

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS BETWEEN THE PUBLIC SERVICE AND THE MEDIA

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ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT

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THE SIGMA PROGRAMME

SIGMA - Support for Improvement in Governance and Management in Central and Eastern European Countries - is a joint initiative of the OECD Centre for Co-operation with the Economies in Transition and EC/Phare, mainly financed by EC/Phare. The OECD and several OECD Member countries also provide resources. SIGMA assists public administration reform efforts in Central and Eastern Europe.

The OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development - is an intergovernmental organisation of 27 democracies with advanced market economies. The Centre channels OECD advice and assistance over a wide range of economic issues to reforming countries in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. EC/Phare provides grant financing to support its partner countries in Central and Eastern Europe to the stage where they are ready to assume the obligations of membership of the European Union.

Established in 1992, SIGMA operates within the OECD's Public Management Service (PUMA). PUMA provides information and expert analysis on public management to policy-makers in OECD Member countries, and facilitates contact and exchange of experience amongst public sector managers. Through PUMA, SIGMA offers eleven countries a wealth of technical knowledge accumulated over many years of study and action.

Participating governments and the SIGMA Secretariat collaborate in a flexible manner to establish work programmes designed to strengthen capacities for improving governance in line with each government's priorities and SIGMA's mission. The initiative relies on a network of experienced public administrators to provide counselling services and comparative analysis among different management systems. SIGMA also works closely with other international donors promoting administrative reform and democratic development.

Throughout its work, SIGMA places a high priority on facilitating co-operation among governments. This includes providing logistical support to the formation of networks of public administration practitioners in Central and Eastern Europe, and between these practitioners and their counterparts in OECD Member countries.

SIGMA's activities are divided into six areas: Reform of Public Institutions, Management of Policy-making, Expenditure Management, Management of the Public Service, Administrative Oversight, and Information Services.

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FOREWORD

Citizens have a right to know the policies and activities of their government. In a well-functioning democracy, the government provides reliable and timely information to the public. Effective communications between the government and the public is especially important in countries in transition, where major changes in state institutions - indeed in all aspects of life - have left the citizenry uncertain about the new roles of the government and public administration, and how to convey their views to representatives of the state.

To reach large numbers of the population, governments everywhere rely heavily on radio, television, magazines and newspapers. The media filters and analyses information from authorities to the citizens, and thus governments must take into account this "intermediary role" of the media when they seek to communicate with the population.

More than ever, the credibility of the government and the acceptance of public policies depends on the degree to which it is open with the media. A relationship that stresses a free flow of information between government and the media is necessary from the inception of a public policy. When the public is allowed to understand the development of a policy, it is then easier for government to build support and implement it and underlying objectives - such as reform of the public administration.

In November 1995, SIGMA and the Hungarian Ministry of Interior organised a seminar entitled, "The Civil Service and Communication". The event, financed in part by the European Union Phare National Programme, brought together three dozen civil servants responsible for press and information at various ministries and government bodies and Hungarian journalists. Its purpose was to examine ways to structure and operate a government office of information to promote effective communication between public servants and the media, and to enhance media coverage of public administration reform.

This publication comprises six papers presented at the seminar by five experts in communications, three working in public administrations in Western Europe and Canada, and two journalists based in Budapest. A background issues paper which sets the stage for seminar discussions precedes these other papers. The annexes comprise sample codes of ethics for journalists and government communicators.

A key theme which participants and invited speakers returned to time and time again was the need for a co-ordinated governmental communications policy linked from the beginning to the process of formulating, adopting and implementing a policy. They noted that government communications strategies which are well co-ordinated across the public administration, timely, pro-active, and sensitive to the needs of journalists are more likely to be successful than those that are not.

This report appears as the ninth in the SIGMA Papers series, inaugurated in 1995. It is also available in French with the following title: “*Pour une communication efficace entre les services publics et les médias*”. The publication is intended as a reference tool for civil servants in countries in transition who provide information to the public as part of their responsibilities. This includes public affairs officers, individuals in press departments, persons conducting public service advertising campaigns, and managers who frequently talk to journalists in the course of their work.

For more information on the SIGMA Programme and its support to central and eastern European governments reforming their public administrations, contact the address below.

Bob Bonwitt
Head of the SIGMA Programme
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SIGMA-OECD
2, rue André-Pascal
75775 Paris Cedex 16, France
Tel (33.1) 45.24.79.00 or 45.24.13.94
Fax (33.1) 45.24.13.00
e-mail: sigma.info@oecd.org
<http://www.oecd.org/puma/sigmaweb>

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BACKGROUND PAPER

The Need to Communicate

For a democracy to operate effectively, the government must communicate with the citizens of the country. They have a right to know what government ministries and other public sector bodies are doing, and why administrative decisions are made. The information provided by government must be credible and timely. In order to reach large numbers of people, the government must rely on the media, which filters and analyses information provided to the public electronically or in print.

Public administration reform requires a parallel reform of the role of citizen responsibility. Leaders of public administration reform need to communicate with the public, apprising them of the changing roles between citizens and the administration and what to expect from change. There is a need at all levels of society for a fundamental definition and understanding of the:

- specific roles of various public administration bodies;
- limits of those roles; and
- sanctions available to the public in the event of non-performance by those with public sector responsibilities.

This process of definition and understanding must begin with political leaders and public servants. At the same time, the difference in roles between the permanent civil service corps and elected and appointed political officials must be delineated.

Above all, every effort must be made to build confidence between the public administration, the citizenry at large, and the media. Individual citizens need to understand services provided by administrations and the new training and accountability standards being applied to civil servants. This will help to demystify the public sector while building up external respect and support for the continuing process of economic and political transformation.

Learning Skills and Targeting Audiences

Public administration reform groups, and the public service as a whole, must build up their capacities to "market" their programmes. A dual-learning process must be mastered for this to be achieved:

- Public servants need to learn basic communications techniques for dealing with the media and other communication channels as vehicles for building consensus and support for administrative reform.
- Media managers in the private sector need to improve their understanding of the role of the public sector and problems of reform, and to consider the potential interest to their customers of dealing with public sector issues.

Consensus-building in a reform process that requires major cultural change implies a two-pronged communications programme tailored to specific audiences. The general public and public servants are principle targets. They can be reached through the written and electronic press, advertising, direct mail, community briefings, and in-school education programmes.

Opinion formers should be the target of a very specific programme of personalised and in-depth briefings. Included among this group are journalists, business and industry groups, trade unions and trade associations, academia, and non-governmental organisations.

The Role of the Media

The media acts as a channel of communication and as an active participant in the reform process. The second role is played whether or not there is a government communications programme and may be positive or negative. The question for government is how to convey its message to the media, which wields a great deal of power in every democracy.

