It applied the non-normative sensitising concept of 'mediatization', together with four subsidiary concepts - resilience, resistance, responsiveness, and representing the public - to conduct a critical and fine-grained analysis of the institutional dynamics that operate at the interface between government and the media, theorised as the 'cross-field'. This approach challenges as simplistic the common assumption that government communications is either a relatively neutral professional function, or an inherently



unethical form of distorted communication, and argues for a more critical, nuanced approach. The debate about government communications can be reframed as an interaction between party politics and the public bureaucracy, and their relations with media. In this sense, government communications presents two contradictory faces, firstly, as a public good and, secondly, as a tool for obtaining and sustaining political power.

The main research question of this thesis asked whether the government's response to mediatization after 1997 challenged the capacity of the UK government communications service to deliver a public communications function consistent with its own stated purposes. Since mediatization is a meta-process that takes place over time, the research methodology required a historical approach that could examine changing contexts, multiple levels of causation, and sequences and differences between one period of time and another (Szreter, 2015). This was achieved by using witness testimony dating back from the 1960s to 2014, combined with documentary and archive sources.

In this chapter I start by examining the research findings in relation to the main research question and the four sub questions. This is followed by an examination and critique of the research design and methodology. In the third section, I consider the contribution made by the specific theoretical approach taken here. Finally, to conclude, I present recommendations for a more publicly accountable government communications settlement based on the findings of this study.

## **8.2 Research findings**

I start by summarising the key findings which relate to the four sub-questions outlined below, and then present the main findings in response to the overall research question.

- *Chapter 4: Resilience* - to what extent did government communications express, plan and deliver in relation to its public purposes and objectives, and what were its strengths and weaknesses over time?
- *Chapter 5: Resistance* – how and when did government officials responsible for dealing with the media resist or challenge what they saw as media and/or

political obstacles to their public purposes and objectives? Did such resistance increase or decline over time?

- *Chapter 6: Responsiveness* – how and when did government officials responsible for dealing with the media respond to the needs and demands of media and political actors? What impact did such response have on its public purposes and objectives? What is the relationship between political and media responsiveness?
- *Chapter 7: Representing the public* - what are the stated public values of government communicators, how have they changed over time, and what kind of representative claim is implied by these values?

*Overall question:* In response to the pressures of *mediatization* after 1997, did the UK government communications service have sufficient *resilience* to deliver a public communications function consistent with its own stated purposes?

### 8.2.1 Resilience

The archival evidence showed that politicians during the Thatcher era were quick to appreciate the implications of the rise of 24/7 media during the 1980s, and responded by demanding that the government information service work more proactively to manage the news agenda. The powerful position of Bernard Ingham as Margaret Thatcher's media protector, and as defender of the Government Information Service, belied the institutional weakness of the GIS as established in 1945. As a network distributed throughout the central governing executive, it had few if any explicit public purposes, no external system of accountability, and was isolated from the mainstream civil service. As the accounts of former government press officers in this study have shown, this cadre of specialists was consistently under-valued and marginalised by the rest of the service. This deprived the senior civil service of significant strategic involvement in the direction of the service and by default, as mediatization progressed, the GIS was driven further into the political domain; a process which accelerated after 1997 and is continuing.

In opposition after 1992, Labour tested the shortcomings of the service to the full through attacks on the government through the media, and, on achieving power in 1997, transferred many of the elements of its proactive, adversarial, news-led approach into government. Reforms to the service since 1997, have been led by politicians from both main ruling parties, who largely overcame both local resistance and criticism from a series of government and parliamentary reviews to mould it in a

way that suited them. In return, they have largely publicly upheld the principle of impartiality, and maintained much of the outward form of the service as created after 1945. The first and only independent review of government communications, the so-called Phillis Review, was commissioned by the government on the recommendations of the Public Administration Select Committee in July 2002 which had raised concerns about a “breakdown in the level of trust in, and credibility of, government communications” following a series of media-related government scandals (Public Administration Select Committee, 2002). Work on the review began in February 2003 under the chairmanship of Sir Robert Phillis and the final report was published in 2004 (Phillis, 2004). The recommendations of the Phillis Review were accepted in full by all parties and it became the main foundation document for government communications, under the leadership of the first Permanent Secretary, Government Communications.

However, less well-known, and not sufficiently addressed, was the Review’s implied criticism of the Labour government’s undermining of impartiality in government communications. Phillis outlined three minimum requirements for achieving impartiality: (1) Directors of Communication must be able to stand back and object to politically-biased or misleading communications; (2) senior communications staff should not change simply because of a ministerial change; and (3) the interests of the general public should be paramount in any programme to modernise government communications. Both the documentary evidence examined here, and the testimony of the civil servants, journalists and special advisers interviewed, point to the same conclusion; that the changes in governance after 1997, the involvement of special advisers in managing the news media, and a perception of job insecurity following elections, have made it harder to fulfil these three requirements, thereby undermining the practice of impartiality.

The government’s response to the Phillis Review in 2004 represented the high point of parliamentary and civil service intervention into the otherwise closed world of government communications. The post 2010 government quietly shelved the Phillis review, discontinued the Permanent Secretary, Communications, post and closed the Central Office of Information (COI) in 2012. Planning and priority-setting is now conducted from within the Cabinet Office and is politically led (Gregory, 2012). A GCS Board chaired by the Cabinet Office Minister acts as the ultimate coordinating and decision-making authority for government communication; identifying and agreeing high level objectives, and approving the annual government communication

plan. Its deliberations are less transparent than the COI, which was obliged to publish an annual report.

Despite such changes, which challenge the paradigm of government communications as conceived in 1945, as a network of specialists whose regard for propriety and professional values can protect ministers against charges of propaganda, there is still almost universal support in principle for the impartial model of government communications. It is still possible to claim that the government communications service has some autonomy to set priorities and plan strategically under a professional head of service, but this has been seriously and progressively curtailed by successive changes introduced since 1997 and this direction of travel continues.

### 8.2.2 Resistance

Resistance by government press officers and their leaders to both mediatization and politicization appears in various forms, from passive resistance and obstruction, to day to day 'push back' and administrative interventions like reviews and enquiries. Overall, however, resistance appears to have lessened, especially when comparing reactions after the 1997 and 2010 elections, and the actions of successive heads of profession. Communications professionals believe that a preoccupation with short term communication advantage, achieved through one main channel, the mass media, and targeted towards the perceived needs of ministers rather than citizens, is *de facto*, ineffective communication. This view was also highlighted in the Phillis Review and more recently in at least one internal capability review (*Cabinet Office Communication capability review, 2013a*).

Nearly all press officer interviewees felt confident about policing the boundary between impartial and partisan communications and used their own sense of 'discomfort' as an indicator of transgression, mainly, although not exclusively, on the part of ministers and special advisers, yet several felt that currently serving civil servants were demonstrably less able to do so. Decisions about how and when to resist demands from departmental ministers, No.10, or the media, are taken quickly, and based on individual sensibility and implicit internal collective wisdom about what is acceptable or appropriate. There are no clearly expressed or externally validated criteria for raising objections, no established and understood forms of redress, and no consistently applied sanctions for misconduct.

Where resistance does take place it is more likely to be tactical than strategic, with the onus on the individual press officer to identify issues and stand up to ministers and their aides, if necessary invoking support from senior colleagues. However, as the propriety guidance states, ministers must be placated through a process of ‘negotiating’, ‘compromising’, ‘finding a deal’ or at most offering a ‘polite refusal’ (Government Communications Service, 2014b). In one recent example from the Coalition period, an objection by the press office to the wording of a press release which could have been construed as ethnically insensitive, caused relations with the ministerial team to become “a touch frosty” for a couple of days (C13). The same respondent reported that journalists had challenged some departmental communication as partisan after 2010, some of which were accepted and some not. It was not clear on what basis or who adjudicated but there is no obvious or consistent mechanism for public challenge or redress.

These findings raise questions in relation to the exercise of impartiality. Who defines the boundary between what is and is not acceptable communication, and in the absence of clear criteria for this, what is to stop the boundary from moving imperceptibly over time to the extent that what was once unacceptable, becomes commonplace? If we accept that the pressures of mediatization increasingly incentivise governing politicians to engage in self-advantaging forms of strategic communication, how realistic is it to expect press officers to fulfil the ethical and political obligations expected of them?

### 8.2.3 Responsiveness

During the early 1980s, in recognition of a more demanding media environment, and the unpopularity of the economic policies of the government, Bernard Ingham encouraged his staff to become more proactive, coordinated and responsive to the concerns of ministers, pushing departmental Heads of Information to work harder to put over and explain the government’s policy and legislative programme. Responsiveness to the media concerns of ministers has been described as an indicator of ‘politicization through indirect mediatization’ (Pallas et al., 2014), as press officers react to ministers’ own increasing responsiveness to media. However, a greater responsiveness to ministers’ media agendas may actually *conflict with* rather than *support* responsiveness to the wider public, especially in majoritarian systems (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008) because it incentivises forms of communication that target the relatively small group of swing voters.

The obligation to *advocate* on behalf of ministerial priorities was almost universally accepted by the civil service respondents because, as Ingham put it, “if you are explaining it, you are advocating it”. Indeed, “advocacy for interests” has been defined as the goal of the PR practitioner (Moloney, 2006, p. 162), who is employed for his or her professional and technical skills, yet is loyal and responsible to their employer (Fisher, 2016). The requirement to go beyond advocacy and to *promote* and *justify* government policy, however controversial, has been seen as a further encroachment into civil service impartiality although it is unclear where the dividing line lies (Grube, 2015). Some press officers reported being asked by ministers to engage in what could be construed as party political communication. One experienced passive resistance from departmental civil servants when she was asked to set up meetings with them to discuss Tony Blair’s policy review leading up to the 2005 election. Another, after 2010, followed instructions by ministers to release information to friendly media outlets which, while not untrue, was selective, and aimed at challenging the austerity claims of rival public sector bodies by criticizing their financial management. Government press officers felt that they had borne the brunt of anti-bureaucratic sentiment on the part of incoming ministers and their aides after both the 1997 and 2010 elections. Some felt they were an easy target since attacks on government communications in the name of ‘political spin’ was a symbolic and visible way of demonstrating decisiveness and political control in government.

Media engagement has emerged as a significant part of the role of special advisers, even those who specialise in policy rather than media, although this is not reflected in their Code of Conduct (Cabinet Office, 2015a). The three special advisers interviewed had regular, intensive contact with journalists, often bearing the brunt of a media storm, but were not always clear about how to designate their role as sources: were they speaking for the minister personally, for the department, or for the government as a whole. When faced with conflicting priorities and interests, their loyalties were most likely to lie with the minister personally.

Government press officers acknowledged that special advisers did on occasion instruct civil servants, and did talk to journalists under the radar, but played down special advisers’ news management role. In contrast, all the journalists interviewed agreed that there had been an immediate, radical and permanent change after 1997 in the way the government managed news announcements. This provided journalists with topical, story-rich, and exclusive nuggets of news which helped them to navigate the growing demands of 24/7 media but the downside was that special advisers

provided the news selectively, and mainly to the political lobby. This change took place immediately after the election victory in May 1997, and led to a transformation in the rules of engagement between government and the news media which continued at least until the later years of the Coalition government. Special advisers administered the news grid, and took responsibility for the story of the day, typically working around civil service press officers and “dealing with handpicked journalists who were being fed the story” while journalists who were not favoured, and the Whitehall press officers, were “left out of the loop”(J21).

