Between mediatisation and politicization: the changing role and position of Whitehall press officers in the age of political spin

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Abstract

Despite widespread critiques of 'political spin', the way governments engage with the mass media has attracted relatively little empirical attention, despite its "increasing centrality to democratic governance" (Moore, 2006, p11; K Sanders, 2011). Recent studies of northern European public bureaucracies' responses to mediatisation *from within* have identified tensions between bureaucratic and media logic and values (Figenschou and Thorbjornsrud, 2015; Fredriksson et al., 2015). This supports wider claims that the traditional dividing line between government information and political propaganda has come under increasing pressure as a higher premium is placed on persuasion by both journalists and politicians battling for public attention (Foster, 2005; Kunelius and Reunanen, 2012). The arrival of Labour in 1997 after 18 years in opposition was a watershed for UK government communications, allowing the government to reconfigure its official information service in line with the party political imperative to deploy strategic communications as a defence against the new "media-driven 'name, blame and shame' environment"(Lindquist & Rasmussen, 2012).

PR, in government as elsewhere, has grown in scale, scope and status to become "a form of work that is increasingly central to economic and cultural life due to the power and influence it commands" (Edwards, 2011; Miller, 2008). However, within the system of executive self-regulation of government publicity, civil servants who specialise in media relations must negotiate between the need to inform citizens about the government's programme, and,

demands by ministers to use privileged information to secure and maintain personal and party advantage in the struggle for power. Taking 1997 as a turning point, and through the voices of the actors who negotiate government news – mainly press officers, but also journalists and special advisers - this paper examines the changing role and position of Whitehall press officers in what has become known as the age of political spin, finding a profound and lasting change in the rules of engagement.

Keywords: **government, mediatisation, political spin, public relations, United Kingdom**

1. Introduction

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) but a suspicion of what is popularly known as 'political spin' – the exploitation by governments of their dominant position as news providers for partisan purposes - has generated much academic and public attention since the term was first coined in the 1980s[i]. Despite this widespread critique, the way governments engage with the mass media has attracted relatively little empirical or theoretical attention (Sanders, 2011) and what attention there has been focuses on party political news management. The larger communications operation delivered by impartial civil servants, now increasingly working with politically-appointed media advisers, has been "strangely neglected" (Strömbäck, 2011). The study of government officials' relations with media *from within* is a small but growing sub-field where scholars from Scandinavia, the Netherlands and Australia have used a combination of observational and documentary methods to identify ways in which central bureaucracies and executive agencies respond to mediatization, suggesting a clash of interests

between bureaucratic and party political values (Fredriksson et al., 2015, Schillemans, 2012, Figenschou and Thorbjornsrud, 2015).

Within the UK, the subject of government media relations "remains, as yet, chronically under-researched, despite its increasing centrality to democratic governance" (Moore, 2006, p11), while the wider issue of "the institutionalisation of PR as part of government has largely been ignored" (Macnamara, 2014, p30), although Rice et al. have analysed the growing role of political-appointees - known in the UK as special advisers (SpAds) - in news management within the particular circumstances of the devolved government of Northern Ireland (Rice et al., 2015). The election of Labour to the UK government in 1997 after 18 years in opposition was a watershed for government communications, but many of the changes that were highly criticised then had actually been gathering pace covertly since the 1980s, as political parties and politicians used strategic communications, and especially news management, as a defence against a more hostile "media-driven 'name, blame and shame' environment" (Lindquist and Rasmussen, 2012, p188; Hood, 2011).

In common with the Scandinavian studies referred to above, this paper uses a mediatization framework to analyse cultural and institutional change within Whitehall, but introduces a diachronic dimension by using archived documents and expert witness accounts. In government as elsewhere public relations has grown in scale, scope and status in recent decades to become "increasingly central to economic and cultural life due to the power and influence it commands" (Miller, 2008, Edwards, 2011, p5, L'Etang, 1998). Politicians and journalists demand a more persuasive, story-driven mode of communication in order to attract public attention in an increasingly competitive and commercialized marketplace (Kunelius and Reunanen, 2012, Landerer, 2013). With the rise of the permanent campaign (Blumenthal, 1982; Norris, 2000a), the distinction between *political* communication as the exploitation of

media power within a political battlefield context (M Lee, 1999; Pitcher, 2003), and *government* communication as the dissemination of impartial public information (Rice et al., 2015), has become increasingly blurred, while the battle to control political narratives has extended deeper into the executive.