Governments and administrations need to learn to tolerate and appreciate the role of an independent media in the reform process as an essential supplier of feedback as well as a communication channel. The effectiveness of the media in its role as communication channel depends, however, on the general situation of the media - both the reality and the perception of its independence.

Communicating Reform to the Media

Those in the public sector should keep in mind a number of general principles and techniques when communicating with the media:

- Build Consensus as the Foundation for Policy Implementation:

Governments and reformer groups must "lobby" for support of their own reform. Thus, an early programme targeted to the different pressure groups as to the changing roles and responsibilities between the public and private sectors can help make the new public policy system work more effectively. Example: meet with doctors before changing rules for visits by the ill to hospitals.

- Maintain a Consistent and Clear Information Flow:

All press briefings and contacts do not have to be news events. It is essential, though, to develop a sense of "complicity" with the audiences that you want to influence so that they feel that they are consulted on and informed of what is going on. Example: meet a journalist informally to discuss general options being considered to curb bribery in the Customs Service.

- Communicate Early on Sensitive or Complicated Issues:

This is particularly important in the complex media environment in Central and Eastern Europe where there is great diversity and a "free-for-all" environment, and where the media is establishing its own credibility by demonstrating its ability to criticise in a constructive fashion. Example: inform the media well before 1 January of higher utility charges to be implemented in the new year.

– Be the Spokesman for your Own Initiative or Crisis:

Do not resort to "no comment" and let others talk about your problem and distort facts; tell your own version - even when it is difficult. Example: present an honest answer - co-ordinated with other appropriate authorities - to a question about the use of ministry cars and expense accounts for personal use.

– Adopt a Pro-Active and Long-Term Communication Strategy:

Put all information within the context of a strategic programme and link your messages with "hot" topics. Example: explain that the sale of a major firm to a foreign company is part of a broader privatisation programme involving national and international parties aimed at revitalising a formerly command economy.

– Transparency to Encourage Trust:

In the new environment, as compared to the old situation, openness or communicated information is the key to power and to building trust and credibility with the media and general public; although this is complicated and requires sophisticated and vigilant management techniques, it is essential to building a consultative style of governance. Example: make the text of a new regulation on banning tobacco sales widely and easily available without delay.

– Differentiate Between Types of Information:

The principal types of information communicated by governments and public administrations can be broken down generally into the following categories:

- statistical data (labour, fiscal, monetary, etc.);
- citizen services (rubbish collection, health clinics, libraries);
- government policies (taxes, military reform, privatisation); and
- political party information (candidates list, campaign platform).

It is very important to differentiate among these types of information to maintain the integrity and neutrality that is associated with information normally provided by public administrations. Example: state funds should not be spent to publicise the appointment of a new vice-chairman in a ruling coalition party.

Formulating a Communications Programme

A strategic communication programme contributes in a very important way to the public administration reform process. Some possible approaches include:

– Create a Strong Economic, Political and Social Case for Reform:

- carry out an internal audit of skill resources, skill needs, internal and external perceptions so as to quantify and justify reform recommendations; involve members of administrations early in the process; and serve as a measure to monitor the reform process;

- demonstrate how each improved public administrative department will better serve society as a whole using examples of success;
 - explain why different skill bases are needed, what new tasks will be performed and services provided, and what the implications are for salaries or employment; and
 - use comparative information and third-party testimony to justify your case - OECD statistics, other country statistics in similar administrations (ie education level, salaries, skills required in each administration), think tanks and academic experts.
- Identify Support (and Opposition) Groups:
- work with business associations, chambers of commerce, academic experts, trade unions, consumer groups and NGOs to form an alliance in support of the administrative reform programme before you communicate.
- Communicate the Strategy for Administrative Reform Clearly, Often, and in the Context of a Long-term Strategy:
- show how reform of your administration is going to have an impact on its ability to deliver services; and
 - set targets and standards for monitoring reform and communicate them regularly.

Issues for Discussion

The above points suggest a number of areas for examination at the seminar entitled "The Civil Service and Communication". Among these are:

- Organisation of a Government Information Office:
- how is the office organised?
 - how does it co-ordinate with the rest of the public administration?
 - what is its relationship to political levels of the administration?
 - what services does it offer to the public in general and to the media in particular?
 - how much of its work is dedicated to public relations? Public interest matters? Media?
 - is the office different from ministry to ministry and does it serve different functions depending on the ministry?
- Policies of a Government Information Office:
- what is the role of a government information officer, and what is the mission of his/her office?
 - what kind of ethical or procedural guidelines apply to the work of the office?
 - is there an overall understanding or strategy about government communications?
 - how are requests for information screened, directed?
 - what information can be given out, and what cannot be divulged (eg military secrets, personal tax information)?

- to what extent are ministry experts used to provide information?
- is there a division between non-partisan institutional information and party political information?
- Staffing of a Government Information Office:
 - what kind of training do employees receive?
 - are officers career civil servants or political appointees?
 - where is recruitment done?
 - is the "skills-mix" of an ideal employee changing?
- Inter-Action with the Media:
 - what are the challenges in getting journalists to report on particular topics in the public administration?
 - what channels are used to convey information (eg press conferences, informal meetings, media announcements)?
 - what techniques are used to reach the media (eg timing announcements to editors' schedules, strategic "leaking" of news, keeping messages short and focused)?
 - how can distortion of the message be reduced?
 - how does a government information officer build up trust with journalists?
 - how does one respond to bias or errors in reporting?
 - how are sensitive and controversial topics best handled?
- Hungary's Media Law and Other Developments:
 - what are the risks and opportunities of the Prime Minister's decision to hold regular press conferences?
 - what limits should be placed on journalists' use of information presented at these and other government press conferences (eg curtailing the making of video and audio recordings, placing an embargo on release of news from the event)?
 - what will be the effect of the Media Law on the work of government information officers?
 - how will new private radio and TV stations affect the work of a government information office?
 - how can government information offices make the best use of technology (eg recorded information provided by touch-tone telephone, Internet, CD-ROM)
 - how does Hungary's integration into European and other international networks and organisations affect the presentation of information (Should information be provided in foreign languages? Should information about domestic topics highlight relationships to international obligations and policy goals?)
 - how can effective informational campaigns be conducted with minimal resources?

1. GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM *by Jack Gee*¹

In the United Kingdom, the mass media is much criticised. It trespasses upon personal privacy. It plays at politics. It is self-regarding. It defends itself fiercely against all criticism. It often hunts witches which exist only in its own imagination. It is in the hands of a few ultra-wealthy people. Fleet Street in London, where until recently all the major national newspapers had their offices, is also sometimes called Grub Street or the Street of Shame. Newspapers have been like this for centuries. All that is new is that technology has given them a bigger bite.

But it is hard to see how a democratic society can fully flourish without a free press. Some of the demons it pursues and the devils it reveals deserve their fate. If it tramples upon privacy, the result is often truth. It holds the ring between vested political interest and the common public good. It is the Fourth Estate.