There appears to be a *de facto* reorientation of government communications around the needs of ministers (Hood & Dixon, 2015) firstly, through a greater responsiveness expected of civil servants, and secondly, through the changing media role of special advisers. What then, should be the particular contribution of government communicators, to its public accountabilities? To take the specific case of the 2002 Iraq WMD dossier, would it have been more *responsive* of civil servants at the Foreign Office and No.10, in the sense of the term as it is used by Mulgan to have *actively resisted* the drive to break with precedent and publish intelligence information (Mulgan, 2008)? This would have led to short-term friction but might have protected the longer-term interests of the UK government, and indeed, the reputation of Tony Blair and the Office of Prime Minister.

#### 8.2.4 Representing the public

Government communicators believe that there are considerations that go beyond the needs of ministers and the government of the day, and the agendas set by the media, to a notional wider public. This includes the numerical majority which did not vote for the ruling party. This opens up the possibility of a space within the public bureaucracy where there is some autonomy from politicians, and hence the electoral principle, and where strategic communication priorities can be determined not just by political or media actors but derived from a notion of the public good. However, it is difficult to discern the public purposes of UK communications and therefore to publicly hold the service to account since such purposes are, rarely if ever, explicitly stated except in the most general terms (**See Table 4.1**). Successive government and parliamentary enquiries have consistently reiterated the importance of informing citizens, providing clear, truthful and factual information and maintaining the line between party political and public information but it is not clear where this line lies and how transgressions should be identified, judged and redressed.

The safeguards that ensure impartiality have been weakened in the most recent iterations of GCS Propriety Guidance (2014) and the latest Code of Conduct for Special Advisers (2015), because they fail to acknowledge that civil servants may have obligations that go beyond the government of the day, or that special advisers play an important role in news management. What is missing from GCS statements since 2010 are references to the particular ethical and constitutional accountabilities required of government communications, beyond a stated recognition of the “core duty to enable people to make informed choices”(*The Future of Public Service Communications: Report and Findings*, 2015).

The greater involvement of ministers in priority setting and in shaping the government news narrative since 1997 is linked with the increasing prioritisation of news management over more direct or interactive forms of communication such as advertising or direct marketing. There is evidence that ministers in the Blair government prevented the publication of research findings about immigration which could have had a negative impact on media and public opinion. This decision may have contributed to later policy failures because, without acknowledging that a significant majority of the population had concerns about immigration, it was harder to address the problem. What little is known about public opinion in relation to trust suggests that while few trust politicians, civil servants are increasingly trusted to tell the truth. I have argued that this could be because partiality or perhaps the political process itself, are increasingly negatively associated in the public mind with the likelihood of truth-telling (IpsosMORI, 2016).

There is evidence from the statements of some politicians, and in the literature, to suggest that they feel that the balance of public accountability, albeit informal rather than formal, has shifted towards the media and away from parliament (Manin, 1997). Even the highly regarded, specialist journalists interviewed for this study downplayed their role as ‘watchdogs’, and emphasised the importance of ‘getting the story’. Reporting the facts and helping audiences to understand complex policy and political matters is a vital prerequisite for ‘informal accountability’, but it does not replace ‘formal democratic accountability’ which must be “visible, tangible and powerful” (Bovens, 2007, p. 465).

Blumler and Coleman recently proposed three founding principles for good democratic communication, which recognise the power asymmetries between governments and citizens and seek to build in genuine accountability. These are that



everyone is equally entitled to be well informed and taken into account when decisions are made; holders of significant power must account for the way they exercise it and ensure that the public interest is served; and effective channels of exchange and dialogue between citizens and decision makers are needed (Blumler & Coleman, 2015). It is not clear who would be responsible for upholding these principles but if civil servants are to continue to be entrusted with the task of policing the propriety of government communications, in what way can and should this unelected, anonymous body of officials be held to account, and by whom?

### 8.2.5 Summary of main findings

The main finding of this thesis is that the process of mediatization, interacting with politicization, did indeed undermine the autonomy and resilience of government communications after 1997, challenging the capacity of the service to resist political demands, and bypassing or even contradicting, any role beyond that to serve the government of the day. As discussed in Chapter 1, Section 1.2.1, the limited definition of impartiality as mere neutrality is a narrow interpretation of a concept which has traditionally been linked with equality, challenge and governing in the public interest. The answer to the main research question:

In response to the pressures of mediatization after 1997, did the UK government communications service have sufficient resilience to deliver a public communications function consistent with its own stated purposes?

...is therefore no, but a qualified one.

A problem arising from one of the key premises of this question is the difficulty in identifying a sustained public commitment on the part of the communications service to *any* consistent, explicit and clearly stated public purposes for UK government communications, beyond the general need to inform the public and ensure that information provided is objective and explanatory. As Moore argues, this difficulty relates back to the failure of the post-war government to establish guidelines, constraints, objectives or public purposes for the new service after 1945 (Moore, 2006). However, in spite of this qualification, the findings of this study suggest that even in its own limited terms, the government communications service, which is now a *de facto* integrated service that includes the news management role of special advisers, has not, during a period of intense mediatization, demonstrated “sufficient

resilience to deliver a public communications function consistent with its own stated purposes”.

The argument of some academics that ‘political spin’ was a feature of Labour after 1997, and that a rebalancing process has taken place since, partly in response to a media and public backlash, and developments in the “digital public sphere” is not supported by these findings (Gaber, 2016, p. 636; McNair, 2007b). The ‘politicization’ of government communications after 1997 did not go into reverse after the arrival of the new Conservative-led coalition government in 2010. Indeed, the most robust attempt to place government communications on a firmer and more accountable footing, the Phillis Review of 2004, was completely side-lined after 2010. Phillis tried to introduce safeguards to protect the Government Information Service from excessive political interference while advocating a more effective communications function that would recognise the needs of ministers. At the same time it introduced the idea of *the public* as an important stakeholder in government communications, albeit in very general terms. The considerable momentum behind the report appears to have ceased after 2010; the report has never been explicitly challenged but several of its recommendations have been bypassed, and the document itself has been removed from the public domain. None of its recommendations or principles is referred to in GCS documents post-2010.

The Phillis Review was one of a series of critical government and parliamentary inquiries after 1997, which tried to improve the credibility of the government communications service by protecting it from the risk of contagion through ‘political spin’. Attempts were made to ‘hermetically seal’ government communications from such contagion through the deployment of politically appointed special advisers to manage the more controversial political dimension and serve the increasingly mediated reputational fears and ambitions of ministers and their parties. This attempt has been only partially successful; special advisers have been integrated into the workings of the civil service communications function, but this appears to be at a cost to both credibility and public trust.

With the exception of the sudden closure of the COI in 2012, the structure of the government information service has shown remarkable resilience in retaining its post-war shape. However, this disguises the significant underlying changes in personnel, practices and priorities as a consequence of ministerially-led reforms after both 1997 and 2010. The findings from this study suggest that government’s

communications with the media, taken as a whole and including the contribution of special advisers, now *over-serves* the needs of ministers, and *under-serves* the needs of the public. Government press officers have become more responsive to ministers, while special advisers have occupied and transformed the domain that constitutes official government news, an area where senior government press officers formerly held sway. At the same time, a lack of transparency about the sources of government news has led to a blurring of the line between the official and unofficial, and between government and party political information.

The government's official news announcement function has become increasingly selective and is now jointly managed by a small but well-connected team of special advisers working closely with departmental civil servants. The government news selection process is determined by special advisers acting on ministerial priorities at two points: firstly, during the selection of news stories via the No.10 news grid, and secondly, through the selection of media outlet or individual journalist, according to the extent to which the announcement is thought to serve electoral priorities. The convention that Parliament is the first to hear major announcements, and that all media outlets are informed soon after, either directly or through agencies such as the Press Association, has been progressively by-passed since 1997. This increasing selectivity is compounded by the failure to clarify the provenance of government and ministerial spokespeople, despite the recommendations of three government committees. This has led to both internal and external confusion about the source and credibility of supposedly official government announcements (House of Lords Select Committee on Communications, 2008; Mountfield, 1997; Phillis, 2004). The transformation since 1997 in the rules of engagement that determine government news management has not been reflected in the propriety guidance of either government communicators who deal with the media or special advisers. In fact, the media relations role of special advisers is conducted largely under the radar.

In spite of these substantive and sustained changes in both principle and practice, the core value of impartiality is still widely upheld, even valorised, throughout the political domain, and in government propriety guidance, even as the conditions for its successful implementation are diminished. There are at least two key conditions for the exercise of impartiality: firstly, the confidence and the autonomy to speak truth to power; and secondly, the commitment to public values such as equity, fairness, impartiality, accountability and, as a precondition for these, due process (Mendus, 2008). These considerations, of necessity, place limits on the extent to which civil

servants can expect to be responsive to ministers, but with the speeding up of the news cycle, and the media/political ‘arms race’ that sustains it, it becomes ever harder to operate within these limits<sup>81</sup>. The critique presented by this thesis goes well beyond debates about ‘political spin’, to deeper structural and cultural changes such as the shift from direct communication to mediated communication; the reconfiguring of government news management through the prism of special advisers; the blurring of the distinction between official and non-attributable sources within government; and the increasing use of media as a channel for public accountability as an alternative to parliament.

Some disquiet among the public about more partisan forms of public communication has been picked up by long-term opinion surveys, although these are difficult to interpret. Could there be a connection between mediatization, seen as a meta-process that is capable of “reshaping relations not just among media organisations and their publics but among all social institutions” (Livingstone, 2009), and the blurring of distinctions that this study has observed within the cross-field between media, politics and bureaucracy? The 31<sup>st</sup> British Social Attitudes Survey (2014), for example, found a marked increase over 27 years in those who thought that governments ‘almost never’ “place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party”, from 11% in 1986 to 32% in 2013 (Park et al., 2014). The annual Ipsos MORI Veracity Index which asks people which professions they trust to tell the truth, found a growing gulf in trust scores between politicians and civil servants between 1983 and 2015, coinciding with the rise in perceptions of ‘political spin’. In 2016, the survey recorded a positive net rating<sup>82</sup> for civil servants of 27%, compared with a net rating for politicians of minus 53% (IpsosMORI, 2016). Whiteley et al. found a definite overall long-term decline between 1997 and 2013 in public assessments of the honesty of the British government related to key events such as the Iraq War and the MP’s expenses scandal (Whiteley et al., 2016).

Howell James’ testimony articulated most fully the sense among the government communicators interviewed for this study that they had an important public duty that went beyond the obligation to serve ministers and the government of the day. This claim to represent the public, however understated, has some support in the literature

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<sup>81</sup> This was the point by Lord (Robin) Butler in his interview.

<sup>82</sup> The proportion of respondents who trusted a profession to tell the truth, minus those who didn’t.

from public administration and political theorists (Aucoin, 2012; Foote, 1969; Grube, 2014; James, 2005b; Manin, 1997; Rosanvallon, 2011; Saward, 2010).

### **8.3 A critical look at research design and methodology**

As an exploration of government media relations in the UK since 1997 this was a case study which used in-depth interviews with three types of elite actor, together with archival and documentary analysis, to present a rounded and empirically grounded insider view of customs and practices over time within a particular site. This site was theorised as the cross-field between the three fields of media, politics and bureaucracy. As a case study, it provided a UK test of how a mediatization approach can inform the study of public relations within national state bureaucracies, and followed other such studies conducted in northern Europe (Fredriksson et al., 2015; Pallas & Fredriksson, 2014; Schillemans, 2012; Thorbjornsrud, Ihlen, & Figenschou, 2014). These studies used a combination of documentary analysis, interviews and ethnography but were synchronic rather than diachronic. Many of the findings here are consistent with these studies, despite the differing political systems, suggesting that the case study approach is generalizable, at least to other liberal democracies. This study also replicates in part some of the much more thorough archival analysis carried out by Moore in his historical case study of UK government communications between 1945-51, which provided some useful precursors to some of the issues raised by this study, such as political sensitivity to news media, and the role of impartiality in protecting governments from charges of propaganda. In this section I consider the role of mixed methods in offering a more complete view of institutional and cultural change.

