

Written evidence submitted by the Department of Media, Communications and Cultural Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London

Response to call for evidence

The House of Commons Select Committee on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs

Inquiry: Civil Service Leadership and Reform

Submitted by:

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On June 27, 2023

Dr Ruth Garland is a Lecturer at Goldsmiths' Department of Media, Communications and Cultural Studies (MCCS). She is well-placed to respond to this inquiry, having worked in public sector PR for 28 years before becoming an academic. She has spent 10 years researching UK government communications from 1979 to date, and publishes frequently on the topic¹.

Executive Summary

1. It is argued that the government's public communication function, both through the Government Communication Service (GCS) and Special Advisers, is a leadership resource that could and should be more effectively and transparently regulated.
2. Propriety guidance and codes of conduct for government press officers and Special Advisers do not set out with enough clarity how statements by official government sources are to be attributed in a way that informs the public.
3. It should be recognised that news management and branding have become central tasks for Special Advisers and that it is inevitable that these tasks may conflict with and undermine the efforts of the GCS to maintain public trust through objective and informative communication.
4. It is recommended that more detailed guidance on attribution is reflected in the Special Adviser and GCS Codes, and that a senior, named, Cabinet Office communications official is given oversight of the No.10/Cabinet Office press offices that includes the activities of Special Advisers.
5. The senior leadership of the GCS should be empowered to consider the overall impact on government communications of the activities of media Special Advisers and should hold editorial oversight of the annual UK Government Communications Plan².

¹ See Ruth Garland's profile at <https://www.gold.ac.uk/media-communications/staff/garland-ruth/>

² For the most recent plan see <https://communication-plan.gcs.civilservice.gov.uk> This outlines what communication professionals across Government are expected to collectively deliver each year. It differs from the Government Communication Strategy which is discussed later.

Q1: The status and constitutional position of the Civil Service including:

1.1 The extent to which the established values of the Civil service, enshrined in the Civil Service Code, continue to determine the conduct of Officials, and are respected by the governments they serve:

The No.10/Cabinet Office press offices provide a political and impartial service to the public through the media. To maintain trust, the official voice of the centre of government must consistently demonstrate the Civil Service Code's (CSC) stated values of honesty and integrity.

The growing pressures on governments from 24-hour media scrutiny over the past 25 years³ has led to increasing political pressures on government press officers to present government failings in a positive light. Non-attributable and largely hidden and therefore deniable media briefing from media Special Advisers is now routine and functions as a shadow news management operation. More recently, the provision of misleading, even inaccurate, responses to journalists, has come into the public domain^{4 5 6}.

It is no longer clear who provides the official government voice. Successive inquiries going back to the controversies of the Blair years recommended that the official spokesperson should be a civil servant, with a clear and separate designation for Special Advisers who brief the media⁷. Propriety guidance and codes of conduct for government press officers and Special Advisers do not set out with enough clarity how statements by government sources are to be attributed in a way that informs the public⁸.

The status of the civil servants employed to conduct news management at the centre of government is not sufficient to ensure the requirements of the CSC that (a) an honest, impartial, and ethical service is always provided to journalists and (b) errors are corrected as soon as possible.

The most egregious recent example of this lack of status is cited by Seldon and Newell in their authoritative 2023 book *Johnson at 10* when senior officials standing up for junior staff were "shouted at" and "harangued as obstructionists" when they objected to telling the public an untruth, that the UK would leave the EU with no-deal "come what may" on

³ Garland, R (2021). *Government Communications and the Crisis of Trust*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁴ Garland, R (2023 – in press). No escape from the No.10 bunker. *Corporate Communication: An International Journal*. 28 (4). To be published September. 2023

⁵ Gaber, I., and Fisher, C. (2022). "Strategic Lying": The Case of Brexit and the 2019 U.K. Election. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 27(2), 460–477. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161221994100>

⁶ Payne, S (2022) *The Fall of Boris Johnson: the full story*. London: Macmillan.

⁷ Mountfield, R. (1997) *Report of the working group on the Government Information and Communications Service*. London: Cabinet Office; Public Administration Select Committee (2002) *Eighth report (2001-2): These unfortunate events at the former DTLR*. London: House of Commons; Phillis, R. (2004). *An Independent Review of Government Communications*. London: Cabinet Office.

