

# CHAPTER 1: – Prologue: The Crisis of Trust

The ideal of the well-informed citizen, facilitated by the watchdog role of the media, is generally seen as essential to the safeguarding of representative democracy. This ideal has been progressively challenged in recent decades under the pressure of a profound media transformation known as ‘mediatization’, and by the response of political actors and political institutions to such change. Governing bureaucracies have had to face two major drivers of change during the past 40 years: a more competitive and ubiquitous media, and a political class in thrall to media power and steeped in the arts of so-called ‘political spin.’ Cumulative changes in the way governments conduct public communication have been linked to a calamitous fall in public trust, and, some believe, may even threaten the foundations of liberal democracy itself. What is frequently absent in discussions about spin is the public. Where does ‘the public’ feature in discussion about government communications, and who holds the key to the public interest and public accountability in a democracy?

This book aims to open up the ‘black box’ of government communications to examine the usually hidden institutions and actors that operate at the interface between mass media and the central governing bureaucracy. It uses a combination of original interviews with civil servants, journalists and other ‘insiders’, and documentary, archival and biographical sources to examine the everyday processes of government media relations. I will argue that, in the struggle to prevail against what they perceive as an existential threat from a rapacious and rapidly expanding media, governing politicians have progressively exploited any strategic means possible to increase their control over the mechanics of public communication within the civil service in order to control political and policy narratives. Politicians and their closest aides have been quick to adopt innovative and often questionable promotional practices, and to use their access to privileged information and the resources of the civil service to trade favours with the journalists they love to hate. While seeking greater political control over the tools of government communication, they have, perhaps inadvertently, progressively weakened the already inadequate accountability structures within government.

This opening chapter identifies two pivotal moments where a crisis challenged the government communication status quo while also revealing some of the mechanics that lay behind it. These were the promotional campaign leading up to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the struggle to ‘get Brexit done’ three years after the 2016 referendum vote to leave the EU. The former initially brought about a low point in public trust in government, as it became clear that

Saddam's much-publicised WMD arsenal did not exist. Hopes were raised by the recommendations of the first Independent Review of Government Communications in 2004 that were accepted by the government as a blueprint for ethical and effective public communication (Phillis 2004). As this book shows, this promise did not materialise. The second pivotal moment was when the Johnson governments of 2019 adopted a wide-ranging adversarial stance on the Number 10 press corps, the BBC, experts, the civil service, parliament, the judiciary and those in its own party who had fought to remain in the EU. It seemed during those few months as if the post-war structures and norms relating to government communication that had been severely challenged by New Labour after 1997 were about to be dismantled. Yet just months after Johnson's election victory in December 2019, the government was forced to adopt a public campaign driven by consensus, where ministers stood alongside experts to successfully call for universal behaviour change to protect the most vulnerable.

A key issue in the deterioration in public trust in recent decades is a much-criticised cleavage between two communication ideals – the need to *present evidence* and the political imperative to *argue for* particular policy actions. There have been numerous UK government and parliamentary inquiries over the past 25 years that have raised concerns about this cleavage, culminating in the seven-year Chilcot Inquiry into the lead up to and conduct of the 2003 Iraq War (Chilcot 2016). The focus in this book is not so much on governing politicians themselves but on the institutional processes and bureaucratic actors inside governments. I will argue that a growing collusion between governments and the media has facilitated a steady and largely unheralded erosion of the post-war principles and processes that underpin civil service impartiality in the conduct of governments' relations with the public, especially through the mass media. This introductory chapter presents a snapshot of these two pivotal moments of potential change - Tony Blair's Iraq war promotional campaign of 2002-3, and the fall-out from Boris Johnson's campaign of 2019-20 to *Get Brexit Done* - as case studies that exemplify the deepening challenge to public values in government communications.

