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GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION: IT'S ABOUT FINDING THE BEST SOLUTION

By The Hon Gary Nairn MP,
Special Minister of State
Chairman, Ministerial Committee on
Government Communications

As our lives, our world and our government become more complicated, and as government seeks to be more inclusive, it is vital that we communicate necessary information to our fellow Australians, in the most accessible and user-friendly way.

The days of the town crier or, indeed, an inclusion in the Government Gazette or a media release, is simply no longer sufficient to impart information that is vital to our citizens.

They have a right to be informed about their rights, opportunities and obligations.

Today, local councils, state governments and the Australian Government are actively engaged in using the latest communication channels available.

We also seek expert and professional advice to present the information in a manner which is easy to understand for the consumer.

So wordsmiths and catchy phrases, artists and imagery are all important.

A key aspect of government communications is to help manage the public relations issues as they arise. Therefore, the support of PR companies and issues managers plays an important role in maximising the total cut-through of a particular campaign.

Any government communications campaign has the unique factor of being subjected not only to the rigour of consumer discernment, but also the real rigours of parliamentary scrutiny and the self-appointed commentariat of the media.

So to try to protect against an adverse reaction, we have to try to put ourselves in the shoes of the ultimate cynic.

One of the recurrent complaints about Government

communications campaigns is that they are bland and anodyne. But it is important not to offend any section of the community and this means going with communications ideas that do not polarise people.

And to guard against such a reaction we need to ensure a campaign is not self-congratulatory or party political. We need to ensure that the words, the imagery, the tenor and the tone cannot be satirised, or disputed as to factual content.

As a Government we are committed to probity and transparency with the letting of contracts and engagement with the private sector.

What are we looking for?

- Is there an incumbent agency? Does the department want them invited again?
- Who has had good relevant experience with this subject matter recently?
- Who is performing really well at the moment?
- The need for a geographic spread of agencies;
- Are there any known conflicts of interest?
- Giving an opportunity to an agency that hasn't pitched before.

I must stress that once the PR agency is selected, the Ministerial Committee on Government Communications (MCGC) maintains an interest in the campaign. My MCGC colleagues and I need to be comfortable with the way the government is talking to the community and the messages – direct and indirect – that are being relayed.

This is all about keeping the system transparent, fair and accessible. And for the Government it's about finding the best solution to a communication challenge.

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The Master Tactician: Jon Gaul, recipient of the inaugural National Press Club public affairs award. The first award sets a high standard for future recipients as Jon's public affairs career has been both diverse and distinguished.

Full story on the back page.

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MESSAGE FROM SCHOOL HEAD

Tom Watson PhD

Head, School of Communication
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THE TEACHING OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

In democratic countries such as Australia, political communication is part and parcel of public life. From the very outset of the colony, the governors, soldiers, settlers and the trading interests were seeking to influence each other as well as the government in London. Through the great debates over the formation of the Federation, there was intense lobbying through personal communication, public events, the media and inter-governmental communication. Since Federation, political communication has continued unabated.

So we are looking at a phenomena and a set of practices that are well established, although some seem to consider that it is very recent and a new threat to our democratic traditions. My counter-argument is that because we have a well-educated nation which has greater access to information, political communication has been forced into a more transparent era. It has, therefore, become more democratic and ethical.

With the decline in membership of political parties and the surge in growth of single interest groups, political communication has become more complex but also, more accessible, especially through the development of the World Wide Web, which has given many small groups a considerably greater presence.

The term “political communication” has many meanings and its popular usage was not helped by the Maoist approach to political communication and political education. Ranks of Red Guards chanting slogans and brandishing Mao’s “Little Red Book”, and repressing all those with even marginally varied views to the orthodoxy gave it a bad name in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Since then, political communication has become an established academic research area, as exemplified by Professor Barry Richards and Dr Darren Lilleker’s article in this edition. It is an interesting and challenging area as it crosses many disciplines – political science, sociology, linguistics, journalism, public relations, conflict resolution and ethics. It can be viewed at numerous levels such as theory, applied theory, professional practice and experimental practice. Overlaying it now is the speed of technology change and of communication, which has led to the “blogosphere” of political comment and debates becoming one of the most exciting and unpredictable changes. As Donald Alexander notes, it is a new battleground and laboratory for communication.

In teaching aspects of political communication at CSU,

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MESSAGE FROM THE CEO

Ian Smith

Chief Executive Officer (Australia)
Gavin Anderson & Company



SALUTE TO JON GAUL

People like us do not often receive ‘gongs’ so the recognition of Jon Gaul’s contribution to public affairs with the inaugural National Press Club award is particularly welcome.

‘Gauly’ - as he is affectionately known - is Chairman of Gavin Anderson Australia and indisputably the doyen of government relations consultants in this country.

Like many of our veterans he first learnt his craft as a journalist but went on to fulfil a possibly unrivalled spectrum of public affairs roles: political staffer, speech writer, campaigner in 14 federal election campaigns, co-founder of a successful independent consultancy, chairmanship of the Australian branch of an international consultancy, former presidency of the International Association of Political Consultants, not to mention his, until now, unheralded work as coordinator of the National Press Club’s awards program for two decades.