The resource devoted to government communications in the UK remains tiny – a fraction of what would be expected for an organisation with the scale and scope of the civil service[ii] – and highly vulnerable to politically-inspired reforms. Within the UK's system of executive self-regulation of government publicity (Yeung, 2006), government communicators are required to balance two, often conflicting, imperatives: to inform citizens about how to access services and understand the government's programme, while, by promoting the elected government's programme, helping to secure and maintain governing party advantage. This paper asks to what extent the balance between these two imperatives has shifted substantively and permanently since 1997. The implications of such change are important because the more government communications prioritises ministerial news management over other channels of public engagement, the less autonomy it has to challenge the political narratives of governments, raising continuing questions about the trustworthiness of government information. Far from gaining in power and autonomy in response to mediatization, as might have been predicted, I will argue that UK government communications remains under-resourced, lacks autonomy and is increasingly skewed towards a pattern of news management clustered around ministers (Hood, 2015).

2. Government 'spin doctors': under-resourced, under-valued and marginalised?

Labour was highly critical of the Government Information Service (GIS) prior to 1997, having "run rings around it while Major was still Prime Minister" (Seldon, 2005, p301; Negrine, 2008). On 3 May 1997, two days after arriving at Number 10, the new Director of Communications, Alastair Campbell, wrote in his diary that: "The press officers were a mixed bunch, but gave off the sense of being terrified" (Campbell and Hagerty, 2011). Later, he described them as "a pretty dull and uninspiring lot" (13 May), while the "culture in which they had grown up" was "way behind the times" (2 June). By 9 June he was "beginning to think the majority were useless". Within two years, the service had been overhauled, the number of politically-appointed SpAds had doubled, virtually the entire leadership of the (renamed) GICS[iii] had been replaced and two critical reviews into government communications had taken place (Mountfield, 1997, Public Administration Select Committee, 1998). By 2004 two further reviews had, respectively, accused the Labour government of presiding over a "breakdown in the level of trust in and credibility of government communications" (Phillis, 2004, p2), and, in relation to Iraq, of placing information in the public domain in which "more weight was placed on the intelligence than it could bear", stretching available intelligence "to the outer limits"(Butler, 2004). The recent Chilcot Report reinforced these charges, concluding that the promotional campaign associated with the WMD dossier of September 2002 resulted in "a damaging legacy…undermining trust and confidence in Government statements" that would "make it more difficult to secure support for Government policy" (Chilcot, 2016, p131, 116}.

There are two main claims that would predict an increase in the importance, power and priority accorded to government communicators in line with the expansion of promotional culture from

the late 1980s onwards (Davis, 2013, Dinan and Miller, 2007, Wernick, 1991, Moloney, 2001). The first, the narrative of political spin, argues that so-called spin doctors took control not only of party political communications but of government communications, thereby compromising its impartiality (Jones, 2001, Atkinson, 2005, Foster, 2005, Oborne, 1999, Franklin, 2004, McNair, 2004). The second, advanced by Labour commentators and others, states that accusations of spin were exaggerated, and that the changes post-1997 represented a long-overdue process of professionalization in response to the expansion and proliferation of news media (Gould, 1998, Campbell & Hagerty, 2011, Macintyre, 1999, Blair, 2010).

I will argue that, although there is some truth in both claims, in practice, PR as a discipline and civil service media relations specialists as a professional group have (a) followed rather than led innovation in government communications (b) struggled to maintain their professional autonomy and reputation and (c) continue to occupy a relatively weak position vis-à-vis ministers and their aides, journalists and the wider civil service. Furthermore, evidence compiled by the author suggests that wholesale personnel changes in civil service communications leadership noted after 1997 also took place after 2010 (Garland, 2016). The government's own figures show that the number of SpAds continued to rise after 2010, although little is known about what they actually do (Cabinet Office, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015).