Against this background every organisation, be it public or private, requires an increasingly professional body to manage the flow of information to the public via the media; to advise principals on how to deal with the demands of the media and to sift newspaper and televisual coverage. These also need to be expert in marketing and paid publicity techniques. It has already become apparent that different countries have widely different methods of operation.

In the United Kingdom there are about 1 000 professional information officers spread throughout the government in ministries and sponsored agencies. Their duties are to respond to press enquiries; write news releases on various aspects of government policy; prepare articles and messages for newspapers and magazines; arrange press conferences and briefings for ministers and senior officials; advise on target audiences. They also prepare advertising campaigns; run exhibitions at home and abroad, arrange publication of government literature.

Their main purpose can be divided into four broad areas:

- i) to create and maintain an informed opinion about the subjects with which each department or agency deals;
- ii) to use all methods of publicity - short of propaganda - to help the department or agency achieve its purpose;
- iii) to assist and advise in all matters bearing on relations between the department and its public; and
- iv) to advise the department and its ministers of the public's reaction to the policies of the department.

I am the Deputy Director of Communication and Head of Information for the Department of the Environment in the United Kingdom. Ours is a complex department dealing with many aspects of Government policy as it touches the public: local taxation, environmental concerns, land use planning, public and private housing, inner-city regeneration and other allied subjects.

¹ Jack Gee is the Deputy Director of Communication at the Department of the Environment, United Kingdom.

I am charged with the responsibility for the news output of the Department; for its public advertising currently running at about UK£ 12 million a year; for its publications and for its regional network of information officers in all the major cities. In addition I have responsibility for the management of all internal communications within my department, for its library; for its cartographers; for its public enquiry unit and for its staff newspaper (a monthly).

In total my staff is 160. But only 35 of these - those dealing directly with the media and those engaged on marketing projects - are professional information officers. They are public servants whose major job is to ensure that the policy message is put across free to the press or through marketing messages.

In the United Kingdom professional information staff are centrally recruited and career managed. They are recruited, usually with degrees in communications from universities, tested and if they pass, placed on the lowest rung of the career ladder - assistant information officers.

Learning on the Job

Their first two years in this grade are probationary. They attend assessment centres and then move to a higher grade - information officer - usually in other ministries. As they progress up the promotion ladder, moving in the process from one ministry to another in different posts, they gain experience in all aspects of communications work. They learn first of all to deal with the media on a day to day basis, seven days a week, 24 hours a day. They learn how to write news releases - 1 000 a year - so that they can be reproduced electronically in the press with a minimum of alteration.

They learn that they exist to inform and guide on policy issues, not to "sell" policy or engage in political propaganda. That is for politicians. They learn that their most valuable asset is credibility. That once they mislead the media will not trust them again. Then, as they progress, they learn how to deal with and advise Ministers and senior officials. How to assess news value. How to target audiences to achieve maximum impact. They are taught the most important message of all: that it is no good making policy without a means of communicating that policy. Communication is a vital part of all policy making. Marshall McLuhan again.

They learn the rules of the game. What is meant by an unattributable briefing, why such briefings are required and in what way are they different from open press conferences and how to choose the method of communication. They learn how to time the release of news to achieve maximum impact on radio and television and, in different circumstances, in newspapers and any electronic means of distribution. They learn to be aware of newspaper deadline requirements. Electronic newspaper production has not, in the United Kingdom, led to later deadlines. All national newspapers now have earlier deadline times than they did ten years ago.

In the United Kingdom there are many regional newspapers, published daily and weekly. Together they sell more copies than the national press. They are, therefore, a very important target audience. In order to cater for their regional and sometimes very local needs, we maintain press officers in the major cities of all regions. Their duties are to disseminate departmental policies to very local audiences, newspapers, local radio and television. They also provide a daily playback to me on what the local media are saying about national issues. This helps me in briefing ministers and my fellow officials on the public's views of our policies. It keeps a finger on the pulse of local reaction.

The way that the broadcast media has expanded over recent years and will continue to expand in the future has added new dimensions to the work of government press officers. Television is now the most important channel for communicating with the public.

Whenever an announcement is being planned, the need to secure time on television for the minister who is making the announcement is an essential ingredient in the planning of the media coverage. The press officer must ensure, through early planning, that the broadcasting media have slots in their news programme schedules for ministerial interviews. They must try to make sure that the announcement is made early enough for the interview to run on the screen throughout the day. They must try to plan the announcement so that it does not coincide with other major news stories - although, for obvious reasons, this is not always within their control.

It is a part of the job of the press officer to deal with the news facilities organisations on technical issues. To learn the nuts and bolts. To ensure camera crews are correctly placed at press conferences; that adequate lighting is available; that sound is up to broadcast standard. Most interviews are recorded. The interviewer will ask more questions than he needs to and, later, edit down his news item, to about two or three minutes.

The press officer, who is always present at the interview, will be alert to this and will try to keep the minister's answers succinct. And will, in advance, have provided "sound bites" to help the minister to convey the message as briefly and clearly as possible. The press officer must also be alive to the need to step in to correct any inaccurate or unfortunate remarks made by the minister in the recorded interview.

The Role of Television

Television, particularly, is in the entertainment business. Editors and producers are always looking for novel ways of presenting their programmes - especially in the field of current affairs. When dealing with an interview request for his Minister to take part in one of these programmes, the press officer should ask himself some basic questions.

- a) Will the minister's appearance advance the government's policies and benefit the department?
- b) Is there something to say?
- c) Is the timing right?
- d) Is there some misunderstanding which needs to be cleared up?
- e) Is the programme balanced or is it too heavily weighted against the department or the minister?

If the shape of the programme seems unsatisfactory, the press officer should negotiate better terms on behalf of his minister. Sometimes, this leads to confrontation. But the press officer must always have in his mind the need to maintain good relationships between himself and the broadcast media - tomorrow's story may depend upon it.

As television output expands so does the demand for arrival and departure footage, this is a common dilemma for politicians of all parties because shouted questions seem to get louder and more persistent and inevitably ministers and government officials become increasingly concerned at the impression they are making. It has to be realised that the doorstep soundbite is a critical form of political communication. It has become so over the last several years.

When public figures are shown on the screen walking along or getting out of their cars, viewers almost expect to see or hear some sort of acknowledgement. Nor is it about speech alone. Body language can be almost as important as words. Politicians who are always offhand with waiting journalists and who fail to observe courtesies run the risk of damaging their reputation not only with the news media but also with the viewing and listening public.

Those advising Jacques Delors, when he was President of the European Commission, were obviously very aware of this factor. M. Delors was a hated figure in the United Kingdom, and particularly was a victim of pillory in some of the more right wing press. However, he became very good at using his television doorstep encounters to improve his image. Journalists, producers and television crews in Brussels noticed that he went out of his way to smile, acknowledge their presence and say a few words in English. This was presumably because he had realised that there was every likelihood that a soundbite delivered on the move would be used sometimes in preference to more formal answers given at news conferences.