To me it is his quiet, consistent work for the Press Club that says it all about ‘Gauly’. In a profession too often noted for style over substance, he is the real thing - pure gold. I valued his guidance and wise counsel when I was first appointed CEO of Gavin Anderson in Australia, and I still do.

In this issue of the Bulletin we look at the challenges confronting political and government communicators in the face of growing mistrust of politicians in particular and government in general as well as big business.

This is a real issue for a company like Gavin Anderson; with a strong political and financial heritage we tend to be communicator of choice for the increasingly tough government asset sales briefs such as T2, Sydney Basin Airports and most recently T3.

These are challenging briefs at present but what of the future when - as the articles in this issue predict - young people become increasingly alienated and derive their information from their own communications media, rather than the mainstream.

If we do not understand the new media we risk being left behind, so this is a challenge for our recruiting and training as well as our current practice.

In a recent issue of the UK magazine *The Spectator*, one of Margaret Thatcher’s gurus, Maurice Saatchi, lays the blame for voters switching-off at the feet of lack of idealism and moral vision. Both major parties in the UK, he says, compete

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POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

BECOMING MORE COMPLEX BUT ALSO MORE ACCESSIBLE

The following four articles address different aspects of the political process present and future. The rather depressing picture of political communication internationally and locally on this page and the article by Dr Wayne Errington on page 7 is in sharp contrast to the more optimistic view for the future presented by Dr Clive Hamilton on page 5 and Donald Alexander on page 6.

Starting below, Dr Darren Lilleker and Professor Barry Richards, both from Bournemouth University in the UK, provide a commentary on the 'professionalisation or Americanisation' of political communication while Dr Hamilton sees the churches as a source of inspiration for the progressive side of politics in Australia. Dr Errington chides the political parties for being secretive about their extensive use of databases while Mr Alexander cites how blogs are beginning to exert influence on the political agenda.

POLITICAL SOAP OPERA IDEAL FOR THE CONSUMER-CITIZEN

Dr **Darren G. Lilleker** is Senior Lecturer in Political Communication at Bournemouth University and author of *Key Concepts in Political Communication* (Sage, 2006)

Barry Richards is Professor of Public Communication and Head of Research in the Media School at Bournemouth University. His forthcoming book *Emotional Governance: New Ideas on Media and Democratic Leadership* (Palgrave) will be published in 2007.



It is universally recognised by scholars of political communication that the process by which political parties interact with the voters has become professionalised and so revolutionised over the last two or three decades.

One can look at the contrasts in two ways. Firstly, there has been a shift from face to face interaction to highly mediated and mediated communication employing many channels and forms of popular culture. Secondly, the strategic targeting and employment of sophisticated techniques to communicate to those voters deemed important by parties when seeking to win electoral contests either locally or nationally.

The reasons for this political communication revolution lie in structural changes within the relationship between party and voters, as well as the increasingly complex media environment professional communicators face.

Voters are now much more disloyal than they once were; research by Kayser & Wlezien (2005) found party membership is on average 15% of the population across all established

democracies. Electoral contests globally are more volatile; Peter Mair's research discovered over half of elections held since 1989 have been unpredictable with voters switching allegiances between the main contenders. Furthermore this dealignment and voter volatility is compounded by a global rise of mistrust of elected politicians (Stoker, 2006, pp. 32-46), and, perhaps even more fundamentally, a deepening antipathy towards government in general (Levine, 2004).

While these are reasons enough to suggest communication requires greater strategic input, the rise of 24/7 news, the more intensive market-orientation and fragmentation of the media, and increased use of the internet for information mean that communication can no longer be viewed as a simple two-step or three-step process where parties communicate directly or via the media to voters.

Like their corporate counterparts, political parties find they must make complex judgements in locating the right message, messenger and media to have any chance of successfully exercising their persuasive power. This intensive

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POLITICAL SOAP OPERA

Continued from page 3...

communications management is moreover continuous (the 'permanent campaign').

These shifts in society and in information and communication technology have led parties to think in highly strategic ways about communication and to employ professionals from the world of advertising, marketing and journalism in order to get the strategy right. This process has been described as professionalisation or Americanisation, due to the spread of American practices globally, but also as the marketisation, consumerisation or corporatisation of political party behaviour, even if the term 'political marketing' is rejected by some of those involved.

While there are debates surrounding the extent of Americanisation, and indeed over the meaning of professionalisation, the fact that parties are increasingly borrowing the tools of corporate organisations in order to reach voters seems accepted.

Communication is designed for maximum impact, usually involving advertising professionals at every stage of the process; the electorate is segmented according to potential voting behaviour; and communication is designed to speak to the desires, needs and fears of the key voter segment. Advertising is skilfully deployed to undermine opponents, such as characterising John Kerry, US Presidential hopeful, as a flip-flop unable to make up his mind; or warning UK voters that not voting Labour could result in 'waking up with Howard' (Michael Howard, then Conservative Party leader).