This article uses evidence from 34 one-hour, in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted and transcribed by the author between 2013 and 2015 mainly with serving and former civil servants (25) but also with a smaller sample of special advisers (3) and policy journalists (6)[iv]. The selection process for civil servants combined purposive and snowball techniques with some quota sampling in order to ensure access to key witnesses that had served within government departments at all levels from press officer to Director of Communication during the Thatcher to Cameron period (1979-2015). The interview topic guide focused on changes over time in the

everyday practice of government-media relations, asking how interviewees saw their role, how politicians, special advisers and press officers worked together, and how all parties managed the interface between government bureaucracy, party politics and the media. This evidence was augmented by the analysis of internal government documents such as reform plans, propriety guidance, staffing lists and reports; government and parliamentary enquiries and evidence sessions; and archived documents dating back to the 1980s that have recently become available through the 20-30-year rule. All material was subjected to thematic analysis via Nvivo. Codes were not pre-assigned but emerged inductively, resulting in a coding frame with 76 separate codes under 16 main headings. The most frequently cited themes were, in order of prominence: the impact of the 1997 and 2010 changes of government; impartiality/'crossing the line'; the role of special advisers; perceptions of government communicators by other civil servants; the Prime Minister/No10; ministers' perceptions of media; and the principles and purposes of government communications.

I will draw on this evidence to examine three main themes: changes in the structure and culture of UK government communications in response to mediatization since the late 1980s; the continuing 'narrative of disdain' towards press officers within the civil service; and how "politicization through indirect mediatization," as observed in the Swedish observational studies (Fredriksson et al., 2015, p27), led to dramatic and continuing changes in the unofficial 'rules of engagement' between government press officers, special advisers and journalists after 1997. *Mediatization* is here deployed to mean the "historical, ongoing, long-term (meta-) process in which more and more media emerge and are institutionalized (Krotz, 2009, p. 24), while *politicization* refers to the dynamic process whereby public service becomes more compatible with the partisan and policy preferences of elected politicians (Peters & Pierre, 2004, b). The process through which public bureaucracies adapt to and embed media demands and priorities

(mediatization) interacts with political imperatives to seek visibility and legitimation while managing considerable reputational risk (politicization). To manage this risk, politicians seek greater control over the communications function of the central public bureaucracy, while officials anticipate growing political 'interference' by responding more directly to ministerial media priorities. This paper asks whether and to what extent politically-led news management has challenged the Westminster ideal of transparent public communication.

2.1 Changing structure and culture of UK government communications

Outwardly, and with one notable exception, the *appearance* of the Whitehall government information service has changed little since it was inaugurated after WW2 as a cadre of specialist communicators under joint political and administrative leaderships. There were three separate components: a small communications team largely conducting media relations from Number 10, a central agency for commissioning and coordinating direct communications, and departmental press offices to disseminate information about government policy (Grant, 1999, Moore, 2006). In 1945, a Cabinet Committee concluded that the government needed "a body of technically expert staff which knew how to conduct publicity without incurring the charge of propaganda". Despite the risk of accusations of propaganda, governments had a duty to provide "the material on which the public could reach an informed judgement on current affairs" [v]. Herbert Morrison, the minister in charge of government information warned that there must be "no questions of Government publicity being used to boost individual ministers"[vi].

Government communications did not become subject to specific internal regulations until the 1970s when ethical standards were laid out in the Civil Service Code (Yeung, 2006). Since the 1990s, further codification took place in the form of propriety guidance aimed at managing

potential conflicts of interest between informing the public, and promoting the interests of ministers and the party in power. On the face of it, the wording of such guidance appears little changed between the early Blair years and today; both iterations state that information must be "relevant to government responsibilities, should be objective and explanatory, not biased or polemical" and "should not be, or liable to be, misrepresented as being party political" (Government Communications Service, 2014, Government Information Service, 2001). However, since the code carries no sanctions, and is not externally validated or scrutinised, it reflects an ideal rather day-to-day reality.