⁸ Code for Special Advisers (2010/2020) at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/special-advisers-code-of-conduct#:~:text=Employing%20special%20advisers%20adds%20a,of%20political%20advice%20and%20support> and GCS Propriety Guidance (2014/2022) at <https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/publications/propriety-guidance/>

October 31st 2019 (p.86). Their account adds that some who raised concerns found their careers blighted⁹.

The conduct of the Downing Street press office during the ‘partygate’ controversy of 2021-2 was called into question when officials repeatedly denied that gatherings had taken place during lockdown. The Prime Minister’s official spokesperson, a civil servant, issued an unprecedented apology to journalists for misleading them¹⁰, but only after the publication of the report by the Second Permanent Secretary Sue Gray, and five months after the original statement was made¹¹. It is not known whether those responsible, whether civil servants or Special Advisers, faced consequences for their actions since sanctions are not discussed in the Codes or made public.

Recommendations:

- that more detailed guidance on attribution is reflected in the Special Adviser Code and GCS Propriety Guidance.
- that a senior, named, Cabinet Office communications official is given oversight of the overall professional functioning of the No.10/Cabinet Office press offices in the light of the CSC and GCS propriety codes. Transgressions should be recorded. Their role would be to monitor and report regularly to the Chief Executive of the GCS on the activities of both government press officers and media Special Advisers. External accountability is also recommended (see answers to Q2).

1.2. Whether the civil service feels sufficiently confident or empowered to give honest advice to Ministers and ‘speak truth to power’, and if not, what the consequences are for policy making and governance.

Numerous witness accounts testify to the routine leaking of government information for factional political purposes by unattributable sources¹². For many governing politicians such intervention is seen as vital to their survival in power, as shown in evidence submitted to the Leveson Inquiry by politicians and aides from across the political spectrum¹³. Media considerations are now so prominent in political life that their role in governance and policy making should be more explicitly recognised and consistently monitored and regulated.

In response to these pressures a dual system of government communications has evolved since the late 1990s whereby politically appointed media specialists work in partnership with

⁹ Seldon, A, & Newell, R. *Johnson at 10*. London: Atlantic Books.

¹⁰ BBC News (2022). ‘Sue Gray report: Number 10 apologises for misleading journalists over Partygate’. 26 May. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk/uk-politics-61595965>

¹¹ Prime Minister’s Office (2022) ‘Investigation into alleged gatherings during Covid restrictions: final report’. May 25. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/findings-of-the-second-permanent-secretarys-investigation-into-alleged-gatherings-on-government-premises-during-covid-restrictions>

¹² The most recent account comes from Bale, T (2023). *The Conservative Party After Brexit: Turmoil and Transformation*. Cambridge: Polity. A useful memoir from the Labour years is McBride, D (2013). *Power Trip: A decade of policy, plots and spin*. Biteback Publishing.

¹³ Leveson, B. (2012). *An Inquiry into the Culture, Practices and Ethics of the Press (Leveson Report)* London: The Stationary Office (TSO). Most relevant statements include: Peter Mandelson (21/5/2012); David Cameron (14/6/2012); Tony Blair (28/5/2012); and Kenneth Clarke (30/5/2012).

career civil servants who specialise in public communication¹⁴. Leading political scientist Tim Bale refers to the prominence of media in the everyday experiences of Conservative politicians as the ‘party in the media’ (Bale, 2023)¹⁵. A recent typology identifies two strands in government communication as, respectively, ‘government information providers’ (the GCS) and ‘government spin doctors’ (Special Advisers). These two types of government communicator operate according to different and often conflicting recruitment processes, professional values, objectives, lines of responsibility, loyalties, and relationships¹⁶. This gives rise to contradictory practices in government news management that are not reflected in the propriety guidance or the sphere of influence of the Chief Executive of the GCS and his/her senior team.

GCS propriety guidance requires that government communication “should be objective and explanatory, not biased or polemical” and that press officers must “ensure that they deal with all news media even-handedly”. The code states that “Government communicators or other resources cannot be used for image-making, or for building ministers’ personal brands, which is the province of the party-political machine”¹⁷. This becomes increasingly contentious as government departments develop social media profiles and MPs and ministers become more adept at raising their own personal brands through social media. Questions were raised by the *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Mail* about the (then) Chancellor Rishi Sunak’s personal branding, such as his signature on policy announcements issued through the Treasury Twitter feed^{18 19}.