### [The road to the 2003 Iraq War: Blair's Dilemma](#)

The publication by the UK government of the dossier *Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs)* on 24 September 2002, and the three major reviews that followed it, provides a massive and still largely untapped resource for uncovering otherwise hidden government processes (Butler 2004; Hutton 2004; Chilcot 2016). The dossier was unprecedented in that it involved the publication of previously secret intelligence information relating to Saddam's chemical, biological and nuclear arsenal. In practice, the dossier deployed intelligence for a political purpose - to turn the tide of negative public, parliamentary and party opinion that was against war in order to achieve

a higher aim, the removal of a tyrant. The failure to find WMDs is still seen as a primary cause of the loss of public trust in British governments since 1997 (Whiteley, et al. 2016).

What is less well known is the role of the civil servants charged with providing an impartial public information service in producing what turned out to be an inaccurate document where “more weight was placed on the intelligence than it could bear,” and where judgements “went to (although not beyond) the outer limits of the intelligence available” (Butler 2004, p.128, para 464). The Iraq Inquiry found that the promotional campaign leading up to the 2003 war resulted in a “damaging legacy, including undermining trust and confidence in Government statements” that in future “may make it more difficult to secure support for Government policy” (Chilcot 2016a, pp131, 116).

In a live broadcast from Downing Street on the day New York City’s twin towers were brought down on 9/11, Tony Blair promised that Britain would “stand shoulder to shoulder with our American friends” (Blair 2001). In a letter to President Bush a month later Blair argued that a “dedicated tightly knit propaganda unit” would be needed to make the case for “deal(ing) with Saddam” (Chilcot 2016, p.338). Inside Whitehall, close policy ties between the Prime Minister at Number 10, the Cabinet Office and the Secret Intelligence Services (SIS) were established almost immediately. A small, *ad hoc* group that met in the Prime Minister’s ‘study (known as the ‘den’) started working on a new policy framework centring on close alignment with the UN, and restraint in relation to US military intervention in Iraq, while slowly trying to build a public consensus for regime change by emphasising the threat posed by Saddam (Chilcot 2016, pp.226, 231, 291, 312).

Blair told the Iraq Inquiry that 28 such *ad hoc* meetings took place, of which only half were minuted. Those attending were those he considered to be the “right people,” namely, Number 10, the Chief of Defence Staff, the Foreign and Defence Secretaries and the Chief of the SIS (Blair 2011). When the small War Cabinet was set up in March 2003, the *ad hoc* group still met privately at 8.30am just before the War Cabinet, to consider issues such as ‘media handling’ (Blair 2016a). Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair’s chief press secretary, records in his diaries that he was a member of these groups (Campbell 2013, p.532). The Cabinet Secretary at the time, Richard Wilson, had doubts about the bypassing of the official machinery of government, telling the Iraq Inquiry that Blair “had his own team. That is, to be honest, how he liked to work” (Chilcot 2016, p.274).

The combination of political spin and ‘sofa government’ has been accused of constraining cabinet government and politicizing the British civil service (Diamond 2014; Hennessy 1999). Jack Straw, a loyal Blairite who served as Foreign Secretary (2001-2006) throughout the Iraq War period, later told the historian Peter Hennessy that processes and procedures were neglected: “I never

approved of the way Tony ran the government. Procedure is about the most important, not the least important subject in the legal system” (Straw 2013). The interplay between due process and political imperative within the context of an increasingly mediatized political environment, is one of the constant themes in this book.

The most visible component of the Iraq War promotional campaign was the widely publicised claim, as stated by Tony Blair in the dossier’s foreword, that Saddam’s “military planning allows for some of the WMD to be ready within 45 minutes of an order to use them” (HM Government 2002, p.4), a claim which arose a few weeks before the dossier was published but was “deemed unreliable” less than two years later (Herring and Robinson 2014, p.574). The claim appeared as the second judgement in the executive summary of the dossier, and was highlighted by Tony Blair in his statement to Parliament on 24 September. It then appeared in the *London Evening Standard* that afternoon under the headline ‘45 minutes from attack’ (HM Government 2002, p.5). Who briefed whom and when is known only to the participants. Alastair Campbell’s diary entry for 24 September, and indeed the entries leading up to the parliamentary debate, do not refer to the 45-minute claim although he acknowledged the following day that the dossier and Blair’s accompanying statement to parliament, received “massive coverage around the world” (Campbell 2013, p.309). He later told the veteran BBC interviewer David Dimbleby that he expected the 45-minute claim to make headlines and that the media coverage had achieved the government’s objective in sharing with the public why concern over Saddam was growing (Campbell 2020).

