

# The unseen power of *creative news management* in government: The marginalisation of UK government press officers between 1997 and 2015

## 1. Introduction

The publication by the UK government of the dossier *Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction* on 24 September 2002 was, and continues to be, widely scrutinised (Butler, 2004; Chilcot, 2016a; Hutton, 2004). What is less well-known, is the unseen role played by the permanent officials delegated to speak to the media on behalf of the government, that is, government press officers, in either sanctioning or 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, so it should not be assumed that the process leading up to the publication of the 2002 dossier was typical of government media operations (Chilcot, 2016b). What it does show is that a government facing little parliamentary opposition, that is in control of the official machinery through which to shape and disseminate its narrative, is capable of delivering a campaign which is, at best partial and at worst deceptive (Herring & Robinson, 2014). The impact of the 2002 dossier was profound, resulting in lasting damage to the reputation of Tony Blair and according to the Chilcot report, led to a "damaging legacy, including undermining trust and confidence in Government statements" which may, in future "make it more difficult to secure support for Government policy" (Executive Summary, Chilcot, 2016a, pp. 131, 116), see also (Seldon, 2005; Whiteley, et al., 2016).

The year 1997 marked a crucial change in government approaches to the media. Labour came into power in May with a huge majority and transferred into government its strategic news management operation, determined to neutralise what had been the default right-wing bias of the national press during most of its 18 years in opposition (Curran & Seaton, 2010; Wilkes-Hegg et al., 2012). The rules of engagement between government and the media were transformed through a process that has become identified with the idea of political spin but far from running its course, this process intensified beyond 2010, rising to the surface during the 2016 European referendum campaign. In 2017, the incoming Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, David Norgrove, a former Treasury economist, told MPs that the leave campaign's repeated claim that EU membership cost £350m a week was "an ingregious use of statistics".

Perhaps more seriously, he described the claim in a Treasury press release that “Britain will be worse off by £4,300 a year per household if Britain votes to leave the European Union” (HM Treasury, 2016) as “an overstatement” (PACAC, 24 January 2017).

This paper draws on the findings of a larger qualitative study of change in the culture and practice of government media relations in the UK between 1997 and 2015, a period of rapid media proliferation when the narrative of political spin moved centre stage<sup>i</sup> (Garland, 2016). It addresses the question of to what extent changes in news management during this period made it harder for government press officers to uphold their own propriety codes and norms. Far from being empowered by a more proactive, creative and selective approach to news management, this article argues that government press officers were marginalised by the process and implicated by association. An increasingly secretive, pragmatic and instrumental approach to government media relations coincided with a steady decline in public trust in government, a factor that has come to preoccupy debate on both sides of the Atlantic with the notion of ‘post-truth’ politics.

## **2. The ‘permanent campaign’ and the rise of political spin – are governments being ‘creative with the truth’?**

Much academic attention has focused on party political news management while the larger and less visible civil service media operation remains relatively un-examined and under-theorised. This leaves a gap in knowledge and understanding which the study on which this article is based set out to challenge (Garland, 2016). The media relations role of special advisers (known as ‘SpAds’), the temporary civil servants who are appointed by and responsible to ministers and are exempt from impartiality is little known, although their wider role as political aides to ministers is attracting more academic attention (Faulkner & Everett, 2015; Gay, 2013; Yong & Hazell, 2014). Many of their media relations activities are conducted ‘under the radar’, that is, informally and through off-the-record briefings, so their relationship with the official government news operation is not made transparent. The special advisers’ code of conduct, for example, does not refer to their role as news providers, or as guardians of the Number 10 ‘news grid’ (Cabinet Office, 2016). In examining UK government communications therefore, we must consider three key actors involved in government media relations: impartial civil servants, SpAds, and ministers, without whom no account of government communications can be complete. This section will firstly examine the notion of truth in public communication and then consider the literature on the changing relations between these actors over time. Secondly,

a novel conceptual framework is proposed, based on the idea of the ‘cross-field’: the interface where two or more distinct fields collide and interact to produce a unique set of patterns (Lingard et al., 2005; Rawolle, 2005). Finally, the implications this has for the role of government press officers and the decline in public trust in government are considered.