There is often a focus on denigrating the opposition, rather than providing informative material about the sponsor of the ad. There is also evidence of a de-ideologisation of politics, and an emphasis upon courting the political 'middle ground' through offering managerialism above vision. This lack of ideology and focus on the ability of the leader and their team leads directly to a personalisation of campaigns and to parties employing emotionally appealing heuristics rather than requiring voters to make a rational choice based on detailed information.

These trends have rightly been the object of much concerned and critical commentary. However there are other accounts which also see positive potential in recent trends. Accounts which tend to derive from 'culturalist' approaches to politics, those which focus on politics as culture and on its place in broader cultural contexts.

An important early work in this vein was John Street's 'Politics and Popular Culture' (1997), which analysed the overlap and convergence between these two domains. Street noted that the relationship between the two, though becoming closer for various reasons including the marketing pressures, was based in the fundamental element common to both which

is their ability to tap into deep passions. This convergence brings politics into more deliberate effort in the aesthetics of presentation, from party logos to the televisual presence of leaders, as part of the broad 'aestheticisation' of contemporary life, characteristic of postmodern consumer culture.

It also foregrounds new concerns with authenticity, in keeping with preoccupations with expressions and assessments of the 'real', inner person in today's emotionalised, therapeutic culture (as seen, for example, in much 'reality TV').

While these trends put politics at risk of incorporation into a manipulated world of pseudo-authenticity, where the politician's image is a persona that is skilfully crafted by public relations advisers, they also open up possibilities for closer scrutiny of politicians as claimants of trust, and for more affective and effective communications with voters.

To the charge that politics is being reduced to 'soap opera', one response is that this is precisely what politics needs. The fact that key emotional narratives underpinning everyday subjectivity and identity can be powerfully articulated in some soaps, leads Liesbet van Zoonen (2005, p.147) to conclude that citizenship can be nurtured 'through the popular vocabularies offered by personalisation and dramatization'.

Emerging from these perspectives (reviewed and developed in the collection of essays edited by John Corner and Dick Pels, 2003) is the understanding that political communication is now an aesthetic performance, a dramatisation, narrativisation or styling. It has to combine an increased visibility of the person of the politician and an enhanced address to the consumer-citizen. Continued declines in electoral turnout, however, suggest that these trends have not yet revitalised electorates or regenerated trust, and whether they create increased space for demagogic forms of populism remains to be seen.

Can we envisage a strategy that combines the best elements of the marketised and traditional forms of political communication, a more authentic narrative-led performance? If we can, would this elicit sufficient trust or be rejected as the latest form of spin?

"To the charge that politics is being reduced to 'soap opera', one response is that this is precisely what politics needs"

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DEVELOPING POLITICS OF MEANING: THE KEY TO A NEW PROGRESSIVE POLITICS

By **Dr Clive Hamilton**,
Executive Director of The Australia Institute



The following is an excerpt from a speech given by Dr Clive Hamilton, Executive Director of The Australia Institute, to the National Civil Society Dialogue convened by the Australian Council of Trade Unions, Australian Conservation Foundation, Australian Council of Social Services and the National Council of Churches in Australia, at Parliament House in October 2006.

Defending ‘the family’ has become conservative territory, but it is time progressives contested that dominance with a new politics of relationships. Everyone wants a happy family life. Families are the source of most of the companionship, emotional support and love we experience throughout our lives; they are where we form our most enduring, caring and loyal relationships.

Yet many progressive people, as if still crippled by the feminist and leftist critiques of the nuclear family, are afraid to defend the family; and, perversely, the more the moral conservatives have seized on the notion and moulded it into a romantic and reactionary caricature of the nuclear ideal of the 1950s, the more the progressives have vacated the field. This has been a grave political mistake.

The widespread unease with consumerism, even among the so-called aspirational classes, and the longing for a society with stronger ethical foundations derives from something deeper than a perception of social decline. Like all humans, what modern Australians want above all is for their lives to have purpose. But finding meaning is not easy, especially when people are subjected to a barrage of commercial messages that promote superficiality, self-deception and laxity. Some are following a religious path, and they find growing church communities where they can, for a time at least, immerse themselves in a social environment that is welcoming, caring, joyous and devoted to a higher purpose.

Progressives feel uneasy about the importation of American evangelism, and for good reason. Evangelical churches lend themselves to capture by conservatives who distort the participants’ desire for a stronger moral order into an assault on outsiders who deviate from ‘the one true path’. But, rather than deriding the ‘happy clappers’ of the evangelical churches, we need to realise that it is only through understanding and

accepting the urge to find something more satisfying than a consumer life that a ‘politics of meaning’ can be built. Responding to most people’s wish to live with purpose in an ethical society ought to be the natural territory of progressives, since the sentiments that underlie this hunger are consistent with the construction of a more just, sustainable and peaceful society.