The fragility of the official record on media briefings, and the use by journalists of non-attributable government-sourced news means that much of what goes on behind the scenes is unknown and hence deniable. Media briefings are frequently conducted over the phone or in person and hence unrecorded, and documentation and archiving in media matters in general, even including press releases and the minutes of meetings is relatively sparse (Hood and Dixon 2015). However, a detailed statement to the Iraq Inquiry by John Williams, Director of Communications at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2000-2006) provides a rare insight into the inside workings of government communication during the lead up to the 2003 Iraq War (Williams 2010). The statement portrays a largely marginalised, compliant and ill-informed government information service that was excluded from the central corridors of power and hence unable to perform one of its widely understood and frequently stated key functions – to challenge the holders of power.

Williams succeeded Alastair Campbell as political editor at the Labour-leaning *Daily Mirror* in 1994, and his background was untypical for a Foreign Office (FCO) official. Traditionally, civil servants or diplomats had been recruited into roles in the press office, but Williams was one of

the new breed of operator brought into government soon after the 1997 election. Amid great controversy, most of the incumbent Heads of Information departed after the Blair government came into power, a process that is documented later in this book. As is evident from Williams' submission to The Iraq Inquiry (Chilcot), his relative inexperience as a civil servant, and his background as a journalist, did not equip him to handle complex political crosswinds and spot the institutional pitfalls quickly enough to avoid them.

Williams' statement shows that although he was close to the Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, and frequently travelled with him, his knowledge was partial. He was not aware, for example, of important correspondence between 10 Downing Street and the White House, or of concerns among officials within his own department about the unconventional use of intelligence. Indeed, the Foreign Office itself was excluded from prior access to discussions between Blair and Bush in December 2001, in which Blair agreed that Saddam had WMDs and was continuing to build on them. Blair told Bush that although it was "presentationally difficult" to argue for "toppling Saddam," there needed to be a softening up of opinion over time (Blair 2001b). Williams' exclusion from the flow of information led him to believe that "the Foreign office was playing a more important role in Iraq policy than I now believe to be the case." In his diaries, Campbell recalls a discussion with the Chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), Sir John Scarlett (2001-2004) in early September 2002 in which they shared the perception that the Foreign Office was "trying to take it (the dossier) over" (Campbell 2013, p.297).

Williams statement claims that he was aware of the FCO's view that "the material available was weak on Iraq," so was "instinctively against the idea of a dossier" because the exercise "seemed to me to rest on uncertainties." His lack of involvement in key meetings made it difficult for him to question No.10's request, in March 2002, to produce a note setting out ideas for a media campaign. The first he knew about the decision to publish a dossier was when he read about it in *The Independent* newspaper on 5 April 2002, during the Prime Minister's visit to President GW Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas. The Independent reported that "a dossier detailing alleged links between Iraq and international terrorists has been delayed, but Mr Blair's spokesman said the information will be released in the public domain 'at the appropriate time'." The official announcement that a dossier would be published came five months later at a press conference held by Tony Blair on 3 September.

According to Campbell, the publication of the dossier was "about beginning to turn the tide of public opinion." He was aware that "massive expectations" had been raised by Blair's announcement, and within a week was chairing a group that would agree public presentation of the dossier (Campbell 2013, pp.292, 297). Having revealed the existence of a dossier it was clear

that a huge amount was at stake politically – namely, the future of the government, the Prime Minister and the UK's relations with the US. It is in the context of this pressure that decisions about the style, content and presentation of the dossier were made. The sense on the part of governing politicians that 24/7 news media posed both a unique opportunity and an existential threat – but one that must be managed - is one that recurs throughout this book.