## **2.1 Creativity and truth in public communication**

“Your main task, day in, day out, is to defend the indefensible – cuts to policing, terrible immigration decisions – while simultaneously trying to avoid the ire of the ‘SpAds’, the special advisors (aka spin doctors) who run the show at big government departments”, Marianne Taylor, former government press officer (Taylor, 2017).

The political strategists at the heart of New Labour argued that the form of “aggressive political PR” (Moloney, 2001) which came to be known as “spin”, was born of a fourth successive election defeat in 1992 that threatened the 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 (Lee, 1999). Jonathan Powell, Tony Blair’s most senior adviser, argued that storytelling was important in government: “We provided the journalists with a new narrative after years of the same old stories about the Tories. The arts of spin worked” (Powell, 2010, p201). In his diary entry for 26 September 2017 Blair’s spokesman, Alastair Campbell, justified the immediate radical shake-up then underway in the Government Information Service (GIS) by saying: “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) (Campbell & Hagerty, 2011), where ‘us’ is the Labour party-in-government. During the first year of the Blair Government, 25 heads of information and their deputies were replaced – 50% of the total. By August 1999, all but two heads had been replaced (Osborne, 1999), and by 2002, none was still in post (Franklin, 2004).

From May 1997 onwards, observers, and especially journalists, noted an increasingly partisan, personalized and strategic approach to the use of government information (Demos, 2003; Jones, 1999; Rawnsley, 2000; Sixsmith, 2007). This made sense from a party political point of view, but risked contravening the GIS’s own 1997 propriety code that required government press officers to ensure that:

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 (Government Information Service, 1997).

So why did the system of government controls aimed at preventing such partisanship fail to regulate the initial threat to impartiality posed by the defenestration of the GIS leadership following the incoming Labour government of 1997? Part of the explanation may lie in the self-regulating nature of the GIS, which was set up after WW2 as a separate hierarchy within the civil service<sup>ii</sup>. Persuasion, and especially the use of creativity to encourage behaviour change, had been an inherent part of government communication since its origins in wartime (Grant, 1999; L'Etang, 2009). Indeed, public relations theorists argue that the use of creativity is essential to the “added value” that is the *raison d'être* of the PR function. For Green, creativity in PR is a form of flexible thinking and problem solving whereby recognition by others is achieved through the creation of “something new by bringing together two or more different elements in a new context” (Green, 2010, p. 8). This is not novelty for its own sake but the application of creativity in order to uphold the client’s objectives and brand values. For the government press officer, the *ultimate* client is the public, but the *proximate* one is the political leadership within the department, the ministerial team. Adherence to public values might have seemed obstructive and old-fashioned, while being responsive to a more active management of the media on behalf of ministers was not only existentially necessary but consistent with the notion of innovative PR.. With their leadership decimated, their traditional practices under threat and the example of a successful news management model in front of them in the form of the incoming Labour SpAds, it was difficult, even impossible, to resist the new government’s more proactive approach to public communication.

Cropley has argued that modern industrialised societies are so ‘enchanted’ with the idea of creativity, perhaps as a unique reflection of the individual spirit and personal fulfilment, that we frequently fail to consider its ‘dark side’ (Cropley, 2010). He cites the promotional arts such as advertising, entertainment media and celebrity as being driven by the “application of creativity with the conscious and deliberate intention of doing harm to others” (p4). He contrasts the ‘divergent’ process of creativity with established rule-based systems that are intended to uphold values such as accuracy, fairness and transparency. Wisdom, he argues, is the accumulated experience of previous generations that aims to “maximise the common good, not just to seek his or her own advantage” (p10). Here, in a nutshell, is the dilemma faced by the government communicator. Within the maelstrom of a busy government press office, how realistic was it to

expect front line officers and their beleaguered leadership to place a distant public good over the immediate threats perceived by governing politicians?