Let me finish by asking which of the four social movements whose peak bodies have convened this conference might provide the ideas for a new progressive politics. Admirable as its work is, the welfare sector does not have the answer to the politics of an affluent society. The activism of the environment movement is vital to the future of the earth and all of its inhabitants, but environmentalism cannot be the basis of a broad-based political movement. In an individualised and affluent society, the trade unions are no longer the principal force for social change, although they will continue to play an essential role in protecting their members’ interests and campaigning on wider issues. Even woven together, a commitment to social justice, environmental sustainability and workers’ solidarity cannot be the basis for a new politics.

This leaves the churches. Curiously, in an age in which the mainstream churches are said to be in terminal decline, I believe that they hold the key to a new progressive politics. I am not appealing to the authority of the churches as institutions, and have no personal affiliation with any of them. But to the extent that their field of concern is the deeper aspects of life, and to the extent that they articulate values that transcend individualism, materialism and selfishness, it is from religious thinkers and activists that progressives might learn to speak to the concerns of Australian citizens. Only by understanding those deeper yearnings and appealing to those deeper values can we develop a new politics of meaning.

“Many progressive people....are afraid to defend the family”



POLITICS ENTERS THE "BLOGOSPHERE" THE NEW BATTLE GROUND AND LABORATORY

By **Donald Alexander**, Senior Lecturer
in Public Relations and Organisational
Communication at Charles Sturt University



The blog or web-log is a new medium emerging as a political communication tool. Terms such as "blogging" and the "blogosphere" are becoming more frequent in discussions on how politicians can communicate with constituents, prospective voters and the media.

The impact of the media on voting intentions has been the subject of intensive research by McCombs and Shaw (1972) and more recent researchers (Semetko, Blumler, Gurevitch, & Weaver, 1991). Son and Weaver (2005, p.175) also found "media content not only defines the characteristics of campaign elections but also has powerful effects on the public."

Politicians and political communicators need to start taking the blogosphere seriously. Why? A reading of academic articles published between 2004 and now, plus commentary in the political media, shows that blogs are beginning to exert some influence on political agendas. Their increasing use means that political communicators no longer need to rely on the media to reach a public.

The literature review suggests blogs can be used for the following political activities:

- a) attacks on candidate blog posts (Trammell, 2006)
- b) market a message without the filter of mainstream media
- c) create a closer one-on-one relationship with constituents or potential supporters
- d) a more cost effective means of communicating
- e) re-engage younger people in the political process as they are major users of the technology to source news and information
- f) a sounding board for thoughts and ideas.

Drezner and Farrell (2004) in an analysis of the 2004 United States presidential campaign commented that "blogs appear to play an increasingly important role as a forum of public debate, with knock-on consequences for the media and for politics" (p.4); they are read by journalists and opinion leaders, and have both political and media "agenda-setting power" (p.5). They also note that media elites "consume political blogs" (p.14); and that "blogs may frame political debates and create focal points for the media as a whole" (p.23). The authors comment that blogs influence important actors within mainstream media who in turn frame issues for a wider public. They refer to the resignation of a US Senate Leader in 2002 as a result of a blogger drawing attention to some old comments that supported a racist view.

Research into the same 2004 election by Nardi, Schiano and Gumbrecht (2004) found that many blogs were created to

organise people around specific political events, were highly activist in nature and therefore "seek to influence others" (p.9) and also political bloggers "seem to value their blog's reputation more than personal bloggers" (p.10).

Su, Wang and Mark (2005) comment that political blogs are on the A-List of most viewed sites and that political bloggers aim to use a large online social network to influence others.

Lawson-Borders and Kirk (2005) argue that the effective use of the online technology has been demonstrated and is an emerging application for future campaigns. Pickerill (2005), a UK academic, conducted a study into radical politics and found that blogging was a form of organising and consolidating grassroots solidarity among activists.

Democrat Senator Andrew Bartlett was one of the first Australian politicians to create and maintain a blog that provides a detailed insight into the daily life and thoughts of a politician. Bartlett says blogs would personalise MPs and remind people that issues of substance are dealt with in Parliament. But he comments that the party system in Australia could inhibit blogging by individual MPs as their personal views might be seen by the media as contravening party discipline.

ACT Senator Kate Lundy who blogs and also podcasts, says blogs are important in politics. Quoted in crikey.com.au recently Lundy said, "We politicians will ignore this technology at our peril." Family First Senator Steve Fielding (www.stevefielding.com.au) has created a vlog (a video blog) so he can speak directly to families and small businesses.

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ELECTORAL MESSAGES TAILOR MADE

DATABASES FOR POLITICAL COMMUNICATION & MARKETING



Dr Wayne Errington is a Lecturer in the School of Social Sciences & Liberal Studies, Charles Sturt University. With Peter van Onselen, he is the author of a forthcoming biography of John Howard

The gathering and management of information by political parties through electoral databases is a crucial part of the ongoing professionalisation of political campaigning. Electoral databases owned by each of the major political parties record information about voters in each House of Representatives constituency.