Thus, by being co-operative he gained a valuable platform for positive messages about the Commission and his work and in addition he became a favourite of the media pack. I feel that this method of transmitting impressions in body language/soundbite form is an art that we would do well to study further.

Serving as a Go-Between

One important aspect of a press officer's work is to advise his fellow officials on their relationships with journalists. That they must not trespass on the responsibilities of ministers. That at all times they preserve the political neutrality of the civil service. That they should consult the relevant press officer for advice before they speak to journalists.

None of this is designed to inhibit contact. But the press officer may be aware - if the official is not - that the journalist is pursuing parallel enquiries with more than one official or even more than one department.

Journalists sometimes seek to write "profiles" of senior officials. Such interviews can be valuable in putting across the process of change and enhancing the public perception of the civil service. The press officer should negotiate the terms of such interviews and ensure that he is present at them.

Informal telephone conversations between officials and journalists should be discouraged by the press officer because of the lack of control over the terms of what is being asked for and given. It is always better to put discussion of departmental policy on a formal basis.

Communicating Changes

Finally a word about communicating the machinery of government change to the outside world.

It is, obviously, important that any change which affects the established administrative order should be effectively communicated to those most concerned. The Department of the Environment is currently undertaking a comprehensive review of how it operates. It is looking at its grading structure, its organisation and costs, its numbers of personnel. We have chosen to communicate the progress of these changes first to staff, through seminars, questionnaires, meetings and by means of a specially produced weekly news-sheet.

Second, we are communicating externally to our customers, local government, affected agencies and through the media to the public the nature of these proposed changes, the benefits we expect them to bring in terms of deregulation and savings to the public purse. This will be an ongoing process and will end with Ministerial decisions being taken next year about the future shape of the British Civil Service.

2. GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS IN BELGIUM

*by Mieke van den Berghe*²

In a democratically organised country, the way in which the government operates must be transparent. The population is entitled to know exactly what the various government departments do, and how and why administrative decisions or rulings are made.

First and foremost, there must be a constitutional framework to make a flow of information possible. In addition, the government must provide structures for co-ordinated two-way government communication. And third, there must be rules to regulate information provision.

Before outlining the Belgian legal framework for government communication, however, let us first say a few words about the Belgian state structure. The first article in the Belgian Constitution reads: "Belgium is a federal state, composed of communities and regions". Belgium has three communities (Flemish, French and German-speaking) and three regions (Flemish, Walloon and Brussels-Capital).

These communities and regions add up to six entities, each of which has its own "executive" and "council" and independently exercises a number of powers over cultural and/or economic affairs. Each government can regulate its own communication with its citizens. However, the federal state still exercises a number of powers over all Belgians. These are covered by the 11 federal ministries:

- Services of the Prime Minister;
- Civil Service;
- Justice;
- Home Department;
- Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Co-operation;
- Defence;
- Finance;
- Labour and Employment;
- Social Affairs, Health and Environment;
- Agriculture and Self-Employment;
- Economic Affairs, Transport and Infrastructure.

The "*Federale Voorlichtingsdienst - Service Fédéral d'Information*" (Federal Information Service, or "FIS") works for federal authorities, including the government, at this level.

The Belgian Constitution lays down a number of fundamental rights which make it possible to provide, gather and disseminate information:

² Mieke Van den Berghe is the Director General of the Federal Information Service, Belgium.

- Article 19 guarantees the freedom to express one's opinion on any subject, barring abuses of this right;
- Article 25 guarantees the freedom of the printed press and forbids the introduction of censorship. This provision must be broadly interpreted. It forbids any preventive measure which is aimed at or results in some opinions not being disseminated by the press by virtue of their nature;
- Article 32 determines the publicity of administration.

The terms under which the administration engages in publicity is interpreted by the federal state, the communities and the regions. The Law on the Publicity of Administration was passed in 1994, and contains chapters on both active publicity and passive publicity. The articles dealing with active publicity state, among other things, that the organisation and tasks of the Federal Information Service must be defined. All federal administrative authorities must also instruct a specialist body to design and draw up the information policy. The articles covering passive publicity, in their turn, look at the right of citizens to inspect government documents.

There is no actual law regulating the flow of communication between the government and journalists. In theory, decision-making is confidential. The Prime Minister determines how to organise communication - via press releases, press conferences, a speech in Parliament, etc.

Objectives of the Federal Information Service (FIS)

The federal government holds executive power in the federal state and the Prime Minister heads the federal government. The Prime Minister also serves as the spokesperson for the federal government; he maintains relations with the press on behalf of the government.

Two channels are available for making announcements about government decisions. On the one hand, every minister, including the Prime Minister, has his or her own political spokesperson, known as a press attaché. This person forms part of the minister's personal staff. Press attachés provide information about the political aspects of their particular minister's policy; they are involved in political interpretation and are attached to the person of their minister.

On the other hand, the FIS provides factual information. The Cabinet meets weekly and takes decisions. After each Cabinet meeting, the FIS issues press releases to all media in the country about the decisions taken, via a simultaneous fax system to all media in the country, and via the Internet. Through this site on the World Wide Web (<http://www.belgium.be/belgium>), readers may view press releases.

Press releases (whether published or in electronic form) are not personalised and always give a straightforward account of the decision taken. The name, telephone and fax numbers and address of the person in charge of the file are always provided. This can be the press attaché, an information officer, or the civil servant in charge, if the information officer agrees.

All decisions are also published in the Service's journal, *Feiten*. This weekly publication reaches 17 000 subscribers, including ministers at all levels of government; secretaries of state; members of the federal, community and regional parliaments; members of provincial councils; and mayors, aldermen and city counsellors. It is distributed to Belgian embassies all over the world, international institutions in Brussels, and the key actors in the financial, social and cultural worlds.

The FIS also disseminates the texts used at the federal government's press conference, and compiles press releases issued by the government/executives consultative committee (the governments of communities and regions).

Federal Authorities Information Project

In 1992, the government decided to launch the "Federal Authorities Information" project in order to improve circulation of integrated communication of the federal authorities. This project is an integrated concept aimed at providing citizens with improved information about decisions taken by federal authorities. Information is transmitted through channels such as advertisements in newspapers and weeklies, radio and television advertising features and leaflets in post offices, and/or libraries and town halls.

Advertisements refer to a brochure with an address and/or a contact address. Citizens are provided with details about official measures and laws and the consequences for them. The project attempts to bridge the gap between the government and the citizen - the "neighbour" - and to make decisions more understandable for every inhabitant of Belgium.

Every campaign must include an address or telephone number to which citizens can refer for more information. The fourth year of the project is under way, and close to ECU 1.5 million are spent on it annually.