## **2.2 *Media hypersensitivity in government***

Since the rise of 24/7 media in the late 1980s, the field of battle in politics has extended from parliament and the campaign trail into the governing executive, in the form of the ‘permanent campaign’ (Blumenthal, 1982; Norris, 2000). As a matter of survival, governing politicians demand that all available tools in the media armoury are deployed in their interest, both politically and personally. Studies from a number of countries have shown that politicians prioritise media attention, and believe that the mass media can determine their futures (Elmelund-Præstekær et al. 2011; Hennessy, 2014; Strömbäck, 2011; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011). Politicians have long been dominant suppliers of news (Barnett & Gaber, 2001; McNair, 2007), and journalists have traditionally been the main gatekeepers to public attention (Davis, 2007), with the result that media and political elites are thought to have become increasingly and “inextricably intertwined”, and distant from an alien and unknowable public (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995, p. 26).

British politicians’ hypersensitivity to the news media was revealed in their testimonies at the *Leveson Inquiry* into the press following the 2007-11 phone hacking scandal (Leveson, 2012). Senior politicians from all political parties expressed concern at the power of the mass media, especially the national tabloids, to undermine governments and end political careers. Tony Blair described 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 "full on, full frontal, day in day out" attack that can "literally wash a government away" (Evidence session: 28/5/2012). The then Prime Minister David Cameron explained why he employed a controversial former tabloid newspaper editor who was later jailed for his role in phone hacking as his Director of Communications. He needed "someone tough and robust" who could handle "the huge media pressure," where even the innocent are "thrown to the wolves" (Evidence session: 14/6/2012). The Leveson Inquiry 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” (Leveson, 2012, III Press and Politicians, para 120).

This article argues that this trading of information was conducted largely informally by special advisers, leading to the marginalisation of government press officers. This change is consistent with broader changes in public administration during the 1990s and beyond that tilted power

towards politicians while central public bureaucracies in many liberal democracies experienced a significant decline in autonomy and status along with the rise of New Public Management (Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014; E. Page, 2007; J. Page, et al., 2012). Peters claims that there has been an increase in “top down politicization” since the 1950s in many European countries, involving the exercise of greater power and control over the central bureaucracy by ruling politicians, and political parties (Peters & Pierre, 2004, p. 287). Since control over the media relations function within central state bureaucracies is a major preoccupation of governing politicians, it is not surprising that much reform focused on government PR, “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).

### ***2.3 Mediatization of government: the ‘cross-field’ as a site of struggle between different promotional operatives***

“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).

As we have seen, the media relations function within government is handled by at least three key actors – government press officers, special advisers and politicians. A fourth actor also plays a key role in crafting government narratives, the journalist. In his empirical study into the relations between US government officials and beat reporters during the 1980s and 90s, Cook concluded that much of the negotiation about what becomes news takes place behind the scenes between political and government sources, and journalists (Cook, 1998). As Meyer’s quote illustrates, the government news environment is political, adversarial, time-limited and even thrilling. Reputations can be dashed, blame allocated, and news circulated around the globe within seconds (Lindquist & Rasmussen, 2012). It is not enough, therefore, to consider the operation of government news management as *either* political communication *or* government public relations – it is a compelling and sometimes toxic combination of both.

To conceptualise the relationship between governing politicians, special advisers, government press officers, and the media, this article adopts the ‘embedded’ mediatization approach... This contrasts with Altheide and Snow’s original idea of media logic (Altheide, 2004), whereby the media production process intrudes “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 instead that the institutional and cultural changes related to developments in media are so profound that they constitute 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 empirical focus is on “the illumination of some of the shifting relations between and across multiple actors and the media” rather than on media institutions or actors (Hoskins & Loughlin, 2015, p. 1325). Mediatization works as a ‘sensitizing concept’, guiding the exploration of changes in custom and practice over time across a range of domains and involving a range of meta-processes (Lunt & Livingstone, 2016).