While there is no substitute for politicians with a sound knowledge of their electorate, the rapid growth in information technology in recent decades has allowed parties to record and store an enormous range of information about voters, seats and policy preferences. They are an important part of the way in which the party organisations target their campaign communication to swinging voters in marginal seats. As well, the databases identify potential party supporters who can be approached for donations and other support.

The introduction of the databases has coincided with a period in federal politics where a great deal of attention, by the parties and the media, has begun to be paid to a relatively small number of swinging voters.

The ALP's database, Electrac, was developed in the late 1980s, as part of Labor's ongoing efforts through its National Secretary, Bob Hogg, to ensure that the ALP was capable of maintaining electoral advantage through exploiting incumbency, something it had failed to do in previous periods in office.

The development of the Liberal Party's Feedback database was part of a national review of the Coalition's 1990 election campaign. In that election, it was generally recognised that the ALP had out-campaigned the Coalition in key marginal seats, allowing Labor to win the election without a majority of the two-party preferred vote.

Information for the databases can come from voters contacting the electoral office, candidates canvassing their electorate or other sources such as letters to the editor of local newspapers. A summary of the new contacts is added to the database, so that the frequency and nature of contacts are tracked, helping to build a picture of individual voters and their suitability for party communication. It is the aggregation of this data that interests the party organisation, and can also be used by individual MPs to tailor letters to small groups of voters. This method is both cheaper and more effective than an electorate-wide mail-out.

Feedback allows voters to be 'tagged' according to their interest in over 300 issues. These tags may mark a general interest in health, or a particular interest in the cost of private

health insurance. Tags can also be created to account for local issues (about problems with particular roads or proposed developments) or new issues as they arise (such as the debate over stem cells). These tags are easily viewed by office staff as icons as soon as they open the constituent's file on the database, and thus provide an instant picture of the person with whom they are dealing.

Seamless operation of the database adds both an aura of professionalism to the office, as well as a personal touch to dealings with constituents. In practice, however, the operation of the databases is rarely seamless. Electoral redistributions, constituents moving in and out of electorates and disputes within parties all limit database coverage at any given time.

It is unlikely that Malcolm Turnbull inherited much constituent information from the man he unseated in Wentworth, Peter King. MPs in safe seats have little incentive to maintain their databases efficiently. The potential of the databases, then, remains largely unrealised.

The major parties don't like discussing their databases for fear of headlines about 'Big Brother'. This is a pity, since the databases raise important questions about privacy and democratic representation. Those of us who have already made up our minds which way we intend to vote would appreciate not being bombarded by party campaign material were such messages more effectively targeted towards swinging voters.

Targeted messages would also reduce the need for party fundraising since the most expensive form of political communication – television advertisements – provides the least value for money. Those of us most likely to change our vote are also the least likely to be following politics in the news media. The parties simply haven't come up with better ways of reaching these voters than blanket advertising during election campaigns.

On the other hand, databases enable the political parties to focus on the all-important median voter to the exclusion of the true believers on both sides of politics. This is said to cause a skewing of public policy in favour of short-term partisan consideration against the interests of the majority of voters. While there are plenty of examples of decisions that focus on such short-term considerations, issues such as privatisation and tax reform indicate a willingness to make unpopular decisions. Databases and other developments in political marketing are then used to frame political debates and tailor political messages in order to sell tough decisions to voters on an ongoing basis – not just during election campaigns.

"The major parties don't like discussing their databases for fear of headlines about 'Big Brother'."

THE HIDDEN HAND IN NEWS



Peter Simmons coordinates postgraduate courses in organisational communication at Charles Sturt University.



Ask any journalist how a press release should be used and they'll talk about checking facts, seeking alternative viewpoints and attributing sources. But a new Australian Press Council report adds to evidence that Australians are getting public relations materials and one-sided accounts served to them as 'news'.

The report paints a picture of newsrooms being starved of resources needed for scrutiny and investigation, government restrictions sending Australia down to number 35 on the worldwide press freedom index, and journalists struggling to fill news holes while being overwhelmed by PR 'machines'.

The Australian Press Council's first 'State of the Print News Media Report' (SOPNM) (2006) analysed 2,448 articles from 14 newspapers and found that more than 40% of stories cited only one source. Fewer than 10% cited four sources, compared with 48% in a similar US study. The largest category of source was 'politician or person employed by a government department' (24% of all articles).

The report makes a special note of the infrequent citations of PR as source, just 4.9% of articles, and says that PR is more successful when its contribution is not visible. This is consistent with previous Australian studies by Clara Zawawi who traced the origins of 683 stories in major metropolitan papers (*The Age*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Courier-Mail*) and Jim Macnamara who tracked the uptake of 150 media releases. Both found that public relations activity was highly successful, but largely invisible.

Public relations and media release journalism are thriving in Australia. But are the conventions of media relations destroying our news media?