Information Officers

The FIS is not the citizen's only source of obtaining information or an answer to his or her question. The Service is a central point in a network of several information points. Within the framework of the government's policy of administrative modernisation, the Charter for Users of Public Services was published. The Law on the Publicity of Administration and the right of civil servants' to speak fall within the context of this Charter.

Among other things, the Charter provided for the appointment of an information officer in every federal ministry and in federal government departments, and this has actually taken place. The information officer in theory gathers together all requests for general information made by telephone or in writing to his or her department or division. In this respect, we talk about general information, not very particular information (eg for the handicapped or the unemployed).

Information officers are thoroughly familiar with their working environments and usually can provide a satisfactory answer to enquiries. If an officer does not have the answer, he or she passes the question on to an expert colleague or makes further enquiries him- or herself.

Every federal ministry has an information officer. However, this does not mean communication with citizens takes place in the same way in every ministry, via this information officer and that officer's department. For example, the Ministry of Social Affairs, Public Health and the Environment has many semi-autonomous governmental bodies (for sickness and disability benefits, pension funds, etc.) which contact the public directly. In practice, therefore, communication is decentralised.

The Ministry of Finance is large and has many specialised departments. This has led to the appointment of 15 information officers for that ministry alone. The Ministry's chief information officer reports directly to the secretary-general.

Individuals must match a certain profile to become information officers. Particular requirements are related to attitude; knowledge and skills; and position in the public administration.

Attitude:

- *attitude to the government* - eg the information officer provides information about his/her department or organisation from that body's point of view, not a personal one;
- *attitude to the population* - eg the information officer respects every user of public services, acknowledges the heterogeneous composition of the general public and ensures that he/she is easy to reach and approach;
- *attitude to the press* - eg the information officer is the person appointed to co-ordinate the provision of information to the population via the media; he/she is the ideal government mouthpiece. In the long term, the information officer can take over the office of cabinet press attaché;
- *attitude to civil servants* - in exercising their duties, information officers must rely on the co-operation of fellow civil servants. They therefore must always be ready to co-operate loyally with the administration and maintain cordial personal relations with those in charge in all departments.

Knowledge and Skills:

- matters requiring detailed knowledge - eg active bilingualism; understanding of the structure and operation of the institutions, public governing bodies and services at all levels; the structure of the media and news service; the theory of information and government information, new technologies;
- matters requiring less detailed knowledge - eg management and organisation of public government; meeting techniques; documentation and library techniques;
- skills - eg clear, correct and creative writing style; excellent oral communication; good social skills;

Position:

- the information officer is directly attached to the secretary-general, the highest ranking civil servant in a ministry; thus, the information officer is given sufficient internal and external authority to perform his duties properly - eg being a spokesperson for that ministry.

Postbus 3000/Boîte postale 3000

The two major pillars upon which the Federal Information Services bases its dissemination of information are the press and the public. In the case of the latter, the continuous process of apprising citizens about the possibilities offered to them by the authorities and their decisions is a comprehensive task. Ministerial departments distribute increasing numbers of brochures and leaflets on old and recent decisions. Most of these brochures are excellent, but citizens may not always know how to get a copy of them.

However, government information would be missing its target if the distribution of informational material were not efficiently organised. Since November 1988, a system has been in place which meets this requirement. It is known as *Postbus 3000/Boîte postale 3000* (Postbox 3000). This system is a department within the Service which ensures that government information reaches the citizen.

Postbus 3000/Boîte postale 3000 brings information of the authorities to the citizen through advertising in the print or broadcast media. Advertising features are brief and succinct and systematically refer to leaflets which are available to the public free of charge in every post office, and in many libraries and town halls in Belgium. In 1994, the FIS distributed over three million leaflets.

Each leaflet refers to a brochure or an information address for further information. It also comes with a reply card for ordering the brochure directly from the relevant department or from the FIS. In any event, the brochure gives the address of the competent administrative body or department from which the citizen can obtain further information.

This system allows the government to reach the widest audience possible while at the same time reaching those genuinely interested in particular issues. This avoids a large number of unnecessary telephone calls to departments which are not involved and therefore prevents a good deal of irritation, both from citizens and civil servants. In addition, *Postbus 3000/Boîte postale 3000*:

- gives citizens an address to which they may convey their concerns;
- reminds citizens where they may find a message (eg at the post office) if they should happen to miss some details during a broadcast advertisement; and
- works chiefly for the federal government but also for other policy organs and levels, such as the communities, regions, provinces and municipalities.

Information Centre and Publications

The FIS operates an Information Centre which is open every working day from 9 am to 4 pm. Here, citizens can consult or buy official publications by ministries, semi-governmental institutions, communities and regions. They can also come here to order photographic and video material or for an answer to question.

In 1994, the facility welcomed close to 14 000 visitors. Whether this is a high or low number is not important. What is important is that the "unknown authority" there in Brussels has a house, a doorbell and a threshold and that you can visit it.

The Service also publishes, either independently or in collaboration with others, practical information guides of important government addresses in Belgium.

The FIS in Numbers

During 1994, the FIS:

- received 13 822 visitors;
- answered 32 324 telephone and written questions;
- distributed 3 065 000 leaflets;
- disseminated 986 000 issues of Feiten.

In order to publicise the information campaigns to the public at large, the FIS used:

- eleven advertisements in daily newspapers;
- four advertisements in weekly publications;
- four advertisements in regional newspapers;
- 161 television advertising features; and
- 357 radio advertising features.

These figures were achieved with a staff of 47 employees (including five working part-time), an operational budget of 100 million Belgian Francs (BF) for fixed costs, a programme budget of BF 26 million, and a campaign budget of BF 50 million. In total, these figures amount to BF 176 million, or about BF 18 per citizen - approximately the price of a postage stamp (BF 16).

In order to make the most of its small budget, the FIS negotiated with the various media to agree on preferential rates. The starting point for these negotiations is the conviction that government information must also be recognised as such. The individual nature of government information and messages in the public interest, together with the individual nature of the procedures which the government must observe in running its campaigns, makes it impossible to compare them with purely commercial messages.

An advertising feature warning citizens about the dangers of carbon dioxide emissions cannot be compared with the message with which a multinational soft drink producer bombards its audience. The usual advertising rates for commercial messages cannot therefore be used for messages in the public interest.

Following negotiations with the mass media, contracts were concluded with the radio and television broadcasting companies (both national and local) and with the Belgian Association of Daily Newspaper Publishers and the National Federation of Information Weeklies. These contracts enable the FIS to enjoy considerable discounts. In 1994 at least BF 30 million were saved in this way, via the project. These preferential rates therefore make collaboration with the Federal Information Service an extremely attractive proposition.

Of course, the essence of cost-effective operation involves more than just these contracts alone. Smooth co-operation with the network of information officers and a co-ordinated, structured exchange of information avoids the creation of parallel information circuits and therefore saves money.