This approach has taken mediatization scholars into a number of settings, including a handful conducted from within central governing bureaucracies. In their analysis of the work of Swedish government communicators, Fredriksson et al. found that the formal autonomy of even arms-length public bureaucracies was not enough to protect them from political interference. In response to political demands, government press officers 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, a Norwegian ethnographic study of communications specialists within an executive agency found 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 their impartial ideals of equal treatment and the neutral bureaucracy (Thorbjornsrud, et al. 2014).

Building on the work of Cook and others, the Australian scholars, Lingard and Rawolle, developed the idea of the ‘cross-field’ to explain the behaviour, culture and outputs of government actors negotiating with journalists to create and convey public policy messages (Lingard et al., 2005). They define social fields as domains where particular forms of competition operate according to a distinctive logic of practice, and where individuals engaged in the competition are driven by a set of compelling but often unseen forces. Although politicians and journalists operate in distinctive ways both culturally and institutionally, they drive and are driven by, the over-arching process of mediatization. The ‘cross-field’, then, is a shared policy and representational space that exists metaphorically and institutionally at the intersection of politics, media and bureaucracy. Here, problems and solutions are defined and sudden shifts in power, and struggles over meaning and interpretation take place. The idea of the ‘cross-field’ can encapsulate the means by which governments attempt to re-frame public attitudes over the long term, both within specific policy areas, and in relation to persuasive campaigns such as that which arose from the British decision to support the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. This conceptual framework provides some basis for understanding the powerful forces that underlie the activities of government media actors, both press officers and special

advisers, which appear compelling and irresistible in the short term but undermine long term credibility and ultimately public trust.

### **3. Research design and methodology**

The study that forms the basis for this paper sought to provide a rare insight into the perceptions and experiences of UK government press officers between 1997 and 2015. Such officials rarely or never comment in public while in post, or issue memoirs once departed, with the notable exception of Bernard Ingham, Mrs Thatcher's press secretary, see (Ingham, 2003). In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 former, largely middle-ranking, departmental government communicators, mainly press officers, who had served for an average of 15.2 years between 1961 and 2014. A further nine interviews with *servicing* civil servants were conducted as part of another study (Garland et al, 2017). The sampling method was purposive and used snowballing to ensure a spread of contacts over time and within a range of government departments.

Most of the interview data related to the period from 1978 to 2015; 15 interviews covered the period between 1997 and 2010, and ten related to the period between 2010 and 2014. To provide a range of perspectives, these accounts were augmented by additional interviews with two other types of media actor operating within the cross-field: six policy journalists and three special advisers who between them had held their positions for an average of 32 and five years respectively<sup>iii</sup>. The response rates for the civil servants, journalists and special advisers were 59%, 67% and 50%. The topic guide was derived from a reading of academic and grey literature and anecdotal evidence from media interviews, political memoirs and biographies and was aimed at establishing what government press officers do, how they define their role and how they work with other civil servants, politicians and their advisers. Concepts key to the conceptual framework, such as politicization, mediatization, personalisation and spin were not referred to directly in the interview questioning.

The interview data was augmented by a systematic analysis of four kinds of documentary evidence in order to establish chronology during the period of study and provide a context to the interview data:

1. Archives relating to the post-war organization of government publicity (CAB 78/37 and CAB 134/355); and the presentation of government policy from 1981-83 and 1983- 86 (PREM 19/720/721 and PREM 19/1775).



2. Documents from the Ingham archive dated May 1979 to April 1985, accessed through <https://www.chu.cam.ac.uk/archives/collections/thatcher-papers/>.
3. Published government and parliamentary reviews and reports relating to government media relations between 1997 and 2016.
4. Internal GCS records such as departmental capability reviews, professional handbooks, government communications staffing lists, internal guidance and communications plans.