#### **8.3.1 Interviews**

As expected, the civil servant interviews provided a rich and detailed testament to the changes in relations between media and government up to and beyond 1997 and there was consistency in their recollections of events of public record such impact of the changes of government in 1997 and 2010 and of the Jo Moore and McBride scandals. Their experience in government service ranged from the 1960s to 2014, and five of the eight who had been in post before 1997 remained in post three years later. Only one experienced both the 1997 and 2010 elections. Their topographical position as 'boundary spanners' (Williams, 2010), their disposition as "outsiders-within" (Edwards, 2015, p. 99), and their professional status as government spokespeople,

required them to be reflexive about both their organisation and their role within it, concerned as they were to represent (albeit selectively) its goals, objectives and achievements in a coherent fashion to the outside world. As participants in the process of refining and explaining the narratives of others, they observe and negotiate the gap between what is said internally, what is done, how things are presented and how things are seen by the world outside. This *uncomfortable* institutional positioning gives them a sense of critical distance that augments the distancing already inherent in the impartial role of the civil servant.

How successfully were some of the risks of the civil servant interviews mitigated during the data gathering and analysis phases, as discussed in Chapter 3? One risk was that, as advocates for their organisation, and in the light of their contested position within it, the civil servants would overplay the importance of their role, underplay some of the difficulties, and deflect blame on to others. In fact, as the analysis of NVivo references in **Table 3.5** showed, they were open about the negative view of their role held by fellow civil servants, while those who were in post in 1997 were openly critical of the quality of the information service offered to both journalists and politicians at that time. Special advisers were frequently mentioned but although there was some resentment about their growing media involvement after 1997 and doubts about the calibre and *modus operandi* of some of them, in general the contribution of special advisers was described as beneficial.

Another risk was that their continuing loyalty to ministers would mute their criticism. This was observed but the significant traction in the interviews given to problems arising immediately after the general elections of both 1997 and 2010 suggests that some perceptions of ministerial interference might have been deflected in this direction. Interviewees were by and large rational and discursive in their responses, but where emotion was expressed, this is the point where it was focused. Jonathan Haslam referred with some anger to the drive by ministers after 1997 to “get yourself a director of communications and hang a head on your belt” (C07). A press officer sadly noted how an experienced senior colleague, “a lovely woman” was “slowly shuffled out” and replaced by a journalist from a left-wing newspaper (C05). A Director of Communication with 20 years’ experience who left government in 2011 talked about high levels of hostility from incoming ministers and the difficulties of “dealing with lots of fearful and weeping colleagues” after 2010 but declined to elaborate on incidents that had affected him personally and which might have led to his decision to leave (C11).

There were some issues that, surprisingly, carried little weight during the interviews, despite questions being asked about them as part of the topic guide, such as digital or web communications, civil service recruitment, and the concept of spin. These are all issues which attract significant attention from external commentators and yet seemed relatively unimportant to the interviewees. The lack of interest in discussing 'spin' is hard to interpret but could imply that as a negatively-charged colloquial term generally used to attach blame, it carries little explanatory power within a professional context. Regarding questions related to the politicization of civil service recruitment, with a few anecdotal exceptions, most respondents could not identify problems in the way the process was handled and didn't consider it to be a matter of interest. This doesn't mean that the issue is not worth covering but other methods may be required.

What is significant is the lack of salience of issues relating to digital and web communications. This may be due to the continuing importance of the print and broadcast mainstream news to ministers that was highlighted by both journalists and civil servants, as this response exemplifies:

Actually the centrality of the print media even as the population move away from it, which it is doing, they are still in kind of Whitehall and Westminster terms, overwhelmingly more important than anything else. They are the people who make or break individual careers and can guide policy decisions just by sheer muscle (C11).

This suggests that ministerial preoccupations with mainstream media, as observed through their statements to Leveson, are being allowed to excessively influence the priority-setting of government press officers; echoing concerns raised by both the Phillis Review and the government's own departmental capability reviews, that there is too much focus on communication through the mass media. It is notable that only one respondent (C11) raised the issue of national newspaper partisanship as a determining factor in ministers' attitudes towards media relations. Generally, the witness accounts suggest that ministers from all parties are highly sensitive to the risk of media attack.

As a marker of loyalty, civil servants may have been reluctant to express overt criticism of ministers' excessive concern with daily news headlines, excusing this on the grounds that ministers' reputation, even survival, depended on being 'media savvy'. Overt criticism of particular ministers was usually done off the record.

Alastair Campbell was the individual most often cited in the interview texts and was generally depicted as charismatic, professional, competent and trustworthy, if demanding. Many felt that the changes introduced after 1997 were professionally justified but could have been introduced more judiciously and sensitively. There was some suggestion of a bullying culture in government generally, an environment described euphemistically by one respondent as “a rufty tufty kind of world” (C03), and by another as scoring high in “the shoutiness stakes” (C11). This finding, and the long-hours culture which made it hard for some parents, especially new mothers, to continue in the job, were beyond the scope of this study but this would be a valuable point of interest for future research.

The interviews with journalists brought the civil servants’ accounts into perspective and suggest that the latter had understated the issue of politicization, perhaps because it reflected negatively on their own professional autonomy and credibility. Civil servants expressed general satisfaction with the exercise of impartiality through their capacity to monitor of ‘the line’ between objective and party political communication although many felt that practice since their departure from the service was less thorough than it had been. This is one indication of a substantive change over time. It also suggests that ‘gut feeling’ as an indication of impropriety is no protection against what some scholars have described as a “seeping politicization” (Foster, 2005; Hennessy, 1999). There could be an element of golden-ageism in some of their recollections but the rich anecdotal detail and its conformity with the findings of the various official reviews into the state of government communications after 1997 suggests that these findings are credible.

One surprise from the journalists’ interviews was the extent and immediacy of their perceptions of special advisers’ dominant role in news management after 1997. As we saw in Chapter 6, all the journalists referred to the change as sudden, dramatic and ongoing. They felt that negotiations about daily news took place in a “different sphere” (J21) where special advisers traded exclusive nuggets of information with particular journalists to achieve targeted coverage. As part of this wholesale transformation in the rules of engagement, Directors of Communication whose faces didn’t fit were hounded out of their jobs, while government press officers were marginalized and sometimes displaced by special advisers. It is interesting that the former Director of Communications in the Department of Health, Romola Christopherson, was mentioned by two of the journalists in almost heroic terms, yet she was not referred to in any of the civil servants’ interviews.



The special adviser interviews were a later addition to the study and too few to reliably generalise from, but it is clear that media relations was an important part of their work, and that they had the autonomy to devote time to this. They accepted the need to work closely with civil service press officers but the determining factor in how the partnership operated was the attitude of their minister. As an indication of their more adversarial and contingent relationship with journalists, special advisers were more likely than press officers to describe journalists negatively, for example as “a pack of wolves” (S24) that “don’t care about the truth very much”(S25). Press officers accepted the demands of journalists as natural, even desirable in a democratic society. Journalists felt that special advisers were less likely than government press officers to tell the truth: one insisted, off the record, that he had been lied to by a special adviser.

The average interview response rate was well over 50%. Of the 27 former civil servants approached, 16 (59%) replied and were interviewed, three declined and six (22%) did not reply. The interview sample provided the intended diversity in terms of age, gender, period of service, position and seniority, with a particular focus on middle ranking officials with departmental experience. The interviews with journalists and special advisers were designed to provide a context, or check, on the interviews with the core respondents, civil servants. Of the nine journalists approached, six (67%) agreed to be interviewed. The sampling frame for journalists was quite specific – those who had served for long enough to experience changes post 1997, and who had had regular, ongoing contact with civil service departments. In this sense they were not representative of journalists as a whole since they were significantly older and worked mainly for broadsheet newspapers or the BBC. For a future study it would be interesting to interview younger serving journalists on a wider range of media outlets. Regarding special advisers, three of the six approached were interviewed, one from each mainstream political party. Two had served under the Coalition and one under Labour.

Given the discrepancies between the three interview groups in how they perceived change since 1997, as highlighted above, the tactic of interviewing three different actors who share a professional space but work to very different objectives, strengthened the empirical reach and validity of the study. It would have been useful to have interviewed more special advisers, and a more in-depth interview study with this group about their media role would be highly recommended. The topic guide was used successfully for all interviews, and remained broadly similar across all three types of interview. This suggests that the three types of actor share many experiences

and perceptions, and that the notion of a ‘cross-field’ where different institutions and cultures operate together according to shared sets of rules, is a pertinent one. However, as ‘quasi-colleagues’ who occupy differing but complementary intermediary roles within a shared environment, one might expect the interview texts to be mutually reinforcing in at least some respects; especially in the significance accorded to government’s relations with media. The analysis of documentary and archival texts was supposed to provide a check on this. Did it work?

### 8.3.2 Documentary and archival analysis

The analysis of documentary and archival texts provided alternative insights into changes in custom and practice over time as seen by parliament, politicians and officials not concerned directly with media management. These data helped to identify discrepancies between practices and ideals, and established a clear chronology which might not have been possible from interviews alone. In particular, the immersion in archival documents dating from the first three years of the Thatcher government, combined with the reading of memoirs and biographies from participants at the time, and the interview with Bernard Ingham, provided an almost ‘ethnographic’ picture of how the government at a particular moment responded to dramatic change, not only in the media landscape but in what was believed to be politically and ethically possible. I am using the term ‘ethnographic’ in the sense that the approach here attempted to provide what Geertz referred to as *thick description*, namely “a detailed, in-depth description of everyday life and practice”, as seen from a range of viewpoints (Geertz, 1975; Hoey, 2014, p. 1).

Documentary analysis also provided a check on assumptions about the novelty of so-called ‘political spin’ after 1997. The briefing materials for the 1980 Budget, for example, showed how administratively-led and, to our eyes, minimal, the process was in comparison with the elaborate pattern of announcements and pre-announcements that characterises the presentation of the modern Budget, as detailed in McBride’s memoirs of his time as a Treasury press officer (McBride, 2013). Yet the deliberations of the secret Liaison Committee in the early 1980s show how concerned ministers were with presenting a coherent and powerful political narrative as a way of engineering consent for a radical and controversial economic programme. There were several weaknesses in the archival dataset however. Firstly, it was not continuous, since internal government information is subject to the 30 year rule (currently reducing gradually to 20 years). This meant that information relating to

the late Thatcher and John Major period is not yet available. Secondly, the archive is partial: information relating to PR practices, such as press releases, minutes of meetings, memos and media plans, is often considered to be ephemeral and is therefore only partially recorded or quickly discarded.

The documentary evidence from government and parliamentary reviews was rich and voluminous. The personal testimony presented at parliamentary inquiries from a range of political and media actors, including journalists, government communications leaders, special advisers and politicians, augmented the original interview material. Politicians' statements to Leveson, for example, provided a powerful backdrop to civil servants' assessments of minister's concerns with media management, and the important media role of special advisers. Of consistent relevance were the findings of the various inquiries conducted over the years by the Public Administration Select Committee. For a future study, in-depth research into the operations of this committee would shed valuable light on such issues as the struggle between government and parliamentary actors to define and operationalise the notion of impartiality, and the possible influence of mediatization on the workings of the Committee itself.

Together with the internal propriety guidance and the codes of conduct, the documentary evidence provided an ongoing and evolving narrative about the role of the impartial civil service at a time of mediatization. In many ways, the apparent consistency in the way impartiality, and hence the role of the civil servant, were officially stated over time, and the gradual tweaks in terminology that belied significant underlying shifts, echoed the findings in relation to the resilience of the Government Information Service itself. Its outward form remained recognisable but what was considered to be appropriate in practice changed radically, from a more public-oriented model of impartiality, towards the more limited notion of neutrality, described by Aucoin as "promiscuous partisanship" (Aucoin, 2012). This supports claims by such proponents of the 'end of Whitehall thesis' as the former civil servant Christopher Foster, that substantial change in what was deemed proper within the civil service has taken place gradually and largely by stealth (Diamond, 2014b; Foster, 2005).