The appearance of continuity is deceptive. Press Office guidance in relation to ministers was significantly if subtly reframed after 2010. For example, the latest version of the GCS code asks press officers to go beyond objective and relevant explanation, requiring them to *promote* and *justify*, using a form of words which, it has been suggested, could not be a "clearer definition of spin in modern politics"(Grube, 2014, p314):

> 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. (GCS Code, 2014)

Furthermore, reforms carried out after the 2010 election, over and above the 15% austerity cuts to civil service headcount since 2010[vii], led to the decision to close the Central Office of Information (COI) in 2011 after 57 years, and transfer its responsibilities to the Cabinet office (Horton and Gay, 2011, Tee, 2011). The Cabinet Office minister now has a key role in oversight

and priority-setting as chair of a new GCS Board. This is the ultimate coordinating and decision-making authority for government communication; identifying and agreeing high level objectives, and approving the annual government communication plan. The academic and former senior adviser on government communications, Anne Gregory, warns that because this configuration "has strong political representation there is clearly the potential for political pressure on civil servant communicators…in which case government communications will come under a tighter political grip"(Gregory, 2012, p374). Hood's analysis of 30 years of government reform between 1980 and 2013 concludes that the information resource has significantly changed shape, as government communications moved from a relatively autonomous common service agency, the COI, to "a pattern of 'spinners' clustered in central agencies and around ministers in departments"(Hood, 2015, p174).

Providing a challenge to ministers while remaining loyal is traditionally considered to be a key role for civil servants (Public Administration Select Committee, 2013). Interviewees accepted this but explained that raising ethical issues with ministers could be "tricky", and required a "daily judgement call" (IV1) that involved "negotiating the words that worked" (IV2), and "having a difficult conversation" (IV3). One press officer (2010-14) recalls the 'frostiness' that arose when one culturally sensitive reference in a press release had to be removed:

> One of the special advisers wanted to insert a text (that) just sat uncomfortably with me…we put a submission in to the ministers' office saying 'our advice 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 (IV4).

There was some evidence that the opinions of the ministerial team carried more weight over time. One press officer (1999-2011) explained how:

> 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. I do feel that over the course of the time that I was in government, there was an erosion of those standards (IV5).

Civil service respondents were generally reluctant to concede that their own capacity to stand up to ministers was compromised and nearly all described maintaining the line between objective and party political information as a routine part of the job that rarely presented any difficulties. However, several also felt that the quality and trustworthiness of government information had declined since they had left the service. One respondent (1998-2010) cited media coverage that he believed had clearly emanated from government departments, as evidence for a more casual approach to the facts than "would…have been tolerated when I was a civil servant":

> I remember Cabinet Office civil servants changing stuff that couldn't go out – press releases, speeches…I just feel a little bit that that sense of the line has shifted a bit in the last couple of years (IV6).

A former BBC journalist (1968-2002) agreed, citing stories about court appearances by 'benefit scroungers' that appeared in the tabloid press:

> 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 (Iv7).

In practice, the 'line' between impartial and partisan communication is ambiguous and ill-defined, and is administered pragmatically, on professional instinct, through negotiation, within a day to day context. Weak propriety codes are no defence against a ministerial team fighting to hold on to power (Mulgan, 2008). Successive government and parliamentary enquiries, including Chilcot, consistently express concerns that political imperatives to *argue for* particular policy actions too often prevail over the requirement on the part of officials to *present evidence* (Chilcot, 2016). 2.2

2.2 A narrative of "disdain"

For nearly all former government press officers, the close working relationship with ministers and their teams, and the complexity of politics and policy-making, were the main attractions of a job that entailed long hours and pitiless media scrutiny. Words like 'fascinating' and 'exciting' recurred, and it is clear from the interviews that, throughout the time period covered by this study, even the most junior of press officers had close regular contact with ministers and their teams. One "enjoyed the close liaison with ministers" and found it "interesting to see how they operated behind the scenes" (IV8). Another (2010-13) explained 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" (IV4). A former Director of Communication who joined the Home Office as a press officer two months before 9/11 described it as a "fascinating time":

> We were just in the eye of a storm…there were huge political issues around anti-terrorist legislation. It meant that the Home Office ratcheted up to a whole new level of importance (IV9).