The interview and documentary material was uploaded into Nvivo, the text-processing software package, and all texts were analysed thematically using codes that arose from the text. The coding frame consisted of 76 separate codes, with a hierarchy of two or three levels, under 15 main headings. The approach to analysis was a hybrid one, combining deductive and inductive elements (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

An innovation in this study was its historical approach: previous studies conducted from within public bureaucracies in Norway, Sweden and Australia focused on single snapshots in time. This study sought to fill this gap by making visible the everyday processes and mechanisms that take place *over time*, through the testimony of those most concerned with enacting them, and through contemporary documents. Within the cross-field, facts are deployed strategically and selectively; even the translation from policy-speak to political speak, and then to media-speak, is a process of translation where choices of what to say and how to say it have to be made. The study aimed to find out what influenced these choices over time, and how this influenced the possibility of democratic public communication. In this article I draw on the interview and documentary evidence from the study that specifically relates to ideas of truth and selective or 'creative' news management in order to dissect the working relationship between government press officers and media special advisers over time.

#### **4. Creative news management in government: an empirical analysis**

“Media advisors must always strive to be honest, basing their advice and briefings on what indisputable facts they can find (but) ... the truth tends to be ambiguous. .. Even facts are not always as solid as they seem and need checking and challenging vigorously, at times to the point of cussedness. That was always my approach, but it failed the Iraq test” (*John Williams: Statement for the Iraq Inquiry*, 2010).

In this statement, John Williams, former Director of Communications at the Foreign Office up to, during and after the 2003 Iraq War, expresses' regret that his normally rigorous approach to the facts, gleaned over long experience as a journalist, failed to prevent a disastrous misuse of intelligence information. Despite his seniority, he had neither the institutional nor cultural

capital within government to influence decisions about the distribution of information. An interviewee for this study, also a former journalist who worked as a strategic communications adviser between 2008 and 2010, described working in government as exciting but demanding and stressful beyond anything she had experienced in her 20s years as a journalist. As a journalist she had only seen “a tiny bit” of what happens in government; it was a major task of *translation* and *simplification* to make complex policy information palatable to journalists:

When you're in the department you see it all ... at a very senior level so it's a very kind of privileged position and you begin to understand policy development and implementation, in all its forms in just a totally different way, so your knowledge expands enormously (C1).

In his 1983 BBC Reith Lectures the former joint Head of the Civil Service, Douglas Wass (1981-3), anticipated the rise of political spin when he identified a perennial tension between governments and the media that he believed increased the risk of three modes of behaviour that undermined public trust: the misleading use of information, the irresponsible use of unauthorised information, and the “deliberate and covert briefing of select elements” (Wass, 1984). He warned that, since there was no provision within the UK government for externally auditing the process, ministers would continue to be “judges in their own court”. They could suppress information likely to cause political embarrassment or selectively brief certain findings that supported their policies. Ultimately, he said, such manipulation will breed “disgust, cynicism and eventually contempt”. In this section we examine what form such manipulation of privileged information took and consider the role of the government press officer in facilitating or resisting the normalization of a more creative approach to news management after 1997.

#### ***4.1 'Being creative': the misleading use of government information***

The Chilcot and Butler inquiries criticised the government for presenting the intelligence on Iraq's WMDs without sufficient caveats as to the uncertainty of the data. Concerns arose in particular with regard to Tony Blair's foreword to the dossier, where he stated that Saddam's “military planning allows for some of the WMDs to be ready within 45 minutes of an order to use them” (HM Government, 2002). The source was later discredited but not before blanket headlines such as “Brits 45 minutes from doom” (*The Sun*, 25 September 2002) had amplified a message that powerfully supported the Blair narrative. The philosopher, Neil Manson, considered the ethics of such practices, which he refers to as ‘truthful spin’; the intentional placing of a selective fact in the public domain that will almost certainly be misinterpreted (wilfully or not), to serve the advantage of the client. He concluded that this was not only

damaging to public trust, but was unethical and deceitful (Manson, 2010). In many sectors, the use of facts in order to create a self-advantaging impression would fit within Green's definition of strategic creativity in PR as discussed in section 2.1 (Green, 2010), but in government, it becomes problematic, and hence subject to voluntary codes on propriety.