The most recent UK Government Communications Plan 2023-24²⁰ is a 16-page document structured around the Prime Minister’s five priorities. In contrast to previous government communications plans, the document contains six photos of the Prime Minister. This suggests that the information needs of the public are being overly determined by the communication needs of the Prime Minister.

It is not clear whether the constraints on political image-making that have existed for decades in government communication are sufficiently regulated internally under modern media conditions. It is also unclear who is and should be responsible for dealing with transgressions and what sanctions should follow. The use of personalised forms of public communication, described as ‘ministers’ pet projects’, was questioned by officials giving

¹⁴ Sanders, K. & Canel, MJ (2013). *Government Communication: Cases and Challenges*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

¹⁵ Bale, T (2023). *The Conservative Party after Brexit: Turmoil and Transformation*. Cambridge: Polity.

¹⁶ Figenschou, U, Karlsen, R & Kolltveit, K. et al (2022). Between spin doctor and information provider: conceptualizing communication professionals in government ministries. *Public Administration*. 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12869>

¹⁷ Government Communication Service (GCS) Propriety Guidance (2014/2022). Accessed 26 May 2023 at <https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/publications/propriety-guidance/>

¹⁸ Kelly, G (2020) An ideals man: what Rishi Sunak’s highly stylised signature says about him. *Daily Telegraph*. 9 July. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/the-filter/ideals-man-rishi-sunaks-highly-stylised-signature-says/>

¹⁹ Mikhailova, A (2021). It’s all about me. *Daily Mail*. 30 October. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10148399/Sunak-swaps-Tory-Party-logo-personal-signature-Treasury-graphics.html>

²⁰ UK Government Communications Plan 2023-4. Accessed at <https://communication-plan.gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Government-Communication-Plan-23-24.pdf>

evidence to the Institute for Government in 2023²¹. The issue of personal image making is a matter for governance as discussed in Q2 that addresses the issue of leadership in the civil service.

Recommendations

- It should be recognised that news management and branding have become central tasks for Special Advisers and that it is inevitable that these tasks may conflict with and undermine the efforts of the GCS to maintain public trust through objective and informative communication. These practices should be openly discussed, monitored, and reflected in the relevant Codes of Conduct.
- The senior leadership of the GCS should be empowered to consider the overall impact on government communications of the activities of media Special Advisers. The GCS should hold editorial oversight over the UK Government Communications Plan.
- Given the increasing role of the mainstream media and social media in governance and policymaking, and the blurring of roles between government press officers and media Special Advisers, especially at the centre, there is an argument that internal regulation such as that operating at present is insufficient to maintain public trust. It may be necessary to establish some external validation. This is discussed further in the next section.

Q2: Civil Service leadership

2.1 What constitutes good leadership in the Civil Service?

It is the responsibility of those leading the specialist functions of the Civil Service to ensure that externally validated professional standards are maintained in disciplines such as the law, statistics, and government communications. This section will examine good leadership in the GCS.

Since its post-war inception in 1946, the (then) Government Information Service (GIS), working with the centralised promotional agency the Central Office of Information (COI), was conceived as “a body of technically expert staff which knew how to conduct publicity without incurring the charge of propaganda”. To win the trust of newspapers and the public, the central agency was “arguably depoliticized by not having a minister at its head”. It was given a degree of autonomy under a civil service director but would work to a Minister

²¹ Urban, J.(2023). *Government communications and beyond: How to make government communications more effective*. Institute for Government, 22 February.
<https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/government-communications>

without portfolio who had responsibility for the presentation of government policy²² (see also^{23 24}).

Moore's archival analysis of the 1945-51 Labour government's approach to communication acknowledges that the structure was comprehensive, but argues that it did not institute adequate controls and the service was therefore not externally accountable. He concludes that "There were no constraints put on the way in which the government produced communication or worked with the independent media (over and above the insufficient civil service code of neutrality)." This meant that "there was no way to ensure the government was giving the news media sufficient or equal access and no way to ensure any consistent representation of information"²⁵.

This structure remained largely intact until 1997, with the arrival of New Labour, when Special Advisers started to routinely brief news media. There was a further turning point in 2012, when the Coalition government implemented radical reforms, including the closure of the COI. A GCS Board based in the Cabinet office, and chaired by the Cabinet Office Minister, became responsible for coordinating communication strategy. This challenged and politicized the professional autonomy of the GCS. The safeguards recommended by the 2004 Independent Review of Government Communications (Phillis Review) as a means of repairing public trust and upholding impartiality were never implemented²⁶.