Concerned at the lack of ground-breaking or newsworthy intelligence material in the dossier, Williams warned in a memo of 4 September that “there is no ‘killer fact’ that proves that Saddam must be taken on now.” At a meeting the next day, Williams recalls being asked by Sir John Scarlett to be the ‘golden pen’; the person with the skills to produce a document fit for publication. The following day, Jack Straw and the Permanent Secretary at the FCO, Michael Jay, made clear that the document should be produced by the Foreign Office, not No.10, and agreed that Williams should indeed be the ‘golden pen’. Williams did what he refers to as the “routine job” of producing a first draft over the weekend, a task that involved “taking the strongest points and putting them in an executive summary” but felt “the result was underwhelming.” At this stage, there was still no reference in the document to the 45-minute claim. By 9 September the ‘golden pen’ had been removed from Williams; he would be part of Campbell’s presentation group but not the writer (Campbell 2013).

In his statement, Williams expresses regret at not raising his own doubts “more robustly and directly with Alastair Campbell.” Although he accepts that his role as Director of Communication was to offer the “yes, but” challenge, he felt “it would have been improper for a spokesman to question the accuracy of intelligence.” He “followed the policy laid down by the elected Prime Minister and had no objection to it *other than my own instincts*, which I felt were outweighed by his” (my emphasis). From his Chilcot submission, Williams appears to have been struggling to see the full picture, caught between No.10 and the FCO over the Iraq agenda, and only intermittently involved in discussions about the communications plan leading up to the crucial House of Commons debate on 24 September, at which the Prime Minister used the dossier to make a persuasive case against Saddam. In this sense, rather than simply being part of a ‘political spin’ operation, he had become an unknowing accessory in a political battle being waged above him (Garnett 2010; Kuhn 2007).

The cautiously-worded yet critical Butler report of 2004 into the quality of the intelligence leading up to the Iraq War criticized the dossier for not including sufficient caveats as to the uncertainty behind some of the claims (Butler 2004; Wring 2005). The report stated that the informal nature of decision-making “made it much more difficult for members of the cabinet outside the small circle directly involved to bring their political judgement and experience to bear

on the major decisions for which the Cabinet as a whole must carry responsibility” (Butler 2004, paras 609-610). Twelve years later, the Chilcot Report agreed that there were occasions when the Cabinet was not consulted when it should have been and that the dossier was presented “with a certainty that was not justified” (Chilcot 2016a). In the House of Lords debate on 12 July 2016 in response to the publication of the Chilcot report, Robin Butler went further, describing the then government as “dysfunctional” and its “disregard for the machinery of government” as irresponsible (Foster 2016).

In their detailed analysis of the paper trail of documents leading up to the production of the dossier, Herring and Robinson concluded that the “inaccurate picture” presented, and the publicity around it, formed “the core component of deceptive, organised political persuasion which involved communication officials working closely with politicians and intelligence officials (Herring and Robinson 2014, pp.579-580). Williams’ account highlights the importance of disaggregating the governing elite in order to examine the power structures that determine what is and is not placed in the public domain, when and in what form. The recent exposure of machinations behind government communications in relation to Britain’s departure from the EU provides a further unique opportunity to observe and evaluate these power structures in play.

#### ‘Let’s Get Brexit Done’: Johnson’s campaign of 2019

The evidence relating to the Johnson government’s actions during the lead up to and immediately after the General Election of December 2019 is necessarily more sketchy and anecdotal than the widely documented promotional campaign leading up to the 2003 Iraq War. The catalogue of errors, distortions, legal challenges, regulatory and propriety transgressions, blurring of boundaries, inflammatory rhetoric and contradictions of fact that have characterised this period are so extraordinary and unprecedented that historians, journalists and media and political observers will be kept busy for decades. Within a timespan of 148 days between the declaration of Boris Johnson’s leadership campaign on 12 June 2019, to the official start of the General Election campaign on 6 November, virtually all the issues that characterised the narrative of political spin after 1997, together with those additional elements identified with the notion of Trumpian ‘post-truth’, were on display.