The first Permanent Secretary for Government Communications, Howell James (C2), noted the practice of incomplete truth telling that could mislead, when he told MPs that post 1997 governments had "a tendency to rebut too vigorously and too quickly without recourse to the full facts" leading to "an inflation of language around policies" (Public Administration Select Committee, 2006). The House of Lords Communications Committee was similarly critical of the misuse of government statistics by deploying them "as a political weapon" that could "reinforce a political point" (House of Lords, 2009).

In his interview, Sir Robin (now Lord) Butler, Cabinet Secretary between 1988 and 1998, noticed a change in the approach to government information in 1997 which caused him concern and led him to commission his deputy, Robin Mountfield, to conduct a review into ministers' dissatisfaction with the operation of the GIS (Mountfield, 1997). He argued that government had become "more political".

The political battle is conducted through the media on a 24/7 basis (so) ministers and politicians obviously give more attention to that battle and they put pressure on civil servants to support them in that (C3).

The growing tendency for ministers to sanction individual news briefings by special advisers led to a focus on personalised storytelling that 'coloured' what would otherwise be 'dry' policy announcements:

It was quite well known for a political correspondent to say to a special adviser 'I hear your minister got the worst of it in cabinet this morning' and for the special adviser to say 'oh no, no, no, old Bloggs got the worst of it', so that you build up a story by playing off special advisers.

The corollary to the selective release of facts that support the government narrative is the suppression of facts that don't. This press officer (1999-2004) explained how:

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 (C4).

Another respondent remembered a decision taken during the Blair years not to publish the findings of a report commissioned into public attitudes towards immigration because it was seen as a “time bomb”:

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...that research was put under lock and key. It was never used (C5).

This decision was unprecedented in this interviewee’s experience since convention held that publicly funded information should always be made available in some form. In her view, it also led to policy failures because, without acknowledging that a significant majority of the population had concerns about immigration, it was harder to address or challenge them. 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). In 2014, two stories accused Downing Street of suppressing a report that fewer jobs were taken by immigrants than had been claimed by the then Home Secretary, Theresa May (C. Cook, 2014). The campaigning charity, *Sense about Science*, uncovered evidence of delays in the publication of government-funded research into food banks and the impact of immigration on the labour market, and called on the government to comply with its own protocols on publishing research. The report concluded that without a comprehensive register of such research delays or even suppression would continue (Sedley, 2016).

#### **4.2 ‘Being creative’: the use of unauthorised information**

Government convention, as iterated in propriety guidance and codes of conduct, prohibits the use of taxpayer-funded resources to conduct party electioneering, to overtly criticise the opposition or previous governments, boost the personal profile of individual ministers, conduct media briefing against colleagues, or deliberately mislead the public. Yet according to respondents all of these practices take place, some routinely.

Nadine Smith, who performed a number of senior roles in departments and at the Cabinet Office (1998-2009), recalled in her interview how:

When I worked with Alan Milburn, his press special adviser was very much focused on winning the next election and that was tricky at times because there was quite a lot they were doing that

was more about electioneering than it was about focusing on the government policy of the day (C6).

A departmental press officer (2010-2014) remembers being instructed by ministers to release information to “friendly” media outlets, which while not untrue, was selective, and deliberately aimed at challenging the austerity claims of other public sector bodies by criticizing their management. As he explained, the aim was “to limit the damage from the (austerity) narrative and at the same time promote your own”. He was expected to prioritise the Daily Telegraph because it was read by potential Conservative voters while avoiding the left-of-centre Guardian (C7). This contravenes the GCS code, which states, “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, 2015)(my emphasis).