For example, in order to counteract the proliferation of government information sites during the recent blossoming of the Internet, the FIS asked for authorisation to co-ordinate the government's Internet traffic. On 25 July 1995 the Cabinet decided that the dissemination of information to the Internet would indeed be co-ordinated by the Service. Thus, any federal government departments wanting to make information available on the Internet must go through the FIS.

Externally, the FIS maintains very good relations with the various information departments of other European countries. Contacts are established and experiences exchanged via the Venice Club.

Target Groups

In theory, all Belgians belong to the target group which the FIS attempts to reach through its campaigns. In other words, the FIS does not usually run specialised campaigns targeted at demarcated groups (in terms of region, age, sex, minority, etc.). However, it does emphasise the messages aimed at all Belgians.

There are exceptions, though, and certain campaigns are aimed at specific target groups. For these campaigns, departments may call upon the FIS to take advantage of its know-how and capabilities. Some of the campaigns run by the Minister of Employment are a good example of these - Preferential Jobs Plan, Youth Employment Plan and Local Employment Agencies.

Two target groups were identified for the campaigns developed for "Preferential Jobs Plan" and the "Youth Employment Plan" (employment plans for the long-term unemployed and young unemployed people respectively): job-seekers and employers.

As part of the "Federal Authorities Information" project, advertisements for the job-seekers were placed in the more popular weeklies. These advertisements referred to leaflets available in post offices, town halls, job centres and trade unions.

The advertisements for the employers, also as part of the "Federal Authorities Information" project, appeared in the "quality" information weeklies. In addition, the advertisement also appeared in several small and medium-sized enterprises newsletters. These advertisements made reference to a leaflet containing more information, which could be requested from the Ministry of Employment. The leaflet was also available in the various social secretariats.

One other prominent example of a targeted strategy was the campaign concerning Local Employment Agencies (PWAs). This campaign also was run by the office of the Minister of Employment. Its objective was to promote local "odd-job" services for the unemployed. The target groups this time were the unemployed who could be recruited, as well as the potential "users" of these services.

Within the framework of the "Federal Authorities Information" project, the advertisements for the unemployed appeared in all the Belgian dailies. Those interested could find more information in leaflets made available at the usual locations, or by writing to the Ministry of Employment. Advertisements for the users appeared in all the Belgian information weeklies. These advertisements referred to a widely available leaflet. This campaign also had a regional flavour. An advertisement in the regional press (regional advertising periodicals) summed up the municipalities in each region offering this type of odd-job service.

Informational Needs of the Population

Consistently tracking society's need for information is anything but easy. In this respect, effective government communication requires a permanent screening of society and every campaign has to be pre-tested and post-tested. However, this approach requires the usual human, material and financial resources. Since the FIS only has relatively modest resources at its disposal, it has so far been forced to adopt a smaller-scale approach.

The Service receives numerous telephone and written enquiries from citizens in search of information. Many of the questions are identical or similar, and thus certain trends can therefore be identified. For example, current topics always score highly. However, general matters such as economy, employment and statistical data also arouse a good deal of interest. Where possible, therefore, the FIS latches on to these trends by publishing guides and informative documents. The FIS always puts itself in the place of the "neighbour". What is bothering that person? What does he or she want to know?

What about the campaign topics themselves? New government measures which impact much of the population are topics which have to be communicated. Examples of these include the new environmental protection act, the new rent act, the law on the publicity of administration, etc.

Contemporary matters of general interest are also considered for campaigns: the Belgian Presidency of the European Union, constitutional reform, commemoration of Belgian liberation, a public transportation day, a new government loan, etc.

Obviously, campaign topics such as these and others are often raised by the ministerial cabinets and the ministries themselves. Depending on their powers and tasks, they have to respond to citizens who have problems or questions on a daily basis. This means that they are well placed to assess the information needs of citizens.

Of course, every campaign implemented via or by the FIS is evaluated. The emphasis in this process is on quantitative results. From the quantitative evaluation results, some representative extrapolations can be made which can be useful for information policy in the short and medium term. Qualitative research should also be undertaken, but financial means are lacking.

Where resources are available, a "zero measurement" is performed as part of major multimedia campaigns and the campaign material is pre-tested. This is the case, for example, for the campaign on the distribution of iodine tablets which is currently being prepared.

Organisation of the FIS

The Network of Information Officers

As mentioned previously, information officers in all federal ministries must satisfy many knowledge and skill requirements. It therefore goes without saying that they have to be supported by an extensive training package.

At federal level, the Selection and Training Department, a part of the Ministry of Civil Service Affairs, provides a range of general and more specific courses for civil servants. There is also much to interest information officers. For example, its prospectus includes the following subjects:

- civil law;
- government orders;
- leading a team;
- organising a department;
- conference techniques;
- library administration and documentation;
- improving welcome techniques and contacts with the public;
- public speaking;
- readability of official texts;
- media relations;
- training in the communicators' club; and
- language courses.

The FIS also makes its contribution by providing all federal information officers with a "toolbox" containing texts and documentation to help information officers with the practical exercise of their duties. These include items such as model contracts, guidelines on how to conduct effective campaigns, and addresses where information may be sought. The FIS intends to offer its own course package to the information officers in the near future.

Structure of the FIS

The Federal Information Service is a government institution under the auspices of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs. It is an institution which exists for the public good, and holds a management contract with the federal government. More specifically, the information service receives subsidies from the Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, as well as having its own income.

Since the FIS is not an administrative body in the strict sense of the word, its employees are not permanent civil servants, but do work as civil servants for the duration of their contracts. Staff is recruited through examinations which relate to the duties to be fulfilled.

A 25-member Board of Directors manages the FIS and meets four times annually. A maximum of ten of these members form the Committee (which gathers eight times per year). This latter group oversees implementation of Board decisions. The director-general manages the Service's day-to-day operations, and is assisted by a management board, consisting of a deputy director-general and four directors.

The Federal Information Service has five departments - Promotion and Distribution, Documentation, Editing, Government Communication, and Production. In addition, there are four cells which deal with the internal operations: Secretariat, Personnel, Accounts and Administration

Since information initiatives are taken by various bodies, proper co-ordination of information at federal level is absolutely essential. For this reason, the Federal Information Service is an active participant in various committees and working parties dealing with information matters. The FIS also co-

operates with information services of sub-national governments to provide Belgian citizens with a clear and co-ordinated information policy.

Working Procedures

Official Guidelines for Government Information

Among the laws affecting the provision of government information is the Law of 12 July 1994 on Electoral Expenses Regarding the Supervision of Official Government Announcements. This law is intended to prevent members of the federal, community and regional governments using official announcements and information campaigns, irrespective of the media channel used, to improve their personal standing. Note, however, that the announcements and campaigns in question are not binding upon members under any legal administrative provision and are financed directly or indirectly using government funds.