The documents, archival and interview texts were all analyzed as one corpus through NVivo, using the four concepts of resilience, resistance, responsiveness and representing the public. Despite some overlap between the first three concepts, they

proved valuable as a way of sorting the evidence without undue bias, and as a way of bringing together, or juxtaposing, publicly stated understandings and unseen practices. Less immediately obvious was the role of these concepts in helping to build a more grounded and robust theoretical framework through which to understand government communications.

#### **8.4 A field approach to mediatization: a valid conceptual framework?**

“Ministers are just terrified of the U-turn, of being pilloried by the media for making errors, or for changing their mind, and they lose sight of the folk out there who are not in the Westminster bubble, who are not journalists who can see through some of the rubbish in the papers. There would be so much more to be gained by just fronting it out and saying ‘I’m going to level with you’” (C16).

This respondent, a former Director of Communication who left government in 2014, argued that the public role of government communicators who deal with the media, and the trust and credibility this required, were threatened by a combination of “noisy media” applying blame, and frightened ministers. This potent mix had become so overwhelming, she felt, and politicians so lacking in confidence that “it just spirals into this huge gulf between the public and government and ministers”, leading the public to “disengage from politics” and conclude that “you can’t trust anything they say”. As ministers become more sensitive to the potential risks of mediated reputational damage, they try to increase their control over what, when and how information is placed in the public domain. It is this selectivity, which arouses the suspicion of journalists, is derided as political spin and exploited through the media by the opposition and others that ultimately damages the credibility of information released from government.

This respondent’s observation, and others like it cited in this study, illustrates the validity of the mediatization field approach at the very least as a reflection of a complex reality. The site of interest is theorised as the cross-field between politics, bureaucracy and the media; where distinct social fields collide and interact to produce a unique set of patterns in response to a range of processes, but dominated by the meta-process of mediatization (Lingard et al., 2005). ‘Cross-field effects’ are defined by Lingard and Rawolle as specific effects generated by *interference* within a mediatized political arena such as the launch of a new government policy. Such

effects would include the policy texts, speeches and media-friendly documentation produced by government agencies during the lifetime of a 'hot topic', the decisions made during the media frenzy surrounding it, and the internal negotiations that take place between officials to manage a media crisis.

I have already highlighted two particular findings from this study as possible cross-field effects. One of these, from chapter 5, was the tendency of government press officers to use their instincts to apply pragmatic judgements about what is and is not appropriate when dealing with the fluid and fast-moving situations that typically occur in government media relations. In chapter 6, I described the experience of exhilaration recounted by one former press officer in response to a high profile political resignation as being so specific to the mediatized realm of the cross-field that it could be described as a cross-field effect. We can see that both these effects, the quick reaction to changing circumstances, and the thrill of breaking news in which the powerful 'other' becomes the victim, could equally apply to other actors in this particular cross-field, such as special advisers and journalists. An advantage of the field approach is that it facilitates a cross-sectional perspective which cuts across institutional and professional boundaries to examine shared cultures within a particular domain, in this case, the cross-field.

In Chapter 2, I drew on the work of Andreas Hepp to propose that we consider these actors' natural habitat, and the culture of norms, customs and beliefs within which they work, as a 'culture of mediatization' which, over time, has developed its own distinctive ways of communicating, and where "life...is unimaginable without media". I argued that, within this cross-field, the media are more than an afterthought; they "constitute and construct the centre" (Hepp, 2013b, pp. 70, 71). In chapter 7, I argued that a 'culture of mediatization' had developed around government's relations with media, leading to a range of cross-field effects, which have diluted the already weak accountability mechanisms for government communications. These include the insidious growth in the news management role of politically appointed special advisers, and tweaks in propriety codes and governance structures for government communications taken without consultation.

There are other findings too that could be considered as cross-field effects within a wider 'culture of mediatization' (Hepp, 2013b). A 'year zero' approach to history allows a reinterpretation of the past in the light of the strategic needs of the present, leading to an expedient and pragmatic application of the ideal of impartiality which

suits 'the government of the day', or in other words, ministers. Within an environment of mediatized insecurity and risk, and fears that 24/7 media scrutiny can bring political careers to a sudden end, office holders' protect and surround themselves with enthusiastic, trusted and 'media savvy' confidantes and favour informal over formal kinds of public accountability. A natural impatience on the part of politicians with due process, especially when it complicates the delivery of already difficult political goals, makes internal resistance to compromised, self-advantaging and hence untrustworthy public statements less likely. As a corollary of this, such a 'culture of mediatization' devalues caution and favours robust individuals who can demonstrate to power-holders that they are both "pure in thought" (C11) and can handle "the huge media pressures" (Cameron, 2012).

The application of the idea of cross-field effects as contributing towards a 'culture of mediatization' can be applied to the evidence that emerged during the Chilcot enquiry. By backing the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq as early as April 2002, despite his and the foreign secretary Jack Straw's awareness that it would be difficult to convince the Cabinet of its necessity, let alone the public, Blair committed himself to "a public information campaign...to explain the nature of Saddam Hussein's regime and the threat he posed" (Chilcot Report, 2016: Executive Summary, pp14). His ability to convince the public through the media that this was the right thing to do became linked to his credibility and even survival as Labour Party leader and Prime Minister. According to evidence presented by Chilcot, throughout the decision-making process he favoured informal over formal accountability and relied on a small close-knit group of enthusiastic, trusted and 'media savvy' confidantes. He led the public communications process himself, prioritising persuasive, self-advantaging terminology over sober assessment. He announced the publication of the dossier himself at a press conference on 3 September 2002, stating that Saddam was "without any question, still trying to develop that chemical, biological, potentially nuclear capability" (p17). During the House of Commons debate on 24 September, in a speech he wrote himself, he declared that Saddam's "weapons of mass destruction programme is active, detailed and growing". In March 2003, during the debate over the decision to invade Iraq, he described the "coming together" of terrorist groups in possession of WMDs, and the repressive dictatorship of Saddam Hussein as "a real and present danger to Britain" (p42).

The Chilcot report concludes that this approach to public communication produced a "damaging legacy" that undermined "trust and confidence in government statements"

and would “make it more difficult to secure support for Government policy (Chilcot, 2016a) (paras. 807, 838). The report drew a sharp distinction between the political need to *argue for* a certain outcome, and the need for the intelligence services (in this case) to *present evidence*. The report argued in favour of “the need to be scrupulous in discriminating between facts and knowledge on the one hand and opinion, judgement or belief on the other” and “the need for vigilance to avoid unwittingly crossing the line from supposition to certainty including by constant repetition of received wisdom”(para 840). Chilcot’s warnings against the failure to discriminate between political “opinion, judgement and belief” and “facts and knowledge” (para 840) are familiar from the many official documents analyzed for this study. The question remains as to whether such judgements are any more likely to deliver change in government communications practices than the similar conclusions reached by the many official enquiries conducted since 1997, especially the Butler Report (Butler, 2004). It is too early to say, but a perspective informed by the mediatization approach taken here would suggest that Blair’s style of communication is consistent with the direction of travel at least since 1997, and has become so institutionalised, self-sustaining and mutually reinforcing within government, that it will take institutional change to prevent such a thing from happening again.

Lundby’s definition of mediatization played a key role in the conceptual framework for this study, and his stricture that the empirical researcher must conduct “observations of moments and objects along the way that demonstrate the transformation of the socio-cultural practice or institution under study” (Lundby, 2014a, p. 23), has been adhered to here. He specifically cited interviews with former participants – in his case, retired legal professionals – as a legitimate means of identifying a “transforming direction or tendency”. This has been successfully achieved by this study. This study has also fulfilled the requirements of critical research which, according to Dahlgren “involves probing the discrepancies between surface appearances and underlying, deeper realities” (Dahlgren, 2013, p. 156).

However, the mediatization approach is not without its critics, and is contested, even by some of its proponents. It has been criticized for being too “broad and inclusive” to deliver a “coherent and robust conceptual framework” (Jensen, 2013, p. 218). Lunt and Livingstone question the idea that mediatization is a paradigm at all, and argue that although useful as a form of guidance for empirical research, casual use of the term leads to confusion (Lunt & Livingstone, 2016). Mediatization scholars have been accused of being too media-centric, of overstating the role of media in society and

failing to clearly define their use of the term (Deacon & Stanyer, 2014). A literature review of mediatization studies which conducted research into change over time concluded that many scholars failed to make explicit either their conception of time or their approach to history (Stanyer & Mihelj, 2016). However, proponents of historical institutionalism have argued that “qualitative, longitudinal, deep case studies” can and should be successfully applied in communication studies in order to examine “informal routines and formal institutions over time, attending to path dependency, as well as to the fact that institutions contain conflicting forces that can be a source of instability” (Bannerman & Haggart, 2015, p. 15). They argue that within the field of media and communications, mediatization scholars are among the few to deploy this type of approach.

In answer to the charge of being *media-centric*, this is not the case here since this study does not examine media or media institutions as such (Hepp et al., 2015). It is concerned, rather, with the institutionalisation of communicative habits, customs and norms arising from the increasing influence of media considerations within other domains. As such, this study could be accused of being *media-centred* – and hence of focusing too much on media influences at the expense of others. However, the major reason for adopting a mediatization approach to government communications in the first place was to overcome the tendency among public administration and political science scholars to consider media as a mere ‘add on’, a ‘black box’; as inherently damaging to politics, and/or as just one among many social influences. The mediatization approach also allowed the foregrounding of an important but understudied group of actors – government press officers – who have rarely been considered as distinctive participants in the process of political communication. In this sense, these aims were achieved by this study. The charge that the mediatization approach risks downplaying other important factors that influence the policy, administrative and even street level reaches of the civil service, is a real one. There is enough in this study to suggest that an examination of the impact of mediatization within deeper levels of government, that is, on public servants who are *not* directly involved with media and PR, would be worthwhile.

The role of history in this study has clearly been crucial, but this does not claim to be a work of history, or even oral history, although it shares some of its characteristics. By making the methodology transparent and drawing on some of the learning from historical institutionalism, the approach applied here provides an insightful pathway into the chronology of media management within a particular setting. In this sense,



the concept of mediatization is deployed here not as a theory or paradigm but as a sensitising concept for an empirical study. The empirical data are given maximum attention and are allowed to influence theory, which is why so much evidence is presented here in four detailed chapters.

The aspect of this study which is conceptually novel is the application of the four concepts of resilience, resistance, responsiveness and representing the public, to the problem of government communications as a complex and interacting process of political, institutional and cultural change. The four concepts have shown themselves to be a powerful means of accessing and organising a rich data-set, and for understanding and drawing conclusions about social change at the meso- and micro-level. These concepts arose during the early stage of the data-gathering process, and were developed as part of the relatively flexible conceptual framework of mediatization. They would not have originated without such an open framework that facilitates 'grounded' or 'adaptive' ways of theorising and pays attention to complex interactions of dynamic processes. Layder describes this as adaptive theory; an approach that adapts to, or is shaped by, incoming evidence. He sees it as being particularly appropriate when examining dynamic 'lived experiences' within social and institutional contexts, as was the case here (Layder, 1998, p. 5).