Propriety codes state that attacks on political opponents cannot be issued as official government texts and should be conducted from the party press office, not by ministers or civil servants (Government Communications Service, 2014). This is reiterated in the special adviser code of conduct, which states “briefing on purely party political matters must be handled by the party machine” (Cabinet Office, 2016, p. 4). Yet the same respondent described such attacks on the opposition as being so routine as to be normalised:

Any direct criticism of current Labour party policy was always done via the special advisers and it wouldn't normally be emailed out to them...the special adviser would take the lead on this and say 'because we want to do a political attack as part of the response, we'll deal with that'.

Jonathan Haslam, former press secretary to John Major who left government in 1998, felt that the *de facto* role of the special adviser was to promote their minister personally, whatever the guidance said:

That's what they are there for. If they didn't do it, it's rather a career limiting opportunity because they are a personal appointment. Who's their chief, their star, their leader? It's the guy who appointed them.

By talking up the individual achievements, the battles that are won behind the scenes, the insights, the relationship that the minister has with the Prime Minister, any one of a dozen mechanisms or a continual drip feed of activities to make sure that their person is seen in the best possible light. And why wouldn't you if you were in that position?” (C8).

Such informal, unrecorded and off the record briefings, either by phone or in person, were flexible enough to be open to interpretation, so if controversy erupted they could be denied. One

long-serving broadsheet journalist went off the record to say that “there were one or two 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”, and yet, he added, “I’ve never had a press officer lie to me. And it’s kind of crucial. Because what do you believe?” (J1).

### **4.3 *‘Being creative’: the covert briefing of selective elements***

The biggest single change observed consistently throughout this study was the change in the rules of engagement in relation to government news management after 1997. Nadine Smith became aware of an alternative channel of communication involving special advisers that she felt it was safer to ignore:

There were a lot of phone calls made that I didn’t know about. I don’t think I wanted to know about every phone call ...because if something went wrong in the press I’d almost rather not know that they’d started the fire (C6).

During the Coalition period, this departmental press officer (2010-14) took direction from the minister’s media special adviser

...on what interviews to accept or try and line-up, which journalists should be briefed, for which stories, so in terms of how we divided work, I think especially, the comms department did all the legwork and the grunt work, and the special advisers were there to help advise on what direction they wanted it to take. We were aware that they were having discussions with favoured journalists (C7).

For Bernard Ingham, operating a generation earlier, this was anathema. The public duty of the government communicator required that, among journalists, “you don’t have favourites; you are there to serve all equally” (C9). Jonathan Haslam agreed that “all the media ought to be treated equally.” Yet the veteran science journalist, Nigel Hawkes, was able to tell MPs in 2009 that “you would not these days ring departmental press officers to find out what is going on” (House of Lords, 2009).

The change in government news management practices was most clearly articulated by the journalists interviewed for this study, who experienced the insertion of special advisers into the news management structure of government after 1997 as immediate and dramatic. The BBC’s home affairs correspondent (1989-2002) Jon Silverman found that the insider briefings from the SpAds were essential in helping him to deliver exclusives across a range of platforms. He would ring the Home Office SpAd as late as midnight to pick up a story for the next day’s radio news bulletin:

I could get 90% of what I wanted out of (him)...rather than the press office. The press office was useful for the mechanics of how a story was going to be issued...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, the special adviser became the main conduit (J2).

With this came discrimination between favoured and unfavoured journalists. David Brindle of *The Guardian* was no longer favoured because, as a specialist, he was not part of the political lobby:

They have their pecking order in terms of who they'd really want to take a call from and get on to ... 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 (J4).