Their empathy with ministers' deep and growing concerns with the need to manage risks and

rewards in relation to media scrutiny drove press officers closer to ministers, but there were also powerful negative reasons for this – namely, their marginalisation within the civil service. Press officers recall being seen as "ministers' narks", "toys for the ministers" and as "below the salt" (IV3). PR was considered to be "a soft option"; something that is "inherently dishonest…something that you use to sell dog food" (IV10). It was seen "not exactly as a necessary evil but certainly not to be taken quite as seriously" (IV5) while another said of the Government Information Service that colleagues "tended to look down on it"(IV11).

This sense of the government communicator as an 'outsider' is backed up by the findings of official enquiries. The Mountfield Report (1997) noted "something approaching disdain for media and communications matters", while the Phillis Report (2004) 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.
>
> 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.

The failure on the part of the senior civil service to recognise and adapt to changes in the media, and particularly the rise of 24/7 news, after the departure of Margaret Thatcher in 1990, exacerbated the marginalisation of the government information service. John Major was suspicious of 'political spin', later telling the Leveson Inquiry that his "lack of a close relationship with any part of the media may have been a contributory factor to the hostile media

the 1990-97 government often received" (Bale and Sanders, 2001, Leveson, 2012, Hogg, 1995). A Number 10 spokesman at the time refers to Whitehall's 'hair shirtism': a reluctance to acknowledge, let alone prioritise, the needs of journalists. He remembers the struggle to provide toilets for female lobby correspondents, and to update facilities for broadcasters, and how, before 1997, 40 lobby correspondents attended daily briefings in a room for 10.

> The media was growing like Topsy in front of us. We were running like fury to try and keep up…It was a tiny office. It was absolutely ridiculous when you think about it. I did get Number 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 (IV12).

A colleague remembers how a press office of four people managed the media for John Major in the run up to 1997. On one occasion, a constituency school visit with the Prime Minister was ambushed by a media pack following a controversial statement on Europe by one of his ministers:

> I looked out of the window and, oh my God, there was the biggest scrum of media I'd ever seen…I then had kind of go 'oh PM there's a big crowd of people outside and I don't think you're going to be able to get to the car without looking as if you're running away'. John Major…went absolutely crazy and the head teacher was in the room as well so I sort of shuffled her out of the room because I thought 'no one else can really see you in this state' (IV2).

By the time Labour arrived in 1997, the shortcomings of the GIS had been made clear. Unlike other corporate and non-profit bodies, which were embracing PR and promoting PR

practitioners, the civil service leadership failed to prioritise communications, leaving development and innovation to ministers. They could now reconfigure the service to suit their own needs; closing the obvious gaps with not only a better-resourced and focused GIS, but with a new and more media savvy network of SpAds who were appointed by and solely responsible to ministers.

Some press officers were openly critical of their civil service colleagues for failing to understand the increased priority accorded to government communications by ministers after 1997. A senior press secretary (1998-2009) explained how, in meetings, policy civil servants showed discomfort when she made common cause with the Minister of State::

> 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 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 (IV1).

This continued into the post-2010 governments. A Head of News (until 2014) noticed resentment when she challenged the claims of policy officials in meetings:

> 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 (IV9).