The parliamentary inspection Committee tests these announcements and information campaigns. Anyone who wants to make an official announcement or wishes to run a campaign must submit a summary document to the Committee. This document states the content, reasons, resources, total cost price and companies consulted for the announcement or information campaign. If the Committee judges that a campaign or announcement is not neutral, its cost price will be deducted from the election budget - which is limited - of those involved, at the next elections in which they take part.

In addition to this law, the Law of 18 February 1977 also contains provisions concerning public radio and television services. This legislation stipulates that "Government announcements are forbidden during the two months preceding an election, urgent cases excepted. In such cases, the announcements may not contain either the name or the face of the minister. They must be purely informative."

Belgium does not yet have ethical rules or regulations for government information, but the FIS is working to develop an ethical code.

Telephone Enquiries

To respond efficiently to telephone enquiries, a number of internal procedures have been developed. For example, the receptionist has a reference list of the files and is therefore aware of "who does what" within the department. He/she also is kept informed which personnel members are absent.

Due to a relatively small staff and the large number of telephone questions, it is not always possible to deal with these questions quickly. Whenever possible, those responsible provide an answer immediately or pass it on to someone else. If research is required, the person asking the question will receive a written or telephone answer.

An initiative of the highly regarded Dutch Government Information Service - "Project 06-51" - has been an influence on the FIS approach to handling enquiries by telephone. This initiative sought to establish a common telephone line for all Dutch ministries. The caller is charged for dialling the number 06-51, but information is provided without additional cost. Citizens can obtain an immediate answer to their government-related questions, or find out where they can obtain more specific information. The separate ministerial information services continue to exist, but 06-51 constitutes the central point for the most requested data of the Dutch federal government.

The telephone switchboard is not manned by new personnel, but by 40 information specialists detached from the ministries for one year. These professionals are highly qualified and have undergone specific training on how to limit a telephone conversation to four minutes, how to cope with advanced technology, etc.

Types of Information Provided

As explained earlier in this paper, press attachés who belong to the office of their minister, provide information about the political aspects of their minister's policy. The FIS, in contrast, always maintains its neutrality and objectivity in all of its activities. For example, the Service does not provide information with photographs and names of ministers, but rather provides neutral reports of decisions which have been taken.

The FIS does not provide information about the preparatory work which precedes decisions. Often such information involves confidential documents. In this respect, the Law on the Publicity of Administration states that an administrative document may not be inspected if its publication violates the secrecy of the deliberations of the federal government and of the other responsible authorities which depend on the federal executive power, or in which a federal authority is involved. Advice or an opinion communicated in confidence to the government is also not made public. There are also other exceptions.

Another legal measure governing the publication and dissemination of certain information is the Law Safeguarding Personal Privacy with Respect to the Use of Personal Information, usually referred to as "the Privacy Law." It was passed on 8 December 1992, and forbids the registration, storage, alteration, deletion, consultation and dissemination of personal information about natural persons (not therefore about legal entities or organisations without legal personality).

The ability to identify a person (for example using a customer number, account number, etc.) is the criterion which distinguishes personal data from statistical data, to which the law does not apply. To give a couple of examples, the law lays down purposes for the use of the following types of information: race, ethnic origin, sexual behaviour or political, ideological or religious conviction or activity, membership of a trade union or hospital, etc. Provision of medical and legal information also is strictly regulated.

The parliamentary Committee on Safeguarding Personal Privacy supervises the implementation of the law. It gives advice concerning implementing orders relating to the law, makes recommendations, investigates complaints, etc.

Co-Operation with Journalists

Differing Roles

An initial condition for smooth co-operation between an information service and the press is mutual acceptance. Both parties have specific fields of work and are organised appropriately for such work. In Belgium, many journalists consider the FIS a competitor, rather than an ally. However, the Service does not wish to be perceived in this way.

There is a fundamental difference between the information which the FIS provides, on the one hand, and that provided by journalists, on the other. When journalists write an article about a particular decision, they place this information within a certain framework. They are closer to current affairs, and

their newspaper needs scoops. They measure the importance of government decisions according to their "news value." Journalists have to comment on decisions. The reader wants them to do so.

By contrast, the logic of the Service is different. The FIS provides information on both old and new measures. A newspaper is thrown away after a few days, but FIS leaflets are available for extended periods. The information disseminated by the FIS is sent out without comment (eg newspaper advertisements), and is packaged differently than journalists' articles.

The FIS does not conduct public relations campaigns for politicians or particular ideas. Neutrality and objectivity are the keywords in any task undertaken. Within the framework of a campaign concerning the distribution of iodine tablets, an information is to appear in the press. The topic (nuclear danger) is so delicate that the information provided must be uniform. This means that the federal government, the local authorities and the press have to tell the same story so as not to create confusion or anxiety among the populous.

FIS activities are attractive for reporters. As already mentioned, the Service provides a ready-made press release about every Cabinet decision. Within 15 minutes of the end of a Cabinet meeting, every editorial board receives these press releases by fax and can access them on the Internet. Every report also contains a contact address for further information. A press folder issued after the Cabinet meeting contains between 20 and 50 written pages.

The FIS also provides informal briefings, eg when new books or brochures are published. In addition, journalists receive free copies of all FIS guides, which can help him or her do his or her job. The FIS works hard to develop a trusting relationship with the media. Editors trust the FIS because they will always receive the complete package of press releases immediately after every cabinet meeting, and at the same time as other representatives of the media. No one receives preferential treatment. In addition, clear arrangements are always made with the media. The FIS ensures that the information is disseminated at the agreed time, and journalists observe embargoes which have been imposed.

Occasionally incorrect information relating to the FIS appears in the media, intentionally or otherwise. The Service responds promptly with a telephone call or a letter. If necessary, a right of reply can be used, but this has not been used to date.

"Every man to his trade" is a wise motto. It also applies to information and the provision of information. An information service and journalists can indeed be the best of partners provided they stay out of each others' territory. They both disseminate information, but at different phases of policy development and implementation. In theory, the press devotes its attention to the preparatory policy phases and the actual decision-making. FIS information does not appear until a decision has been taken.

Trends in Government Information

In the years ahead the landscape of government communication in Belgium will undergo several major changes. However, these changes are in fact a necessary consequence of the path which has already been chosen.

So what is in the offing? In the first place, *Postbus 3000*/Boîte postale 3000 will be further expanded. Indeed, the objective is to organise the system so that it becomes Belgium's sole information address for citizens who do not know to whom they should put their questions. In more specific terms, if a citizen has a question, he or she will send it to Postbus 3000/Boîte postale 3000 which will ensure that it

reaches the person who knows the answer. Behind the system, the federal state will work with the sub-national governments to offer one address for one problem.