The litany of mishaps included a further centralization of communications at No.10; contradictory media briefings on matters of major public interest by anonymous political aides, including the Prime Minister’s chief of staff; the consistent avoidance of parliamentary scrutiny; the bypassing of norms of impartiality; the controversial failure to publish important information that was inconvenient to the government; the silencing (and dismissal or forced resignation) of dissenting voices; attempts to draw civil servants into improper party political forms of communication; and

the unprecedented resignation and public claims of ministerial bullying from a senior civil servant (Prescott and Eccleston-Turner 2020). On 4 September 2019, 21 Conservative MPs, including former senior ministers such as the Attorney General and the Chancellor, were removed from the party for voting against the decision to prorogue (close) parliament, a decision that was ruled unlawful and reversed by the UK Supreme Court in September 2019. This decision ended their political careers and removed the party's most senior moderate and pro-EU voices from public life.

One prominent example of a public transgression of impartiality norms was the televised visit by the Prime Minister to the Carr Gate police training facility in West Yorkshire on 5 September 2019 to announce a police recruitment campaign. Boris Johnson was filmed making an unexpected political speech about Brexit in front of ranks of uniformed police officers; an unprecedented act that compromised their political neutrality (Black 2019). The Chief Constable John Robins issued a statement saying: "It was the understanding of West Yorkshire Police that any involvement of our officers was solely about police officer recruitment. We had no prior knowledge that the speech would be broadened to other issues until it was delivered." He added "I was disappointed to see my police officers as a backdrop to the part of the speech that was not related to recruitment" (BBC News 2019a).

Other acts of public communication drew a level of criticism not seen since the Blair years. Even Facebook showed a greater concern for propriety than Whitehall when it decided on 2 November 2019 to take down a government campaign known as @MyTown because it appeared to target voters in marginal election constituencies (BBC News, 2019b), something that is explicitly against the government communications propriety code (2014/2020). Three days later the Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service, Mark Sedwill, intervened to prevent the government from publishing costings of Labour Party policies developed by civil servants because it was against the rules preventing civil servants from participating in election campaigning (Blitz and Romei 2019). In October 2020 a Department for International Trade tweet was widely condemned for making the false claim that soy sauce "will be made cheaper thanks to our trade deal with Japan." Experts challenged the claim saying that this would only apply in the case of a No Deal Brexit. The next day the Department's Twitter feed had been changed to read: "To clarify: thanks to the UK-Japan trade deal, soya sauce will be cheaper than it otherwise would be under WTO terms, on which we would be trading with Japan from 1 Jan if we had not secured the UK-Japan trade deal." It was noted that since much soy sauce used in the UK is made in the EU it would probably have become more rather than less expensive under No Deal (Stone 2019).



Such apparent trivia illustrate not only the vigilance of modern fact checkers but the importance of check and challenge in government communications, even if this gets in the way of a good story. It raises concerns that an adversarial approach to long-established conventions and a cavalier attitude to facts demonstrates a further ratcheting up of ministerial powers in relation to public communication that co-opts or bypasses the bureaucratic actors charged with policing such conventions.

## Conclusion

There is always the risk that unique events such as the publication of the UK government dossier of September 2002 and the public information campaign about Brexit coordinated by No.10 in 2019 reveal and obscure in equal measures since they cannot be seen as typical. On the other hand, moments of crisis such as these provide an opportunity for the exposure of government machinery that may otherwise remain hidden. Chilcot accepts that many of the lessons learned from this case were “context dependent” but that general lessons can and should be applied in relation to the decision-making processes in government, especially at times of national crisis. The Iraq Inquiry report agrees with the earlier Butler report in calling for a clear distinction to be drawn between the political imperative to argue for particular policy actions, and the requirement on the part of officials to present evidence (Chilcot 2016a).