The Press Council report blames 'poorly staffed newsrooms' for press releases being taken too often at face value. It also laments various restrictions and techniques used to limit access to information or alternative views:

The use of "media management" techniques may be the greatest threat to the press's ability properly to report on matters of public interest and concern. The fact that other institutions, the courts, the police, business, universities and sporting bodies, among many others, have looked at and learned from government on these techniques means the situation will only worsen. (SONPM, 2006)

'Media release journalism' involves printing or broadcasting media release content and ideas without meeting journalists'

responsibilities to the public - disclosing all the essential facts, giving fair opportunity for reply, attributing information to source and disclosing conflicts of interest. It results in readers getting 'news' that is the version preferred by the entity issuing the release, not a balanced version of events scrutinised by a journalist.

Media release journalism is ethically objectionable because it deceives, and because "it constitutes a breach of trust owed by the communicators (the journalists and the PR practitioners) to those with whom they communicate, including the general public". This applies when the source is not disclosed, whether the content is 'true' or not.

The deception perpetrated on the reader by media release journalism is mostly removed if journalists disclose their sources. Readers can, therefore, make their own minds up about information if they know the source.

But journalists don't disclose if the source is PR. Despite increasing dependence on PR, the public's right to disclosure is often ignored where PR is concerned.

Zawawi found that journalists disclose sources when they 'confer credibility on the stories', but not when these are PR practitioners. Conversations with journalists suggest that not sourcing PR is more a matter of credibility among peers than with the public.

Journalists and their editors seem most obviously responsible for any deception because they control what appears to the reader. Most are duty bound to uphold codes of ethical practice which include objectivity and balance.

PR and the 'media managers' are also responsible. And made more responsible where they are in positions of relative power. It behoves them not to engage in practices that undermine ethical communication processes by targeting under-resourced journalists, timing to restrict scrutiny or by other means. If public relations engages in systematic or deliberate practices that lead to media release journalism, they effectively collude with the journalist in the deception.

The Press Council SOPNM report suggests trends to an impotent media, unable to provide 'full-time, professional monitoring of powerful institutions'. Taken case by case, the practices of media release journalism and media control may seem to be of small consequence. But over time, they are eroding trust in the media, and undermining confidence in all our institutions.

PLAYING THE COMMUNICATION GAME: USING COMPUTER GAMES TO SIMULATE CRISIS COMMUNICATION



By Zoe Hibbert, Lecturer in Public Relations & Organisational Communication in the School of Communication, Charles Sturt University

The holy grail of government communication – whole of government messaging – may be a step closer following Australian Research Council (ARC) approval to fund a project to develop a serious computer game that simulates and predicts communication management decision-making in crisis situations.

The project, which is titled ‘Crisis management simulation: Developing a new methodology for transforming communication response’, is a joint venture between Charles Sturt University (CSU) researchers and Australian Defence Public Affairs (ADPA). The coveted ARC grant demonstrates that the Federal Government considers this initiative to be unique and of national importance.

Associate Professor John Carroll, the project’s chief investigator, believes the methodology developed will have global application to public and private organisations.

“This project merges cutting-edge digital games technology with applied drama techniques to produce a crisis management

game to simulate conflict and crisis scenarios,” he said.

“We will work closely with the Australian Defence Force to better understand organisational communication under extreme pressure, build teamwork and break down barriers to effective crisis management. Ultimately we hope to develop a game that will assist the planning of whole of government communication programs.”

The serious games will feature new tools for speech and gesture recognition in virtual spaces, and analysing decision-making under pressure. The project will provide the means for other organizations to rapidly develop new crisis scenarios tailored to their situation and needs.

CSU will work closely with ADPA over the next three years to fully develop and test the serious game. If you’re interested in finding out more information about the project, contact Zoe Hibbert 02 6338 4603, zhibbert@csu.edu.au

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USING MARKET RESEARCH TO INFLUENCE GOVERNMENT

OR HOW I KILLED OFF THE ORANGE-SPECKLED BANDICOOT



Sue Vercoe is CEO of GA Research, a market research firm that specialises in corporate, financial and issue management projects. It is a division of Gavin Anderson & Company. Sue previously worked at UMR Research and is a graduate of the School of Communication at Charles Sturt University.

A community action group has formed to oppose the development of a shopping centre that will bring hundreds of jobs to the area, but will increase traffic in residential streets and endanger the last known habitat of the orange-speckled bandicoot.

They've distributed pamphlets, held public meetings, put up banners, organised a petition and garnered coverage in the local newspapers. The development is in a marginal government-held seat and the local MP is concerned he may be ousted if the Government approves the project.

To convince the Government to green-light the project, the developers need evidence the project isn't going to place the seat in jeopardy. This is where a market research firm is called in. This same scenario is played out across Australia for projects such as pulp mills, brickworks, refineries, smelters and toll-roads.

The market researcher's job is to find out how deep the opposition to the project is among the people closest to the project, people further away in the electorate and sometimes in other parts of the State. Is the protest the work of a small well-organised and vocal group or is there widespread community opposition? Is the issue strong enough to sway votes?

A market researcher will also investigate the potential to use media coverage and communication tools such as letterbox drops, advertising, Web sites and independent opinion to change perceptions.