Further, the concept of mediatization enabled a non-normative approach to factors which are often considered as 'either/or' dualisms or categorical variables. The civil service is 'politicised' rather than impartial; government communications are 'professionalised', and hence open to suspicions of 'political spin'; and the office of Prime Minister is undermined through 'personalization' or 'presidentialization'. By and large, the non-normative approach taken to these concepts was successful in revealing complexity, avoiding simplistic dichotomies, highlighting contradictions and reducing the risk of implicit value judgements. In this respect, by looking at everyday processes within Whitehall, the mediatization approach has helped to challenge the mystique of Whitehall as a particular institution with immutable values. The advantage of this approach in comparison to, say, a study of politicization within governing bureaucracies is that it allows a more open and critical approach to changing relationships and power asymmetries within the administrative and political ecology of government which could be applied to other liberal democratic jurisdictions either comparatively or as case studies.

Where the mediatization approach struggled to achieve clarity was in relation to the doctrine of impartiality in public service but this may be strength as well as a

weakness, since it leaves open the question as to whether impartiality is a value, ideal, belief, ideology or practice. Impartiality was depicted by participants in this study in all these ways: as an instinctively understood yet almost impossible to define value, norm and practice which permeates all aspects of life in the public bureaucracy; sometimes appearing as resistance, and at other times, responsiveness. It was shown to be persistent and resilient as well as fragile and contingent: persistent in that it maintained its rhetorical, legitimising force, and fragile in the sense that it could be progressively reinterpreted according to political expediency. At one moment it was the key to the defence of the public interest against party political opportunism; at another it was a smokescreen for party political propaganda. It was viewed by protagonists as “the line”, but one that applied to “a grey area” (C11, C13). What is clear is that, however ambiguous, ill-defined or poorly understood, civil servants consider impartiality as an ideal grounded in a commitment to equality and applied by agreement in the context of British liberal democratic public life and social justice (Mendus, 2008). As such, it can be considered to be a public good (Honig, 2015). What is open to question is how the limits of impartiality are drawn and applied, by whom, and in whose interests and to what extent they can and should be both accountable to the public, whether directly or indirectly, and responsive to changing social circumstances and understandings?

## **8.5 Conclusions and recommendations**

The narrative of political spin asserts that governments have become increasingly prone to self-advantaging and therefore untrustworthy forms of strategic political communication. Even academics refer to those responsible for government communications as ‘spinners’ (Hood & Dixon, 2015). The findings of this study do not disagree with this assertion, especially if one accepts that government communications now incorporates the news management practices of special advisers, but to place the blame on an ill-defined category such as spin or spinners is insufficient. More substantive, and therefore troubling, underlying changes in UK government communications have taken place that affect not just what is said, how, when, and by whom, but to whom governments consider themselves accountable. The institutionalisation over time of the changes in media relations practice outlined in this thesis have demonstrated that political will and journalists’ need for a story can override civil servants trying to apply propriety codes, journalists upholding ‘fourth

estate' responsibilities, and parliamentary committees reporting post hoc on political/media scandals. In this sense, this thesis finds that the UK government communication service since 1997 has not been resilient enough to deliver a public communications function consistent with its own (albeit limited) stated purposes.

The persuasive media campaign around the 2002 WMD dossier which led to such headlines as *The Sun* newspaper's *Brits 45 minutes from doom* (25/9/2002), is one high profile example of how a mediatized style of decision-making can lead to long-term reputational damage to governments and politicians, but there has been no substantive change in the internal self-regulation of government communications since then to suggest that this could not happen again. On the contrary, the propriety codes for government communications have been re-written in a way which makes resistance more difficult. The recommendations of the independent review of government communications (Phillis, 2004), which sought to improve the efficiency and credibility of government communications after 2004 were ignored and sidelined after 2010. This does not mean that the attempt to re-work a government communications service built on the principle of impartiality was not worthwhile or that the approach outlined by Phillis can be deemed to have failed. If anything, the increasing demands of 24/7 media, and the development of Extended Ministerial Officers, suggest that public-oriented principles are more important than ever in sustaining public trust in government communications.

What remains, though, is a growing gap in accountability and a significant decline in public support for democratic institutions, although not democracy itself. The undignified struggle for control over the public presentation and re-presentation of government actions and decisions has been increasingly dominated by political and media actors since 1997 but to blame individuals for engaging in an ill-defined process loosely termed 'political spin' is to deny the extent to which public information is compromised, weakened and subject to inadequate forms of accountability and redress. The narrative of political spin places much of the blame at the feet of politicians or their operatives, and we have demonstrated here that they have indeed played a decisive role in the transformation of the rules of engagement between governments and the media, but they are just part of the picture. A 'culture of mediatization' has developed, leading to a range of 'cross-field' effects which challenge the resilience of the accountability mechanisms for government communications that were already weak in any case. The news management role of politically appointed special advisers has been allowed to develop without proper

scrutiny or even recognition of what the role means in practice. Propriety codes have been tweaked and governance structures changed without consultation or regard for long-term or unintended consequences. There has been a failure to fulfil even the basic criteria for good public communications as recommended by Phillis or as suggested by scholars such as Blumler and Coleman.

Yet despite this, the commitment to the doctrine of impartiality remains almost universal within the UK and is regularly re-stated by politicians, civil servants, parliament and the media. As far as the public view is concerned, what little evidence we can glean from public opinion research suggests that they increasingly place value on the officials who appear to offer impartiality, such as civil servants. Impartiality is part of a taken-for-granted and shared belief system that seeks to underpin the values of justice and equality within the elite political/administrative sphere. But impartiality is not the only principle operating within government communications: special advisers who are explicitly exempt from impartiality have become integrated into many aspects of government, including the news management function. This development acknowledges quite rightly that ministers have particular communications needs but these should not be allowed to routinely override the needs of the public. To enable a thorough and transparent analysis of the problem of government communications, the needs of ministers, and the day-to-day role of special advisers in briefing the media should be publicly recognised and brought into the open, not condoned and conducted in secret.

As a first step, the civil service must uphold a long-term and publicly-sourced and presented vision of what government communications should be which goes beyond the narratives developed for individual ministers or that pursued by No.10 or the Treasury. This is essential if the civil service is to live up to its stated obligation to provide a check on the role of the political party and the politician within government communications. The starting point for this vision is already available in the form of the 2004 Independent Review of Government Communications (the Phillis Review), which was accepted by the government of the day. As the Phillis Review stated, at the very least, communications professionals must be given the autonomy to ensure that they can use professional judgment to deploy the full range of communications tools, techniques and approaches aimed at reaching all citizens, not just the channels which seem expedient for short-term political survival. Rather than using attacks on government communications as a political football in order to demonstrate a 'get tough' approach to public expenditure, there should be an honest acknowledgement

that the resources currently devoted to communicating with and hence accounting to citizens, are probably too small. Hood's estimate put the numbers of communications staff at 3,000 in 2013 of whom about 750 are press officers (Hood & Dixon, 2015), representing an insignificant 0.7% of the civil service workforce.

Most importantly, Parliament must be seen to publicly hold governments to account for their custodianship of this most politically-sensitive of public goods – the public communications function, as Yeung has already suggested (Yeung, 2006). The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee is responsible for overseeing the work of the civil service, and has been vociferous in its concern in relation to government communications since its first report 18 years ago (Public Administration Select Committee, 1998). It should be given the explicit task of firstly restating and updating a public framework for government communications along the lines of the Phillis recommendations which should incorporate and acknowledge the media and communications responsibilities of special advisers, especially if there were to be a revival of the idea of the Extended Ministerial Office. This framework should establish clear and externally-validated criteria for assessing the propriety of government communications, as well as a transparent system for overseeing complaints, including public complaints, and providing redress, and, if necessary, sanctions. The Committee should be routinely held responsible for reviewing the deliberations and decisions of the GCS Board, approving and proposing changes to GCS propriety codes, commenting on and approving the annual communications plan, and scrutinising the appointment of the Head of Profession for Government Communications.

Chilcot warned that lasting damage to public trust in government statements had resulted from “a widespread perception” that argument had been presented as fact. Changing times will bring new pressures, but the answer is surely not to abandon any notion of a place of common interests, or allow it to shrink and decay through cynicism or lack of attention, but to constantly refresh and replenish it. This is not the task of public servants alone although they have a legitimate part to play. It is one that must also be embraced by elected politicians on behalf of all citizens.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1: The power of the media: politicians' testimony to Leveson (in chronological order of service)

Name	Date of statement	Selected quotes
Kenneth Clarke	30.5.2012	<p>"In recent years it's got noisier and noisier, more and more professionalized on both sides, so modern politics is mass media dominated".</p> <p>"...the power of the press is now far greater than the power of Parliament...I think a lot of people are driven away from politics by the fact they don't want to accept the level of exposure".</p>
Chris Patten	23.1.2012	"I think politicians in office, or for that matter, some of them out of office, would sleep better at night and make better decisions if they weren't quite as affected by the front pages of newspapers".
John Major	12.6.2012	"I was much too sensitive from time to time about what the press wrote. God knows, in retrospect, why I was, but I was...I was always struck, when I went away from the chattering circle of Whitehall and Westminster, how different was the attitude of people away from that".
Gus O'Donnell, cabinet secretary to three Prime Ministers.	14.5.2012	"Certainly, Prime Ministers – and Sir John Major was no different in that respect – care a lot about what the media say about them and get very upset when there are inaccuracies reported. He got particularly upset when they would be of a personal nature."
Tony Blair	28.5.2012	"I think actually we were guilty of ascribing to them a power that they ultimately don't actually have and...have less today than I think back then."
Alastair Campbell	30.11.2011 14.5.2012	"We have a press that has just become frankly putrid in many of its elements...There's a sense of (politicians) still judging their success or failure far too much on what sort of press they are getting."
Peter Mandelson	21.5.2012	"The intensity of the relationship has grown as the 24/7 news cycle, with its rapacious demand for instant information and answers, has placed the political world under intolerable pressure. This is magnified many times for government."
John Prescott	27.2.2012	"Politicians are very sensitive, I think, about what the papers think....that's unfortunate. It's never troubled me, quite frankly, but it is the problem....Papers actually believe they win the elections, and so I think the

		politicians get to think it's best to have them on your side than against you. That's proper political influence."
John Reid	23.5.2012	" <i>The Sun</i> ran an eight-week campaign to try and destroy me, describing me as the Ali G of the Labour Party, describing me as the man who'd lost his brain. Attacking me for going away for a weekend".
Alan Johnson	22.5.2012	"The Government needs to get very important and sometimes quite complex information across, but, you know, the slightest slip, it turns into something personal against a minister rather than an issue about the actual policy".  "It's the picking on the families. It's the nastiness, the real nastiness that you have to face."
Jack Straw	16.5.2012	"What <i>The Sun</i> was doing in the 1992 election was working over each senior member of the Labour front bench and this had an effect, and if you were on the receiving end of it, it felt like power".  "Mr. Kinnock...was mercilessly and unjustifiably treated by <i>The Sun</i> over quite a period. It did contribute to our defeat. I took that as power."
Lance Price, Labour Party Director of Communication	12.4.2012	Labour's fear of "losing control of (the news agenda) and allowing space for your opponents to advance their agenda at your expense....led to the heavy pre-announcement of policies, the granting of special access to favoured members of the media, the frequent re-announcement of news and a tendency to exaggerate the significance or likely impact of new policies."
David Cameron	30.5.2012	"I did progressively realize over 2006, 2007, that it's very difficult if you are running a political party and you're trying to swing over the public....if you don't have what I would call bits of the conservative family behind you".
George Eustace, David Cameron's Director of Communication before Andy Coulson	24.7.2012	"Those who claim that it is the role of the press to hold politicians to account are implicitly conceding that the press are the highest authority in the land who hold all others to account but who are themselves accountable to no-one....often, when the owners of newspapers talk about 'free speech' they actually mean the unbridled power that they themselves possess to act as propagandists to mould public perceptions."
George Osborne	11.6.2012	"In a modern political party and for a government, you have to be on the news management cycle. The pressure in government is to make sure you have answers to some of the tough questions that the media are throwing at you."