Early observations of the actions of the 2019 Johnson government suggest that either such lessons have not been learned, or that the lessons have proved to be too inconvenient and constraining for successive governments to apply. This begs the question as to whether the accountability structures in relation to government communications are too important to be left either to civil servants or political actors. The public has largely remained invisible in discussions of the crisis in government communication that began in the 1980s, intensified with the election of Tony Blair in 1997 and continued through Brexit and into the earliest days of the Covid-19 pandemic. As we see later in this book, public servants have long argued for a space within public bureaucracies that is autonomous from politicians, where strategic communication priorities are derived from an appraisal of public need and a notion of an impartial ‘public good’. Here, normative considerations apply, such as objectivity, equity, fairness, accountability, and ultimately due process.

This book is divided into four sections. Part 1 examines the immediate post-war period and the Thatcher and Major governments that preceded the arrival of New Labour in 1997 to ask, how did we get here? The first chapter in this section, Chapter 2, shows how the distinction between *presenting evidence* and *arguing for policy* became a key underlying principle of the government information service as established after the Second World War, not just in the UK but in other

liberal democracies. The undermining of this distinction is considered by critics to be a root cause of the crisis in public trust and public communication “that is sapping the vitality of democratic political culture” (Blumler and Coleman 2010, p.140). The post-war Government Information Service (GIS) was, by the 1980s, already facing criticism for failing to keep pace with changes in the media. Chapter 3 looks at the Thatcher and Major neoliberal governments of the 1980s to uncover subtle and covert changes to ‘the rules of the game’ that enabled an initially unpopular government to exploit a partisan press and the dominant medium of television to shift the post-war narrative.

Part 2 focuses on the so-called age of political spin – the period from 1997 to the end of the Coalition government in 2015. Chapter 4 looks at how the growth of the 24/7 news environment coincided with a radically new and overtly promotional approach to government media relations that precipitated an enduring sense of deep crisis. Chapters 5 and 6 provide an in-depth, longitudinal study of the role of the ostensibly impartial UK government information service from the point of view of those who occupied key roles within it after 1997, looking at the rise of politically appointed media strategists, and the response from bureaucrats and parliamentarians. Taken together, parts 1 and 2 do not set out to provide a comprehensive and complete historical record but to offer a longitudinal and institutional context to the dramatic change in government communication norms and practices that took place after 1997.

Section 3 switches perspective to explore the themes of mediatization, impartiality and public trust, and to argue that the dynamic relationship between these drivers of change underpins the development of what has come to be known as ‘political spin’ and more recently, ‘post-truth’. Chapter 7 examines how the mass media came to be seen and to see themselves as representatives of the public, and how politicians surrendered to the 24/7 news cycle. Chapter 8 analyses the concept of impartiality in government communications to ask what it means in practice and why it is such a key factor in public trust. Could this largely hidden, contested and evolving public value offer collective resistance to spiral of distrust between media, government and the public? Chapter 9 asks what good government could and should look like. What are the purposes of government communication as stated in official documents and as seen through the eyes of public servants themselves? Are these sufficient to ensure a trusted and trustworthy public communication function? Chapter 10 examines the issue of trust in democratic government in what has come to be seen as a ‘post-truth’ age where media have proliferated and become more fragmented. It finds biases in the understanding of truth that are symptomatic of wider structural problems in the government/media interface.

The final section, part 4, examines the impact of coronavirus and looks to the future. Chapter 11 asks to what extent the UK government's COVID-19 communication campaign was clear, consistent and comprehensive? In early 2020, in response to the pandemic emergency, the Johnson government, like others, turned to widely-understood norms of impartial public communication to build public trust and drive participation in a national programme of mass behaviour change. What does the public response tell us about how to rebuild trust in democratic government in a post-truth age? Chapter 12, the Conclusion, considers how institutional arrangements can become more aligned with publics and more accessible to democratic scrutiny in order to deliver a credible and trusted public communication function that takes account of repeated communication failures in recent decades and is capable of responding to the global and local challenges ahead.

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