Governments are very sensitive to voters' opinions and can be heavily influenced by community lobbying campaigns. This is exacerbated in the lead-up to an election, when the desire to remain in government is enormous. The market research findings can be one of the few ways to reassure policy makers that approving the project won't be a vote-loser, and may even be in their interests.

The cost of the research, which could run from \$20,000 to \$150,000, can be a worthwhile investment given what's at stake – the viability of the project and future profits. Without objective information, politicians and their advisers may base their decisions on their worst fears and assumptions.

The research is usually conducted in two steps. The qualitative process involves a series of community focus groups, where the market researcher moderates a 1.5-2 hour discussion among

8-10 people to gain an in-depth understanding of the context in which people see the issues, how it ranks amongst other issues and the likely impact on voting intentions.

Focus groups are also important in identifying any communications gaps and testing and fine-tuning messages and communications materials that could be used in an information campaign.

A quantitative survey is usually also conducted, using a telephone poll of at least 350 people within the electorate.

The research report will identify levels of community support and opposition as well as likely changes in sentiment based on exposure to specific campaign messages.

If the project has merit and the research demonstrates broad community support, then the report is provided to Government by the company or its advisers. The Government will gain comfort from understanding the true level of community concern or can work with the company to develop alternative approaches to allay opposition if necessary.

Research plays a crucial role in getting Government to expedite projects. It also provides an edge in communications to both Government and stakeholders once the approval process is underway.

The credibility of the company conducting the research can also be persuasive when presenting the findings to Government. It's easy to dismiss a research report on the basis of biased questions or sampling error. For this reason, many companies tend to choose a research firm with close links to the incumbent Government.

GA Research straddles the political middle ground. It draws on the credibility of Irving Saulwick, one of Australia's most experienced social researchers, who acts as senior research counsel, as well as the extensive polling experience of senior consultants within Gavin Anderson & Company, including Deputy Chief Executive Officer Brian Tyson and Chairman Jon Gaul.

Since its inception earlier this year, GA Research has completed projects for clients including Australian Pipeline Trust, Babcock & Brown Infrastructure, BGC, Fox Symes, Foxtel, M5 Motorway, St Lukes Hospital Complex, Sydney Opera House, UTS Faculty of Business, Macquarie Generation and SBS.

THE TEACHING OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Continued from page 2...

our aim is that students become critical thinkers who are able to analyse practices, apply ethical judgements and become knowledgeable participants and practitioners in our democracy.

Almost all our communication students study political science subjects and ethics. Journalism students learn to research political debates and write about them in a print- or broadcast-ready style. Public relations students have a public affairs subject in their third year which reviews community relations, political campaigns, government information campaigns and initiatives, the role of think tanks, and e-government and e-democracy, amongst other topics.

When they graduate, these young professionals are ready to enter the real world of media and communication well-equipped to question, challenge and contribute to their nation on political and governmental issues. They will change political communication, just as generations have done since 1788.

THE MASTER TACTICIAN

Continued from page 12...

more than cameras and microphones.

Jon barked at him like a parade ground sergeant-major, ordered him to don his tennis gear and marched him out to face the media scrum.

During the 1980s Jon's contribution to the beer industry in particular and business in general was considerable. He pioneered the use of polling and independent economic advice in the campaign to reform alcohol beverage taxation which was a key part of economic reform at the time. Blame Jon Gaul for the wine tax.

The Australian Medical Association was another long-standing client. Jon had a leading role in repositioning the AMA and specifically negotiated the lease arrangements with the ACT Government for the AMA's new Canberra headquarters in the Parliamentary Triangle. Another lasting achievement.

After a quarter of a century running a public affairs consultancy, we accepted Gavin Anderson's offer and Jon became Chairman of the three-office Australian operation.

Essentially a self-effacing person, Jon's reputation is based on achievement not publicity. His work for the National Press Club is typical.

For over 20 years his office has regularly been even more untidy than usual strewn with photocopies of newspaper articles as well as news and current affairs audio and video tapes; that means another NPC award is being judged.

Consistently, effectively and – until now – with scant reward Jon just got on with the job of adjudicating and helping recognise journalistic excellence.

It is fitting indeed that his contribution to public affairs overall is being recognised by the national institution – the National Press Club – of which he was one of the founding members and now a Life Member.

SALUTE TO JON GAUL

Continued from page 2...

for the centre ground.

“One direct result of this convergence on the centre ground is a super-cynical electorate... Young people are routinely criticised for moronic addiction to computer games and iPods. But theirs might be the most rational response to centre-ground politics. With little difference between the parties on substance, image and appearance take over,” Saatchi wrote.

With that depressing picture emerging, the National Press Club is to be congratulated for inaugurating the public affairs award and selecting as the first recipient a practitioner with a solid record of service and achievement; substance over flim-flam every time.

GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION

Continued from page 1...

Before I conclude, I would like to give PR firms some gratuitous tips...

Firstly, we are not interested in winning awards – we are interested in communicating the information. The Government does not seek to promote itself, but the information. Embellishing and ‘gilding the lily’ is just not on – the information must be accurate.