2.3 Changes in the "rules of engagement" for news management

Politicians' sensitivity to, and fear of, hostile media scrutiny was laid bare in their evidence to the Leveson Inquiry into the ethics and practices of the press (Leveson, 2012). This helps to explain the drive to bring government information services under greater political control, a tendency noted in other liberal democracies (Eichbaum and Shaw, 2010; Page, 2007; Meer, 2011). In the UK this has been most manifest in the steady rise in numbers of special advisers who can simultaneously and seamlessly manage both politics and the media (Greer, 2008). Neither the simple mouthpiece of ministers, nor the demonized 'spin doctors' of popular legend, they have become significant media and political operators in their own right, who together form a 'political civil service' (Hood, 2015). This has led some to claim that the UK now has a "dual government communication system" (Sanders et al., 2011).

Witness accounts suggest that, after an initial period of disruption, this small but growing and increasingly coordinated group of politically appointed special advisers after 1997 came to be perceived as vital to political leadership within the civil service (Yong and Hazell, 2014; Public Administration Select Committee, 2012, 2001). The interviews conducted for this study support this in part but also raise questions about significant but insidious changes in the unwritten rules of engagement for government news management. The media relations practices of SpAds are little researched, although 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 (Hillman, 2014; Yong and Hazell, 2014; Blick and Jones, 2013; Gay, 2013; Wilkes, 2014). Detailed insights into how they operate vis-à-vis the media, however, are hard to find, since such activity is conducted covertly, and the civil servants who work most closely with them

rarely comment publicly. Most recently, though, the former joint Head of the Civil Service, Sir Bob (now Lord) Kerslake, hinted at the dominant role played by special advisers in the trading of privileged information when he told the trade magazine CSW that "information is routinely leaked by special advisers and ministers. There is a double standard going on where we should just acknowledge. The public see this and feel that information is controlled" (Foster, 2015). An interview study of the media role of special advisers and government press officers within the devolved government of Northern Ireland found that the latter were marginalised as news providers while special advisers provided exclusive, off the record briefings to selected journalists (Rice et al., 2015).

Overall, the civil servants interviewed for this study accepted the need for special advisers, so long as they behaved with maturity, tact and professionalism. However, according to this senior press secretary, there were concerns that on media matters they were permitted to operate freely and beneath the radar.

> There were a lot of phone calls made that I didn't know about…a lot of briefings done …I don't think I wanted to know about every phone call they were making because if something went wrong in the press I'd almost rather not know that they'd started the fire… It was a sort of case of, 'well what you don't know won't hurt' (IV1).

Some special advisers continued to instruct and even try to manage civil servants, despite this practice being officially outlawed after the 2004 Phillis Report:

> I had a couple of big rows with special advisers…mainly about how they would overwork the civil servant press officers… I sometimes felt that they were over demanding of some of my team. They were taskmasters.

A former Director of Communications (1991-2011) found that "regardless of what the codes say, they do direct civil servants every day", becoming effectively "chiefs of staff". Many were sensitive and understanding in the way they worked with press officers but others were "not mature enough for the job":

> There is a class of special adviser or minister who discovers that there are all these people who if you shout at them or swear at them, they just go red and look at their shoes 'cos they are not allowed to answer back, and they love it. There are always some people who take advantage of that (IV3).

Most striking was the testimony of journalists, who described the insertion of special advisers into the government news management after 1997 as both immediate. One broadcast journalist was required to file stories at any time, day or night, across a range of platforms, giving him 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 him to 'feed the beast' by providing not only a news subsidy but an authoritative comment and narrative subsidy as well.

He found that he could ring one well-placed special adviser as late as midnight to pick up a story for the next day's 6.30am 'two-way' on the Radio 4 Today programme: the source was authoritative and timely so there was little need and no time to explore alternative angles. The angle would inevitably favour the minister and sometimes "would not be exactly what the official news machine wanted or thought was appropriate":

> 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, when a minister was going to be available for interview…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 (IV14).

One freelance broadsheet journalist explained that editors preferred news delivered by special advisers because it provided "added value". To them, the 'official line' was "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" (IV15). Here, in a nutshell, is an expression of the dynamic whereby politically inspired, selective nuggets of news become currency in the 24-hour battle for media attention after 1997.

With this came discrimination between favoured and unfavoured journalists, according to this special editor for a broadsheet newspaper: "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. The involvement of special advisers:

> Changed fundamentally the rules of engagement and continues to do so…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 (IV13).