Appendix 2: Government and parliamentary reviews – a summary

<b>Report</b>	<b>Conclusions</b>
<p><b>The Mountfield Report 1997</b> (Mountfield, 1997) – This working group commissioned by the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Robin Butler, was carried out by his deputy Robin Mountfield, and included Alastair Campbell. It investigated the workings of the Government Information Service (GIS) amid concerns at the departure of a number of Heads of Information.</p>	<p>Upheld the non-political status of the Heads of Information but, “failed to address the power of Ministers”(Mountfield, 2002)</p>
<p><b>Public Administration Select Committee 2002</b> (2002) – a major disagreement at the Department of Transport in media handling between the Director of Communications and Jo Moore, special adviser to the Secretary of State, led to the leaking of her 9/11 email (“it’s now a very good day to get out anything we want to bury”).</p>	<p>Found “serious flaws” in the management and accountability of special advisers and called for a clearer distinction between their roles and that of government press officers. Called on the government to set up an independent review of government communications.</p>
<p><b>Committee on Standards in Public Life: Defining the boundaries within the Executive: ministers, special advisers and the permanent civil service 2003 (Wicks, 2003)</b> – investigated the boundaries between special advisers and departmental press officers, taking oral evidence from 48 witnesses over nine days.</p>	<p>Recommended that special advisers be defined as a separate category to civil servants and that there should be clear written guidance on what they can and cannot do. Upheld the impartiality of the GICS and recommended that the civil service be established in statute. An independent adviser on ministerial interests should be appointed.</p>
<p><b>An Independent Review of Government Communications 2004</b> (Phillis, 2004) – described the GIS as “a virtual and voluntary network which has neither the authority nor the capability to enforce standards in communication”, and identified a “three-way breakdown of trust and credibility” over events at the Department of Transport and concerns at the behaviour of special advisers.</p>	<p>Wide-ranging recommendations, including the creation of a Permanent Secretary, Government Communications, a broader and more professional service using more direct communications, and a ban on special advisers directing civil servants.</p>
<p><b>Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction 2004 (Butler, 2004)</b> – a review commissioned by the Prime Minister to examine intelligence leading to the Iraq War, following the row with the BBC over the “dodgy dossier” and the death of the weapons inspector Dr David Kelly.</p>	<p>Criticized the informal nature of decision-making that “made it much more difficult for members of the cabinet outside the small circle directly involved to bring their political judgment and experience to bear on the major decisions for which the Cabinet as a whole must carry responsibility”. The September 2002</p>



	dossier was misleading because "more weight was placed on the intelligence than it could bear".
<b>Hutton Report (Hutton, 2004)</b> – an inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the death of Dr David Kelly, following the ongoing controversy in relation to claims about Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction set out in the dossier of 24 September 2002. Examined the role of the BBC, the report by Andrew Gilligan, the preparation of the dossier, and the public naming and subsequent death of Dr Kelly.	Exonerated the government of dishonourable or underhand behaviour in connection Dr David Kelly. Accused the BBC of failing to adequately investigate shortcomings in the original report by Andrew Gilligan. His allegation that the government “probably knew that the 45 minutes claim was wrong before the Government decided to put it in the dossier” was “unfounded”.
<b>House of Lords Report on Government Communications 2008 (2008)</b> – examined the extent to which the recommendations of the Phillis Review had been implemented in the light of continuing developments in media and communications.	Ministers should take responsibility for respecting “the primacy of the house when making policy announcements” and that these “should always be provided on a fair and equal basis to all interested journalists”.
<b>Report into the culture and practices of the press 2012 (Leveson, 2012)</b> – concluded that politicians’ conduct in relation to the press: “contributed to a lessening of public confidence...by giving rise to legitimate ...concerns that politicians and the press have traded power and influence in ways which are contrary to the public interest and out of public sight” (III Press and Politicians, para 120).	Recommended the creation of a new independent press regulator accountable to a body made up not of newspaper appointees but with a statutory basis, with sanctions for those who do not participate.
<b>Chilcot Report (Chilcot, 2016a)</b> – examined in detail decision-making in relation to policy and its delivery by the UK government from the period when military action became a possibility in 2001, to the final departure of British troops in 2009. This included pre-conflict strategy and planning, the UK decision to support US military action, government decision-making, advice on the legal basis for military action, WMD assessments, and post-war planning.	Judgements about the severity of the threat from Iraq were “presented with a certainty that was not justified”. The widespread perception that the 2002 dossier had overstated the risks had “produced a damaging legacy” that could make it harder in future to secure support for government policy. Cabinet had not been adequately informed or involved, and there was too little separation between the responsibility for the analysis of evidence and the making of arguments for particular policy outcomes.

## Appendix 3: Interviewee metadata

### Civil servants

Name/code	Date of IV	Word length	Started service	Ended service	Length of service (yrs.)	Last position as civil servant
Bernard Ingham/C01	14/11/2013	6780	1967	1990	23	PM's press secretary/
Robin Butler/C02	12/11/2013	4259	1961	1998	37	Cabinet Secretary
Siobhan Kenny/C03	18/11/2013	9208	1994	2005	8	Departmental Director of Communications
C04	25/09/2013	7223	1999	2011	12	Departmental press officer
C05	02/12/2013	8627	1999	2004	5	Departmental press officer
C06	03/12/2013	3820	1998	2010	12	Strategy Director
Jonathan Haslam/C07	06/12/2013	9529	1978	1998	20	PM's press secretary
Howell James/C08	06/01/2014	6599	1985	2008	9	Permanent Secretary
Nadine Smith/C09	10/09/2014	7222	1998	2009	11	Chief Press Secretary, Cabinet Office
C10	17/06/2014	8027	1975	2008	33	Senior leadership role
C11	06/08/2014	9316	1991	2011	20	Director of Communications
C12	10/09/2014	7700	2008	2010	2	Strategic Communications Adviser
C13	06/11/2014	7738	2010	2014	4	Departmental press officer
C14	02/02/2015	10224	2001	2014	13	Departmental Deputy Director and Head of News
C15	03/02/2015	7444	1986	2008	22	Senior official, Cabinet Office
C16	10/09/2015	4106	2001	2014	13	Departmental Director of Communication
Average (total)		7754			15.2 (243)	

### Journalists and special advisers

Name/code	Date of IV	Word length	Started Service	Ended Service	Length of service (yrs.)
<i>Journalists</i>					
Chris Moncrieff/J17	27/01/2014	5666	1962	1994	32
J18	9/04/2014	8045	1991	Cont.	24
Nick Timmins/J19	14/04/2014	6200	1981	2012	31
Nicholas Jones/J20	31/07/2014	11109	1968	2002	34
David Brindle/J21	14/08/2014	6207	1978	Cont.	37
Jon Silverman/J22	09/11/2014	7897	1972	2002	30
Average (total)		7521			32 (192)
<i>Special advisers</i>					
Nick Hillman	20/05/2015	8301	20006	2013	6
Bill Bush	26/06/2015	6194	1999	2005	6
Katie Waring	15/07/2015	4970	2010	2013	3
Average (total)		6849			5 (15)

#### Appendix 4: Sample topic guide (civil servant)

<b>Heading</b>	<b>Issues</b>
Your career	When and why did you enter the civil service and how long did you spend in the service? How did your career develop?
Defining excellence and good and bad practice	How did PR practice change during your time in the civil service. Can you provide an illustration of good and bad practice in government media relations? How did you see excellence in government media relations?
What it was like doing the job: highs and lows	Long hours? Teamwork? Excitement? Stress? How did the experience compare with other jobs you had done? Bridging role and sense of exposure to both media and political masters?
Reputation of GICS during your time in government	What is/was the reputation or standing of PR in the civil service and how, if at all, did this change over time? What was the general attitude towards the media and how did that change?
Public service purpose and ethos of Govt comms	If the purpose of the civil service is to serve the government of the day, what is the specific role of government media relations as regards the public? Is it clearly understood within the civil service?
The civil servant at the front line of media relations, especially at departmental level.	Coping with patrolling and policing the boundary between government and party political PR. What was it like and how did you handle some of the difficulties? Role of the COI and heads of news concerning the policing of press releases?
Impact of changes of government	What is the impact of a change of government, especially at senior level in the information service? Are press officers more at risk during a change of government? If so, why?
Government communications appointments	Transparent, fair, open and impartial recruitment process? Were there any times when you had to intervene on issues of recruitment or when ministers did not get on with their heads of information or wanted to appoint political sympathisers?
Prime Minister's office/No 10/Cabinet office	Importance of the relationship between No 10 and the departments. How did you observe this working in practice? Examples of when it went well and when it didn't.
Ministers at departmental level	Ministers' role in determining media priorities (timing and content of announcements, drafting of press releases). How to reconcile Ministers' interest in personal image making with government needs. Has their involvement in government media management changed over time?
SPADS	Their media responsibilities. How these have changed over time or vary between departments. How would you describe the role of the special adviser vis-à-vis the media – firstly, as it should be, and secondly, as it actually was in practice.
Political control vis a vis communications and change since 1997	What do you think about claims that political control has increased since 1997? How do you see the current government's approach to government communications or indeed, the civil service? The latest CS reform plan is to create larger ministerial support teams including a political head of communications. What would be the impact of this?

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## Appendix 5: Invitation to interview



From: [R.garland@lse.ac.uk](mailto:R.garland@lse.ac.uk)  
Sent: xx October 2013 17:00  
To: xxx xxxxxx  
Subject: Research into UK Government communications

Dear Mx xxxxxx

I am a postgraduate researcher in Media & Communications at the London School of Economics, and I am approaching a number of former and serving UK Government communications professionals from all levels to obtain first-hand accounts of life at the frontline of government media relations at departmental level, including both special advisers and permanent civil servants.

As a former long-serving public sector communicator myself, I aim to examine how modern government media relations operates given the demands of 24 hour news media, and the constraints of government, since little empirical research has been done into this from a departmental perspective. I am writing to invite you to take part in a one-hour, one-to-one interview, on the understanding that your contribution will remain anonymous and confidential.

The kinds of areas we would be discussing include how you saw your role, what quality and excellence means in government communications, how you and your teams managed the boundary between government and party political communications, how effective and useful the conventions and codes of practice were, and what changes you observed over time, including periods of transition from one administration to the next. My focus will be on the period from 1997.

I will be conducting interviews from November 2013 onwards, mainly in London, and would be happy to meet you wherever and whenever is convenient for you. If you have any questions or would like to discuss the interview process or the project further before coming to a decision, please feel free to call me on my mobile on 07764 391239 or email me at [R.garland@lse.ac.uk](mailto:R.garland@lse.ac.uk).

To tell you a bit more about myself, I worked in public sector media relations for more than 20 years, in public health, BBC television and publishing, and local government, although not the civil service. My supervisor is Dr Nick Anstead and my academic adviser is Dr Damian Tambini. You can see my LSE profile at: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/WhosWho/PhdStudents/Ruth-Garland.aspx>.

I would be delighted if you could take part in an interview, and if so, would be happy to share my general findings with you before submission. I would be most grateful for your time and look forward to hearing from you.

With kind regards

Ruth Garland

*(Full contact details added).*

## Appendix 6: Sample interview transcript

### **Transcript of interview with Howell James at Christie's, Monday 6/1/2014.**

#### **How did your career develop within the civil service - starting with the 1980s...?**

I came in to do a comms job candidly. I wasn't there to be an adviser on anything that David was doing. When I first came to work in the cabinet office he was the minister without portfolio, mainly focused on job creation and that him into tourism and looking at training and that was interesting, it wasn't an area of my expertise at all. I was a special adviser brought in because I had a comms background, and also because he had fallen out with the person who had been looking after his communications. The civil service, they'd given him a civil servant to be the allocation press media liaison for the, what was called the, re-deregulation unit, that he led and I think he found their model, he was a proactive, wanted to get out to evangelise his message and he was a bit kind of wary of the don't talk to them I'll brief them you've got to be more in the background, you know. So that seemed to me at the time was one of the issues for him. So he brought in a special adviser who I think he wanted us to be more proactive.