Secondly, firms are engaged by the Australian Government, not the particular advertising agencies. So we demand no collusion or excuse-making for the agencies. We need to know it as it is. And do not worry about offending the agency, because the MCGC will always be better at it than you.

Thirdly, we expect quantifiable outcomes. If I have to sit through another presentation with people who rabbit on about “delivering synergies through strategic partnerships” and “holistic mainstreaming of key learnings”, I am going to scream. What are you actually going to do?

Finally, sometimes my colleagues can be robust in their questioning when PR firms present before us. Whilst you might think this is simply done at their expense, as some type of legalised blood-sport, or to hone their interrogation techniques, let me assure you that we take our role seriously.

We need to know that PR firms understand the brief, the sensitivities and the necessity to get value for money. Spending approximately \$100M of our fellow Australians' money each year brings with it such responsibilities.

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THE MASTER TACTICIAN

JON GAUL RECOGNISED FOR SERVICE TO PUBLIC AFFAIRS



By **Peter Sekules**, Director, Gavin Anderson & Company and former business partner to Jon Gaul with consulting firm, Canberra Liaison.

The recipient of the inaugural National Press Club public affairs award, Jonathan Julius Gaul, was born in Sydney 68 years ago on 11 August 1938.

The first award sets a high standard as Jon's public affairs career has been both diverse and distinguished. Highlights have included:

- Prime Ministerial and Opposition Leader staffer;
- Veteran of 14 consecutive Federal election campaigns (1972-2004);
- Co-founder of government relations firm Canberra Liaison;
- Chairman of Gavin Anderson Australia;
- Awards Co-ordinator for the National Press Club for over two decades;
- Past President of IAPC, International Association of Political Consultants; and
- Founding member and Treasurer of APAPC, Asia Pacific Association of Political Consultants.

Reflecting his varied and interesting life, his was far from a conventional childhood. His father, a movie industry executive, died prematurely leaving a young family. Jon's journalist mother was a woman of spirit and decidedly progressive views who made ends meet running a boarding house in the then bohemian Sydney suburb of Hunters Hill. From here, he inherited a sturdy independence, if not her left-wing views.

He was educated at the unusual combination of the Quaker Friends School in Hobart then the selective Sydney High in the same years, ironically, as two people who went on to play significant roles in Labor governments, Peter Wilenski and Paddy McGuinness.

Despite his high IQ level university was not an option, and he started his working life at CSR. Then Colonial by nature as well as name, his stint there cured him of the attractions of corporate life and after three months national service in an infantry regiment at Ingleburn, including a week in the brig for assaulting an officer, he moved to the *Sydney Sun* as Alan Ramsay's police rounds copy boy. Next stop was Ezra Norton's afternoon tabloid, the *Daily Mirror*. There he learnt to hang onto his tram tickets if he wanted the expense reimbursed – excellent training for running a consultancy.

Rupert Murdoch bought the *Mirror* and Jon first found his way in 1959 as a 'sessional' reporter in a press gallery dominated by Alan Reid and Ian Fitchett, Jon relieved long

nights of boring debates by enticing to the Parliamentary refreshment rooms off-duty Canberra Hospital nurses in the public gallery by means of cups of tea drawings on his reporter's notebook. He consequently married Helen Falconer in 1965. In 1964 he had been recruited to head the gallery bureau of *The Canberra Times*, which had been acquired by Fairfax in preparation for the epic battle with Rupert Murdoch's *Australian*.

It took *The Canberra Times* three years to drive *The Australian* out of Canberra in part thanks to the reporting of its political correspondent Jonathan Gaul. When I was sent over to join Jon in the old Parliament House bureau, the editor told me that Jon was so good because he 'thinks like a politician'.

Historians and students of the 1960s, particularly the Holt and Gorton periods, should use Jon's dispatches as primary source material. In addition to his accuracy and insight, *The Canberra Times* then had the luxury of more time and space to devote to politics and government than our interstate competitors.

Early in 1968 he left what Gough Whitlam used to refer to as "Gaul's flaccid organ" to join Maxwell Newton's eclectic publishing empire where libel writs were ten a penny. From there he found his way to writing speeches for Prime Minister MacMahon and press secretarizing for Opposition Leader Snedden.

Snedden used to boast that he was on the wavelength of his generation and Jon was certainly on Snedden's wavelength of small 'l' Liberalism which has been his consistent credo.

It was at this time at the 1972 election that he began his unbroken run of 14 election campaigns in the Liberal interest up to and including the 2004 poll. To mark the achievement the Liberal Party presented him with a one-off certificate to "The Master Tactician".

Jon and I formally established Canberra Liaison in June 1978 but had begun working together prior to that. In the previous year we launched 'Life. Be In It' and Jon's contribution was memorable.

The new Minister who was supposed to be the main event at the launch froze at the prospect although he was a decorated army officer who had previously faced an enemy armed with

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The *Bulletin of Public and Corporate Communication* is available online at www.gavinanderson.com.au or in hard copy. Comment and contributions are welcome. Please contact the Editor: psekules@gavinanderson.com.au