Once press officers accepted that they too had to prioritise their work in line with the Number 10 news grid, even those with whom he had previously 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.

The mechanics of this "different sphere", where special advisers traded exclusive nuggets of information for targeted coverage, were observed by a broadcast journalist who worked during the late 1980s and 1990s as the BBC's weekend duty editor. His job was to check government news stories which had been trailed in the Sunday papers by contacting government departments to "find out which one had legs, which one was actually the imagination of the journalist." 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 (IV7).

Now, he argues, everything is trailed ahead. In this "change in the balance of power" it is "the special advisers calling the shots increasingly". This is epitomised by the Number 10 news grid, introduced after 1997. This is a "political tool" which is run by special advisers, working to a political agenda: "It has the civil service stamp, this is up to civil service standards, and this can be accommodated within the civil service structure." Observing these changes, Bernard Ingham, Margaret Thatcher's long-serving chief press secretary, warned that was a "constitutional shift"

whereby New Labour had "effectively created a hybrid system…without the consent or proper debate in Parliament"(Ingham, 2003, p. 243).

The three special advisers interviewed for this study all had regular contact with journalists, often bearing the brunt of a media storm. The relationship with the departmental press office varied according to the disposition of the minister. This policy special adviser (2001-2005) explained that both he and his minister agreed 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.

Although he concentrated on policy he still spoke to the press office "pretty well every day":

> When things were quiet…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.

He was also in frequent contact with journalists, some of whom knew his number and called him direct:

> 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 (IV16).

Media engagement is clearly an important part of the role of special advisers, even for those who are policy rather than media advisers, yet this activity is not transparent, and is therefore

deniable by ministers, as was evident with a series of controversial special adviser resignations following controversial media briefings between 2009 and 2014[viii]. The Code of Conduct for Special Advisers says little about their media relations role, stating simply that they may: "represent the views of their Minister to the media (including a party viewpoint), where they have been authorised by the Minister to do so". They are asked to "observe discretion and express comment with moderation, avoiding personal attacks, and would not normally speak in public for their Minister or the Department" (Cabinet Office, 2015). This appears to contradict the first point, since speaking to journalists is essentially speaking in public for the minister.

Special advisers were irresistible to journalists because, as they moved into the heart of government news making, they began to offer rich pickings in the form of a steady stream of newsworthy, crisis-rich understandings of the game of politics. The six specialist journalists interviewed for this study were in senior roles that required them to not just report on but to analyze government news and, more importantly, to break their own stories. For them, the government 'line' as presented by government press officers was never more than a starting point for a wider and more complicated and nuanced story. For ministers, special advisers provided protection against media exposure but since their actions took place largely below the radar, they also provided a firebreak which could be disposed of when the inevitably risky game of media management took an unforeseen turn.

Conclusion

The civil servants, journalists and special advisers interviewed for this study report significant, substantive and permanent changes in the way UK governments managed the media, most particularly after 1997 but also continuing today. This suggests that it has become harder for

government press officers to resist political influence over government communication. We have shown that, after 1997, media relations became institutionalised as a core part of the role of the special adviser although this is not recognised in their Code of Conduct. This coincided with a shift in the role of government press officers, who are increasingly expected to prioritise ministerial needs and agendas, and accommodate the working practices of a larger and increasingly coordinated team of special advisers who report only to ministers and operate largely under the radar. The mainstream senior civil service largely stood aloof from the pressures of mediatization from the early 1990s onwards, leaving them powerlessness in the face of a politically driven media agenda and a speeded up media/policy cycle. Marginalised by the wider civil service, government press officers struggled to accommodate a clash of interests between bureaucratic and party political values, a phenomenon also observed in studies from within government bureaucracies in Sweden and Norway (Fredriksson et al., 2015, Figenschou and Thorbjornsrud, 2015). A trend towards increased political control over government communication has been reported in other ministerial democracies such as Germany, Belgium and Denmark, although it takes different forms (Eichbaum, 2010, Hustedt, 2014).