As a minister without portfolio, you were in the cabinet office, you haven't got a department, you haven't got big battalions, you haven't got a big budget, and really a lot of your locus is around making sure that the few things that you do make the requisite amount of noise when you do them. And so his report on tourism and his report on deregulating things were very central to him and how they were communicated to the lobby and how they were communicated to the wider media was something that he cared about. I was there to be a press officer; I was in no confusion about that. And to work alongside the civil servants.

It wasn't such an issue in the Cabinet Office because I was only there for three or four months before we moved to Employment and you have more freedom in the Cabinet Office you weren't tied down to a clear departmental structure. When he was promoted to be the Secretary of State for Employment immediately you are in a big department, there's a big comms department, there's a director of comms there as a special adviser you have to weave your path between serving the minister, helping the department, being collaborative and supportive of what the department is doing and how the minister can be properly positioned within in and you have to work your way through that which I think I did.

#### **Coming from a fairly proactive approach when you were at TV am what was your impression of the culture and practices of the civil service media teams when you arrived?**

Well all I could reference is what I found at the Department of Employment. Very well led by an exceptionally good head of comms who absolutely knew the lobby, knew his way around the journalists, knew what they wanted to write. I think this is an enduring tension between ministers coming into office and civil servants who are inside departments and have worked with ministers from previous administrations or ministers who have been there in current administration but moved on and a new minister arrives. They've seen all the brickbats, they've watched all the pitfalls, they've seen all the dilemmas and...overpromising, getting out over your skis, being too available to the media, pursuing too much of a profile and then reaping the reward of that when something goes wrong. Their natural default position is to be cautioned. Do they put their foot on the accelerator or do they cautiously play on the clutch? They have a propensity to cautiously play on the clutch.

If you look at certain big things, I always smile wryly at Tony Blair's memoirs where he says about the FOI, "Sir Humphrey, where were you when I needed you?" The inevitable consequences of an FOI act which the media would use almost exclusively to constantly pursue certain kind of issues or certain kinds of statistics which inevitably anyone in a government department or civil servant would have perceived but you come in as a new administration, you've made promises in opposition, you want to

get them done, and you have to find a balancing act as a civil servant between counselling the caution but also being supportive of the energy and the excitement that new ministers have about wanting to do stuff and sometimes it lands slightly on the wrong side. I found them very knowledgeable, very thorough. I thought they were good citizens who were trying to deliver well. They had a lot to do and I think there is inevitably...if you've sat in a department and watched a lot of stuff come and go there can occasionally be an air of "we have seen this before and let's see how this works out", and to be more of an observer rather than a participant.

**What do you think the reputation of standing of media relations was from other civil servants or within the service?**

I think people had a number of different views about it. I think there were more cautious civil servants who viewed communications as a sort of doorway to the media and therefore to be treated with great caution, keep everything away from them until the last minute, don't let them know too much. There were others who I think took the view that ministers need to treat with the media and the access point for that needs to be the comms function and a well informed and intelligently managed communications function can help you do that and serve your ministers and policy needs if you do it in a collaborative spirit. So, some civil servants "steer clear of comms until the last minute" and so then, with them you found yourself working in an environment which is "here it is, we've decided what it is and now we want you to put it out". With others you were brought in much earlier and they would be toying with the upsides and the downsides of doing it this way or that you, and you will know this yourself, there are some programme makers who tell you everything all the way through and by the time the programme comes to air you feel more invested in it very vested in it, very knowledgeable about what they're doing and others keep away from you until the last minute and you are running to keep up. And policy civil servants and some ministers are no different.

**What was the balance in the 1980s between cautious and more collaborative?**

I think in the 80s there was probably more of an air of caution. At the same time they harboured a tremendous admiration for Bernard Ingham at No.10. Their view of the No.10 machine that it was very effective that Bernard knew and understood the lobby well, was tough minded, he had a very close and good working relationship with the Prime Minister, he knew her mind, he could sit in front of a group of journalists and be trusted by her and by them and by her to be an honest broker between the two and I think that worked very much to the benefit of the comms function but it also of course made ministers want. Ministers would look to No.10 with a degree of caution because Mrs Thatcher's voice, the Prime Ministers' voice could come over much more clearly on a policy issue or on an area of endeavour than perhaps a departmental one could because their machine was so effective, and her own electricity, the electricity around her as Prime Minister, .and the focus editors and writers around her it's hard to capture it now in the last...one saw it a bit around Blair in the early period but it hasn't worked as well for other Prime Ministers, but she carried all before her at that time as you will recall. There was.... people knew her mind, they knew what she wanted, she had a clarity of purpose, or there was a sense that she had a clarity of purpose, and that was very well and ably communicated by the comms function at No.10 and I think departments looked on in some...they knew that comms was important. And by communications really this was the key Tory newspapers, so the focus predominantly was on the broadsheets and the mid-markets, David English's role at the Daily Mail, reigning supreme there, so a the management role was focused on managing the media, but not just the media but the print media. You weren't going to get much spin out of John Cole who was the political editor at the BBC... but placing and shaping stories.... and of course Mrs Thatcher ran a very effective communications function out of her Party headquarters as well and people knew that and she had close relationships with Gordon Reece with Tim Bell and others who were communicating her agenda as well.

**Moving on to your next period in government in the 1990s in the Prime Minister's office how would you compare the media handling processes at No.10 with what you'd seen earlier, and at the BBC?**

Everything lives in its era, and particularly politics. I got there in summer 94 and the Major government had had two years of knocking since the 92 election so they 'd been put under a lot of pressure by the media, the European issue was playing badly for them ... the PM had supported qualified majority voting... that had provoked a backlash from some of the Tory newspapers and indeed you look at the current travails that David Cameron has with the back bench Tory MPs who are more to the right of the party very similar environment for John Major.... and a rapidly falling majority, he'd only got a majority in 92 of 21 seats. So I think it's impossible to talk about the comms function separate from that political environment and the difficulties that the government faced. I thought the comms function was extremely ably managed, Christopher Meyer was a wonderful communications manager, he commanded huge support from his team, he had great charisma, he absolutely understood and has written himself his ten points...he went off to Harvard to do some work before he went to Berlin and one adage that I've always held fondly is his "if you haven't got a story, coin a phrase". Although he was a diplomat by training he had a wonderful instinct for the media and how to handle them. I found him an absolutely delightful colleague and he welcomed me.

So although I came in with a comms background from Corporate Affairs at Cable and Wireless to do the job and the job at No.10 was not a comms job. I was the key liaison between the party and the Prime Minister, I was looking after John Major in his role as leader of the party while he was at No.10 and there's a long tradition of having a small political office at No.10 which looks after the Prime Minister in his other capacity and which brings the party machine and party activity into the diary planning and timetabling of No.10's arrangements, and when you think about the big high points of the Prime Ministers' year big party events form a key part of that as much as the big national government events, and therefore having a political secretary there is a very very useful function but it's not just a comms function. You are there to make sure it all joins up. You are there to be a liaison for the party chairman and other party officials and of course in our structure the role of fundraising and all of that, so I was not focused solely and only on comms, but when I dealt with the comms team and when we faced the 95 leadership election when John Major put up or shut up a lot of the comms function came back to the political office at that point because clearly if you are running to be leader of the Conservative party whilst you are prime minister it's not appropriate for civil servants to look after your comms and it's not appropriate for Conservative central office to look after your comms because there could be other candidates running against you so John Major's own leadership team had to do that of which I was a part.

So it wasn't a comms job. That said, my observation of the way No.10 worked was extremely able. The dilemma we had was of course that because of the fragile political ecology of the time ministers and others had their own different agendas and they used their special advisers very actively to brief the media and you had lot of to-ing and fro-ing. And you expected every Friday or Saturday weekend speeches and party political speeches of ministers to start picking up issues, which is exactly why we ended up in 95 with the leadership election because you'd had every Friday you could guarantee that John Redwood would stand up and say something unhelpful about Europe.

**Do you see any grounds for New Labour's claim when it came into office that the government comms function was ineffective?**

Look. I think. I don't feel able to judge the competence of departmental comms functions because I was so bogged down in my own little patch, my own little territory, so making a sweeping statement about how the Ministry of Defence or the Foreign Office ran their comms under Malcolm Rifkind or Douglas Hurd. I think there's often a lot of misunderstanding when a new government comes in and it's back to my the slight tendency for communications functions to be a little bit of a handbrake, to caution, and if you come in with a great majority after a great election victory it's quite hard to hear those cautionary voices initially and sometimes... the Permanent Secretary, the Personal Private Secretary and the Comms director are the three people that the minister has most to do with personally and directly and I think it reinforced for me the political sensitivity of the comms function which, fast forwarding to the Phillis Review, came out of the Phillis Review, which is the balance that you strike between the political communication and governmental communication and I think if a government comes in with a big majority on a big high having had a big success with a new agenda

with a huge amount of public support seeing the difference between your political agenda and your government agenda, it's quite hard and if you bring in the director of comms from the Labour Party as the government's senior communicator and you put civil servants and budgets under that person as well as political obligations around them, you change the terrain and a lot of special advisers in 1997 decided they were mini Alastairs, and why wouldn't they? That was the sort of model that No.10 set up and seemed to encourage, but it led down the line to difficulties, Jo Moore and others...

**You seem to be suggesting that 1997 was a turning point for government communications?**

It was interesting at the point where Christopher Meyer left No.10 to do go to Bonn, the opportunity was there for a political appointment. At the time Charles Lewington was the director of communications at the Central Office, political editor of the *Sunday Express*, very able, extremely smart, and the opportunity was there to bring a journalist in to do that job and indeed it wasn't the first time this had been done. You go back to Harold Wilson with Joe Haines, even Macmillan had a former Times journalist at No.10 who worked very closely with Bill Deedes who was made a Minister for Information, so you'd had a political appointment and all of these issues were often looked at but John Major fully rejected the notion of having a political appointee brought in to do that.

So in the sense that in 1997 for the first time you had a very ...a political polemicist in Alastair a passionate fluent popular journalistic sense driving the comms agenda... it probably was a sea change.... Was it a sea change that would have happened anyway? Because politicians as they campaign, as they go out there to make things work for them. I don't think this is a party political issue it's about how to get your message over in this world that is so noisy and is so difficult and one has to assume that David Cameron came to the same view which is why he wanted Andy Coulson to do that job. One of them is sort of very helpful. Having a journalist close by you in the modern age when stories break and move very very quickly, where will it go next what will they be looking for what do you say to stop it how do you stop it..The levels of confidence that a former practitioner an editor of a newspaper particularly a mid-market or a tabloid newspaper would have to do that; the confidence they would command from a politician is clear to see. Does it mean that they give good advice in that environment is more open to question?

**How do you compare Bernard Ingham's approach – he was also a journalist. Was he the equivalent of Alastair Campbell?**

Patently not, because he was working for a Tory administration and I think he came in as I hope I did when I went in as a civil servant you sort of hang your political colours at the door. You are not there to give political advice you are there to give practical pragmatic advice and actually I think Alastair was very very good at this for a period, very very good at this. He is a very smart man and he delivered extremely effective advice to the Prime Minister and look how well Tony Blair's premiership went for the whole of that first term, an extraordinary run of well managed announcements, well managed presentation issues, damage limitation very effectively handled in that period...more rocky in the second term. But that sort of happens anyway. Your permission to get away with stuff gets narrower and narrower the longer you're there, as all Prime Minister's careers will attest.