Nicholas Jones, who worked for BBC news until 2002, also noticed that “the special advisers were calling the shots increasingly” (J3). This was epitomised by the centrally-coordinated news diary (known as ‘the grid’) that was introduced after 1997. This was, he said, a “political tool” that was run, not by civil servants, as was commonly believed, but by SpAds: it had “the civil service stamp” and was “accommodated within the civil service structure”, but was driven by a political agenda. Similar findings were observed in an interview study in Northern Ireland, which concluded that press officers were marginalised as news providers by special advisers who conducted exclusive, off the record briefings to selected journalists (Rice, Somerville, & Wilson, 2015). Jonathan Haslam sees this as a major shift “from special advisers talking up their ministers...to having a much greater say in every sense of the word over what the department would be saying to the media”. All three elements related to creative news management – covert individual briefing, the mis-use of unauthorised information and the misleading use of privileged government information – were conducted *in spite of* government press officers, and contributed to their increasing marginalisation.

## 5. Conclusion

The former head of the civil service Robert Armstrong (1979-87), described the “professional civil service communicator” as “one of the bulwarks against a blurring of the distinction between party political and government communications” (House of Lords, 2008), and indeed, propriety guidance places the responsibility on them to uphold the distinction between impartial and party political communication. On the evidence presented here, given the competitive pressures

operating within the 'cross-field', it is unrealistic to expect front line government press officers and their beleaguered leadership in government communications to place a distant public good over the immediate and existential threats perceived by their proximate clients, the governing politicians. The deployment of professional *creativity* needed to ensure impactful communication with the public through the media, and loyalty to the immediate client, the government of the day, take precedence over the *wisdom* of serving an abstract public good. Institutionally, the defenestration of the service after 1997, the drive to provide story-rich political narratives for the national media, and the deployment of special advisers in media management roles, has steadily intensified, making it harder for government press officers to uphold their own propriety codes.

This study has reported on practices that contravene the codes, such as selective briefing, unclear source attribution, the suppression of uncomfortable information, tactical instruction of civil servants by political appointees, and attempts to seek electoral advantage within government through taxpayer funded resources. Public relations requires a form of strategic communication that benefits the client but in government, custom, practice and codified rules are there to ensure that the whole public, including the majority that did not vote for the ruling party, are collectively represented within the corridors of power. Far from being empowered by a more proactive and creative approach to news management, government press officers have been marginalised by the *unseen power* of media special advisers working directly for ministers, and largely under the radar. To build and maintain public trust, the task of upholding ethical public communication cannot be left to government press officers alone. The civil service as a whole must uphold a long-term and publicly shared vision of what government communications should be which goes beyond the narratives presented by the government of the day. Yet this is not just the task of public servants. Parliament must be given the power to hold governments to account for their custodianship of the public communications function, this most politically sensitive of public goods.

## 6. References

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<sup>i</sup> One account claims that the term 'spin doctor' was first used by *The New York Times* in 1984, in coverage 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)

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<sup>ii</sup> The GIS was formed in 1946 and renamed the Government Information and Communication Service (GICS) in 1997, the Government Communications Network (GCN) in 2003, and the Government Communications Service (GCS) in 2013.

<sup>iii</sup> List of interviewees cited:

C1 – Strategic Communications adviser – 2008-10

C2 – Howell James, Permanent Secretary, Government Communications – 2004-08

C3 - Robin Butler, Cabinet Secretary – 1988-1998

C4 – Departmental press officer – 1999-2004

C5 – Government communicator – 1975-2008

C6 – Nadine Smith, government communicator – 1999-2009

C7 – Departmental press officer – 2010-14

C8 – Jonathan Haslam, government communicator – 1978-1998

C9 – Bernard Ingham, government communicator - 1967-1990

J1 – Broadsheet journalist – 1987-2012

J2 – Jon Silverman, BBC correspondent - 1989-2002

J3 – Nicholas Jones, journalist – 1968-2002

J4 – David Brindle, broadsheet journalist - 1978-date