Professor Anne Gregory, a specialist in corporate communications who has advised successive UK governments, concluded from her 2019 ethnographic and interview study that modern best practice in strategic communication is not served by this model because it facilitates an "authoritarian" and "top down" approach that does not seek public opinion or listen "to the population in a respectful and collaborative way"^{27 28}. One government witness reported that where public intelligence was available "this was rejected if it did not suit a policy end" (p213). The incoming CEO of the GCS, Simon Baugh, argued in 2021 that insight and listening skills are vital, both for communication and policy development²⁹. This

²² McKenna, A.Z (2018). *100 Years of Government Communication*. OGL. Available at https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/100-years-of-Government-Communications-History_Alexander_McKenna.pdf

²³ Brendan Maartens (2016) From Propaganda to 'Information': Reforming Government Communications in Britain, *Contemporary British History*, 30(4), 542-562, DOI: [10.1080/13619462.2016.1162157](https://doi.org/10.1080/13619462.2016.1162157)

²⁴ Grant, M. (1999). Towards a Central Office of Information: Continuity and Change in British Government Information Policy, 1939-51. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 34(1), 49-67.

²⁵ Moore, M (2006). *The Origins of Modern Spin: Democratic Government and the Media in Britain, 1945-51*. Palgrave Macmillan, p.216.

²⁶ The Phillis Report (2004) established a set of principles that enshrined impartiality, accepted the professional autonomy of government communications as a discipline and called for explicit recognition of the public interest as a priority, especially when considering reforms of the service. The Report can be accessed from Leeds University at <https://universityofleeds.github.io/philtaylorpapers/pmt/exhibits/1967/Phillis.pdf>

²⁷ Gregory, A (2019). UK Government Communication: The Cameron years and their ongoing legacy. *Public Relations Review*. 45 (2): 202-216. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2018.08.003>.

²⁸ A conclusion also drawn by Macnamara (2017) in his three-country study of government communications, *Creating a 'democracy for everyone': Strategies for increasing listening and engagement by government*. London, UK and Sydney, NSW: LSE and University of Technology Sydney.

²⁹ Baugh, S (2019) *Stakeholder Engagement in a Changing World*. Speech to CIPR. <https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/news/speech-stakeholder-engagement-in-a-changing-world/>

is not achieved when 'the public' are seen as electoral targets rather than as citizens for whom the democratic need for reliable information is a constitutional necessity. The GCS Communications Strategy 2022-23 explicitly argues against a top-down approach³⁰.

Recommendations

- One of the most important recommendations of the discarded Phillis Review is that the interests of the general public should be paramount in any programme to modernize government communications. The radical changes in governance of the GCS after 2012 should be re-examined and refocused in the light of this.
- The senior leadership of the GCS is not empowered to speak truth to power to ensure that professional ethical standards of public communication are upheld in accordance with the spirit and letter of the Civil Service Code. This should be rectified.
- It is recommended that an independent and accountable body or framework that includes PR professionals and members of the public is constituted to examine and make proposals relating to the governance and performance of the GCS and Special Advisers in the light of the serious transgressions that have emerged since 2019.
- The current GCS Propriety Guidance, Special Advisers Code and governance through the GCS Board and the regular Directors of Communication meeting are insufficient to ensure public trust and compliance with the CSC. The Government Communications Strategy (2022-2025) governance section includes a commitment to establish a new GCS External Advisory Board by October 2022 (p10). This has not yet been announced³¹.
- It is argued that the government's public communication function, both through the GCS and Special Advisers, is a leadership resource that should be more effectively and transparently regulated to take account of modern conditions.

Further correspondence

We would be pleased to speak further about our response. Please contact Dr Ruth Garland, Lecturer, Promotional Media, r.garland@gold.ac.uk.

³⁰ HM Government (2022) *Government Communications Strategy 2022-23: Performance with Purpose*. Accessed 7 June 2023 at <https://strategy.gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/gcs-strategy-2022-25.pdf>. The first of its three pillars is Collaboration, including "valuing different perspectives and listening to organisation expertise rather than pursuing a top-down approach".

³¹ HM Government (2022) *Government Communications Strategy 2022-23: Performance with Purpose*. See: "S008: Establish a new GCS External Advisory Board by October 2022" <https://strategy.gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/table-of-commitments/>