So I think it was a change in 97. It was probably a change that was inevitably going to happen because of what was happening in the media, the way in which newspapers themselves were fighting for their own survival, as the digital revolution..., the BBC was already beginning to get up and running with its huge website in that period, you could see many more television channels, many more routes to market, how to manage that effectively, the clarity about getting your message over, control, the grip, making sure you've got a grip across Whitehall, a grip of what departments are up to, what ministers are up to, what the comms function was doing. There was always....It wouldn't matter who was in power this was a natural evolution of managing the media in a very difficult world. And a high profile world. A publicly accountable world. The whole thing about government is that there is no hiding place. You've got to be out there all the time. So at No.10 you've got to have somebody who's got an appetite for that news machine to manage that news thing on and on and on. It's bloody tough work.



**Coming to the 1990s when you became Permanent Secretary of government communications – this was a new role**

I thought the curse of the job was if you just ended up being a referee between special advisers and civil servant Comms function you'd end up having a pretty blighted life it seemed to me so I embraced a slightly wider agenda, which was, let's think about the wider benefits of properly communicated government activity to the largest number of people which is the electorate in its broadest sense, the citizens, and how do you do that in the modern age. Directgov. Do you put more up on the website? We'd had the FOI. How do you manage this stuff? How do you get ahead of the curve? How do you not find yourself constantly at the receiving end of tiresome questions but actually put more information out there so you pre-empt it, you put it out in your own terms in your own way, all the usual professional advice you'd give anybody whether they are running a company, a government or any enterprise.

**When it comes to this line between government and party political, I'm getting the impression from other interviews I've done that it's not difficult and that you know it when it's there?**

Oh yes, you absolutely know it. I think the Cabinet Office guidance on this is really excellent. We worked hard on it. I doubt they've changed it very much.

Party political work is clear. Who is the press officer that's going to accompany David Cameron to the Conservative Party Conference? It's a party problem. Who accompanies him to the G8, it's a government problem. If he makes a speech at the G8 which then decides to take a pop at the Labour Party, that's where the contention arises or when a minister decides that a government speech needs to have two or three paragraphs of knockabout in it about what the opposition has said. And the closer you get to an election at any point the more ministers move away from delivering the set piece civil service speech and the more they get into wanting to deliver something broader. The advantage of having the special adviser in the department is that they can navigate that space and working closely with a department press office they can divide up the work in a sensible and grown up way. What I hoped to do in my role was create an environment where that dialogue could happen in an open and sensible way where everyone wasn't always on tenterhooks and feeling they were being beaten up.

There was a tremendous spirit we found in Phillis that a lot of the civil servants just felt that they had no voice in departments and that that had precipitated a lot of resentment and a lot of tension between ministers, ministers expectations of what departments could do and relationships with special advisers. Now of course some of this stuff is ad hominem. It's individuals who behave in a certain way and it exasperates and it exhausts people. You can't write rule books around that. That will happen. That happens in all organisations, large or small and it happens whether you are in a political environment or you are in a highly competitive commercial environment.

I think what we tried to do was we tried to give some confidence to the civil servant cadre of communicators. Give them the support of the training they needed, the skills they needed, the experience they needed. What sort of... Make sure we brought in good communicators who knew and understood the terrain who could manage the departments intelligently so at the top of government communications departments we had people who had some commercial experience, political experience or governmental experience in proper balance. We brought some people in from outside we promoted some people internally. But I felt it was a very important part of my role to try and help departments appoint somebody good to do the job, not just to say well we'll take a policy civil servant to do it or we'll bring in someone from the private sector but to take some time to search the job properly to think and ask...., one of my jobs was to spend time with senior civil servants and ministers asking them what do you think you really need here? What are the skillsets that you need? What job do you really want this team to do? What is the thing that is most important to you? How does your private office work? How do your special advisers work? And then helping them to appointment somebody who would be able to navigate that space.

**Do you think the process worked well while you were there?**

I do actually. Usha Prashar was the Civil Service Commissioner and she understood that I this was a sensitive area. There are only three jobs where ministers have direct intervention, where they can veto appointments, Perm Sec, Principal Private Secretary and Director of Comms. Those three roles are very particular roles.

## Appendix 7: Coding frame: NVivo thematic codes

<b>Thematic codes (top level)</b>	<b>References to top level codes</b>	<b>References to most commonly cited 2<sup>nd</sup> level codes</b>
Case study/individual	126	Iraq: 44, Jo Moore: 24, Blair: 22, Thatcher: 11, Cameron: 8, Major: 7.
Centralization)	65	No.10/PM: 42, Cabinet Office: 23
Change of Government	118	1997: 72, 2010: 46
Churn	36	Job losses: 16, vulnerability: 10, Suspicion: 5.
Government communications leadership	96	Campbell: 45; Ingham: 11, Directors of Communication: 8
Journalists	183	Broadcasters: 33, relations with press office: 30, sources: 29, politicians: 16: print media: 16, SPADS: 16.
Mediatization	53	Response to media change: 24, policy impacts: 10, social media: 10.
Ministers	83	Perceptions of media: 42; relationships: 19, role in government communications: 14
Perceptions of government communications	77	Policy civil servants: 29, senior civil service: 22; special advisers: 15.
Perceptions of the job	52	Positive evaluation: 38, negative: 21; intermediary role: 12.

Personalization	33	Ministers' personal needs: 19, personal relationships with press officers: 10.
Politicization	182	Crossing the line: 42, impartiality: 39, propriety and codes: 33, political tribalism and rivalry: 17; responsiveness: 16.
Professionalism	175	Principles and purposes: 42, role of press officer: 16, skills and competence levels: 15.
Propaganda or spin	49	Propaganda/spin: 19, truth and lies: 10
Special advisers	134	Role: 38, problems: 34, working with them: 16, history: 13.
State of the civil service	59	Restructuring and reform: 15, culture and mind set: 10.

## Appendix 8: Changes since 2010 among Directors of Communication

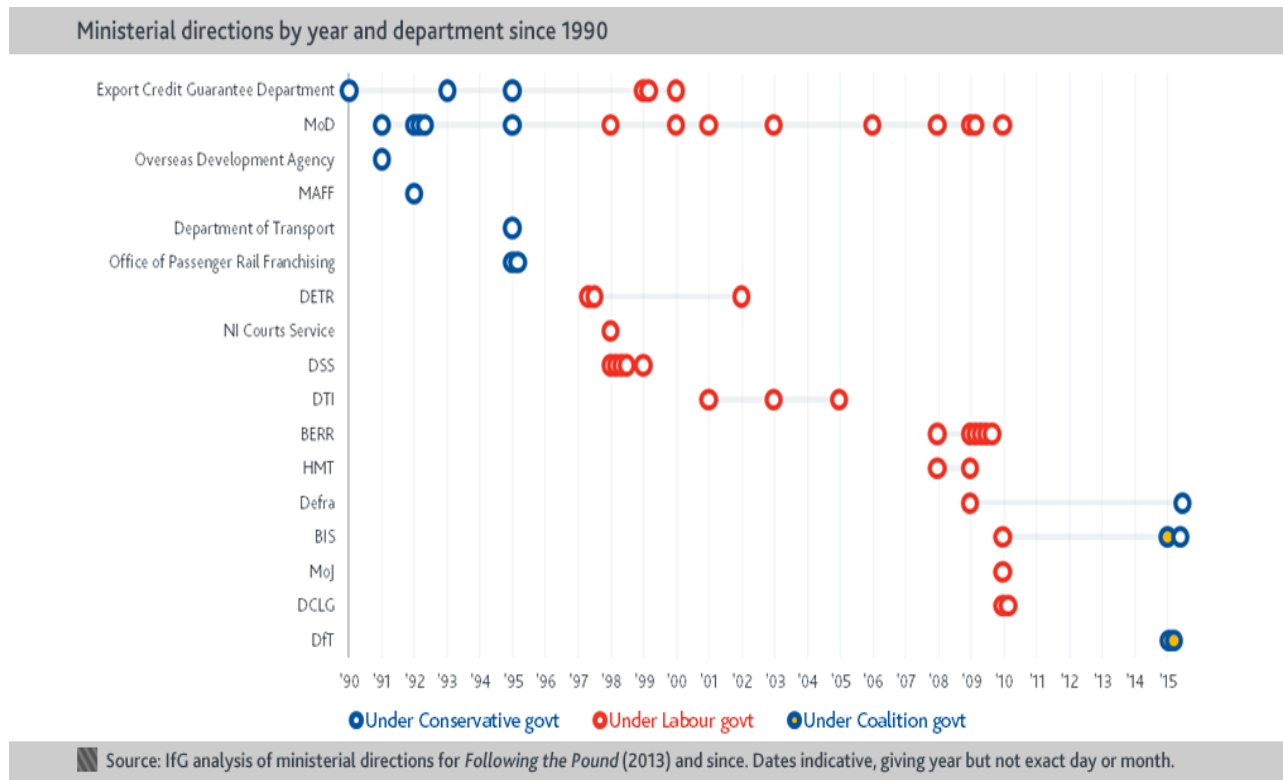
My own analysis of churn since 2010 within the small group of Directors of Government Communications in ministerial departments suggests that there has been a similar turnover to that in 1997 (see Figure 1 below). Of the 20 Directors in post in 2010, just two remain: Russell Grossman, in the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (working to a Liberal Democrat Secretary of State), and Paul Geoghan at the Scotland Office, who have been in post respectively since 2008 and 2009 (highlighted in bold).

Department	Name	Appointed	In post May 2010?*	In post July 2015?
Cabinet Office	Alex Aiken	December 2012	No	Yes
Communities and Local Government	David Hill	January 2014	No	Yes
Culture Media and Sport	Jon Zeff	April 2011	No	No (Sarah Healey)
Education	Gabriel Milland	September 2011	No	No (Paul Kissack)
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	Emily Totfield	September 2014	No	No (Sean Larkins)
International Development	James Helm	December 2010	No	Yes
Transport	Vickie Sheriff	January 2013	No	No (Simon Baugh)
Work and Pensions	Richard Caseby	January 2014	No	Yes
<b>Business, Innovation and Skills</b>	<b>Russell Grossman</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
Energy and Climate Change	Arthur Leathley	August 2013	No	No (Rae Stewart)
Health	Sam Lister	October 2011	No	Yes
Foreign Office	Hugh Elliott	March 2013	No	Yes
HM Revenue and Customs	Stephen Hardwick	September 2011	No	Yes
HM Treasury	Jonathan Black	June 2011	No	No (Conrad Smewing)
Home Office	Simon Wren	April 2012	No	Yes
Defence	Stephen Jolly	April 2013	No	No (Carl Newns)
Justice	Pam Teare	April 2011	No	Yes
Northern Ireland office	Una Flynn	February 2013	No	Yes
<b>Scotland office</b>	<b>Paul Geoghan</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
Wales office	Stephen Hillcoat	March 2013	No	No (Fergus Sheppard)

\* As at March 2014

Notes: several long-serving officials have circulated within the GCS, for example, Simon Wren from the Ministry of Defence to the Home Office, and Pam Teare from the Crown Prosecution Service to the newly-formed Ministry of Justice. Other post-holders in 2010 were reported as having been “head hunted” by other employers. (Cartmel, 2012).

## Appendix 9: Ministerial directions between 1990 and 2015



Source: Freeguard, G. *A Sense of Direction: When Permanent Secretaries Object to Ministerial Decisions*. Institute for Government. 6 July 2015.  
<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/12084/a-sense-of-direction-when-permanent-secretaries-object-to-ministerial-decisions/> Accessed 16/8/2016.

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