The Whitehall communications structure has been described as being a politico-administrative *dual service*; in fact, the working practices described here more closely resemble an *integrated service*, where 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 high profile news-led agenda-setting and strategic communications work that was previously the domain of Directors of Communication. While superficially largely intact, the post-war system which deployed a range of promotional methods, including direct and indirect communication, to reach the public, has given way to a system dominated by news management clustered

around ministers and serving selected journalists. This raises concerns that, within this increasingly large, mediated and unregulated space where ministerial aides covertly and selectively brief the main national news media, there is an increased risk of activity that, at the very least, bypasses the spirit of propriety codes, and is therefore less accountable either to Parliament or the public, and potentially less trustworthy.

These findings support a conceptual framework which holds that politicization and mediatization interact to facilitate a form of "politicization through indirect mediatization", whereby ministers become increasingly concerned to exert greater control over media representation while government press officers increasingly identify with and serve their particular needs (Fredriksson et al. 2015, p27). The mainstream senior civil service resisted changes brought about through the growing dominance of media considerations in political life, especially after 1997, and in the space thus vacated, ministers interjected their own preferred structures and processes and created their own largely autonomous network of political news managers within the civil service. Government propriety codes were, and continue to be, subtly altered over time to provide a *post-hoc* justification for these changes. The strictures of 1945, that required "a body of technically expert staff which knew how to conduct publicity without incurring the charge of propaganda" and who "could not be accused of using government publicity to boost individual ministers" [ix], are at the very least under threat. The resilient public narrative of political spin, both in the UK and elsewhere, bears testimony to a widespread, even unquestioning suspicion of what governments say.

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Endnotes

[i] 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 e between the US presidential candidates Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale. See www.theguardian.com/notesandqueries'query/0.5753,-1124.00.htm

[ii] The 2004 Phillis review estimated that 2,600 people worked directly in communications directorates at an annual cost of £90 million, referring to these figures as a "best estimate", and lamenting the lack of readily available statistics on the scale of the government's communications effort. Comparing these figures with the total number of full-time civil servants of about 500,000 in 2003, communications staff represented just 0.5% of the civil service by headcount. Recent official figures are not available but the Institute for Government put the number of full time civil servants at just over 327,000 in 2015, while Press Gazette estimated that there were around 1500 government communicators in government departments, representing 0.46% (Press Gazette, 20 November 2014) .

[iii] In November 1997, the GIS became the Government Information and Communication Service (GICS).

[iv] List of interviewees cited:

Interviewee	**Final position and dates of service**
IV1	Departmental press secretary/chief press secretary, Cabinet Office (1998-2009)

IV2	Number 10 press officer/Departmental Director of Communications (1994-2005)
IV3	Director of Communication (1991-2011)
IV4	Departmental press officer (2010-2014)
IV5	Departmental press officer (1999-2011)
IV6	Strategy and Communications Director (1998-2010)
IV7	BBC journalist (1968-2002)
IV8	Departmental press officer (1999-2004)
IV9	Director of Communications (2001-2014)
IV10	Deputy Director, Communication(1986-2008)
IV11	Deputy Director, Communication (1975-2008)
IV12	Press Secretary, Number 10/Director of Communication (1978-1998)
IV13	Specialist Editor, Broadsheet newspaper (1978-date)
IV14	BBC journalist (1972-2002)
IV15	Specialist broadsheet journalist (freelance)(1981-date)
IV16	Departmental special adviser (2001-2005)

[v] National Archives: Cabinet Papers CAB 78/37

[vi] Memorandum from Herbert Morrison, Lord President, 14 September 1945.

[vii] Institute for Government. Whitehall Monitor. 17 June 2015.

[viii] Note the resignations of four special advisers between 2009 and 2014: Jo Moore (2002), Damian McBride (2009), Adam Smith (2012) and Fiona Cunningham (2014).

[ix] Memorandum from Herbert Morrison, Lord President, 14 September 1945.

Interview transcripts are available from the author on request.