FEDENET, the federal information network, is becoming the electronic counterpart of the network of information officers. This network groups together several sub-networks which gather government databases by field of information, such as justice, economic affairs, and finance. Through this network, it will be possible to exchange relevant policy information within the federal government.

Moreover, the federal government will systematically make data available on the public information super highways. The FIS will continue to manage the dissemination of data from the federal network to the Internet. Co-ordination will prevent duplication and data will be disseminated uniformly.

In addition, government communication will acquire a much clearer profile. In this respect, the FIS will provide the necessary incentives, partly by compiling an ethical code.

The influence of European and other directives is increasingly being felt at the FIS. For example, depending on the cost of a campaign, an international invitation to tender may have to be issued.

Recent Events and Campaigns

Several accomplishments which fit in with the user's Charter were of major importance to the FIS as well as to government communication in general in recent years. Virtually all information used to be provided by press attachés and was politically tinged. Non-partisan institutional communication has taken root. The Law on the Publicity of Administration was passed, information officers were appointed for every federal department, and civil servants were also given the right to speak. The Charter for User's of Public Services therefore forms an indispensable catalyst for the current and future development of information policy.

The FIS also set out along the information super highway. The FIS developed its site on the Internet and is a major partner in the realisation of FEDENET. Also, the "Federal Authorities Information" project was extended for the fourth time. By increasingly involving the information officers, this project underwent reorientation and institutionalisation.

The scale of FIS information campaigns is always directly proportional to the available budget. A campaign can therefore be run in many different ways, ranging from a one-eighth page black and white advertisement in the daily papers to a multimedia approach.

The best examples of the latter type of strategy, a campaign receiving considerable media coverage, was the "Constitutional Reform" campaign and the "European Presidency" campaign, both of which ran in 1993. These campaigns used advertisements in the daily papers, the information weeklies and the regional weeklies, as well as advertising features on the radio and on television. Leaflets and brochures also were published. The FIS even produced two teaching packages for secondary schools for the "Constitutional Reform" campaign.

More recently, in 1995, a major multimedia campaign was launched to commemorate 50 years of social security provisions. The media used were the daily papers, information weeklies, regional weeklies, television and radio. Leaflets and posters were also printed and the campaign was rounded off with an academic session. At this moment, two information campaigns are being prepared. In addition to the one concerning the distribution of iodine tablets, there also will be a campaign dealing with eco-taxes.

3. GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS IN CANADA *by Carla Gilders³*

Introduction

Principles of Government Communications

Underlying the federal government's communications policy and its approach to dealing with the news media, is the principle that the responsibility to provide information is inseparable from the nature of representative government. Adequate information is essential in order that the public may understand, respond to and influence the development and implementation of government policies and programmes - whether as individuals, through representative groups or their Members of Parliament.

The Canadian Government's communications policy recognises that the free flow of information between the government and the public should be carried out through both formal and informal exchanges in a dialogue that is continuous, open, relevant, understandable and reliable.

Role of Elected Representatives and Public Servants

Under the Canadian parliamentary system, ministers are accountable to the Prime Minister and to Parliament for presenting to the public the policies, programmes and priorities relating to their responsibilities. As part of these responsibilities, ministers, both individually and collectively, are the primary spokespersons for the Government of Canada and they provide leadership in establishing the priorities and themes of government communications.

As elected politicians, ministers and the political staff that support them, are partisan, politically oriented and yet operationally sensitive. The deputy ministers and the public servants who support them are non-partisan, operationally oriented, yet politically sensitive.

It is up to the ministers to establish their communications priorities for their own departments; it falls to deputy ministers to ensure these priorities and requirements are met. And it falls to the Clerk of the Privy Council - the government department that supports the Prime Minister - to ensure that communications across government fully reflects government-wide priorities, policies and themes, and that departmental communications are fully integrated into the development, planning and implementation of policies and programmes.

Of all the functions of government, communications often "walks the line" between the political/partisan activities of the elected politicians and the non-partisan/bureaucratic activities of the public service. Ideally, the two can work together in a complementary way to support the free flow of information about government plans, policies and programmes between the elected politicians and the public.

³ At the time this paper was written in Autumn 1995, Carla Gilders served as Director of Operations, Communications and Consultation in Canada's Privy Council. She now is the Director General of the Communications and Consultation Directorate, Health Canada.

The Communications Policy

Against this principle, the federal government has adopted a communications policy governing the day-to-day management of the communications function. The function of communications - the daily work of communications planning, co-ordination and execution - is considered an integral part of the management process of government.

It is the policy of government to:

- provide information to the public about its policies, programmes and services that is accurate, complete, objective, timely, relevant and understandable;
- take into account the concerns and views of the public in establishing priorities, developing policies and implementing programmes; and
- ensure that the government is visible, accessible and answerable to the public that it serves.

Functions and Activities of the Office

Mission Statement

The fundamental mission of the federal government is service to the public. In the last few years, as part of a government renewal exercise launched by the former Prime Minister in 1989, most federal departments have developed their own mission statements that reflect this service orientation and embody it in their statements of core values, guiding principles and strategic objectives. Service to the public is a key element of the communications policy.

As the policy states, "communications is more than simply providing or receiving information. It also concerns the manner in which that information is exchanged. The quality of the transaction has an impact on the usefulness of the information as well as on the perception of the government in the mind of the public."

Communications, in its broadest sense, includes everything from answering the telephone to consulting with citizens on policy proposals, to providing information on how to fill out a tax return, to briefing journalists or holding major news conferences. In some senses almost everything the government does becomes a question of communications.

But as a management function, as a "job description," the communications function encompasses four elements:

i) ***Communications Research and Analysis:***

Research and analysis includes the analysis of the public environment from public opinion research, media coverage, correspondence or telephone calls to the department.

Public consultation also gives the government an opportunity to seek the views of the public before the policies are introduced. It can be carried out through focus groups, public hearings, town hall meetings, or round table discussions. Increasingly, parliamentary committees which review legislation before it is passed into law, hold their own public hearings on government proposals.

ii) *Providing Communications Advice:*

Communications advice includes not only advice on the techniques of how to communicate, but often more importantly, on how a particular decision or course of action could be perceived by the public.

Such advice is based on an understanding of the public environment (from research and consultation), knowledge of the policies and objectives of the government and of the principles and techniques of the discipline of communications. Government communicators provide daily advice to both their departments and their ministers on how to deliver the government's message effectively, how to respond to crisis situations, what the communications implications could be of various courses of action, or how various courses of action could be perceived by the public.

iii) *Communications Planning:*

Since the introduction of the 1988 communications policy, communications planning has been, in theory at least, an integral part of the policy-making process in Canada. Communications advisors should be part of the policy-making teams in departments. However, the full integration of policy and communications remains elusive, with communications advice sometimes being sought as an "add-on" at the end of the policy process.

To ensure that cabinet ministers consider the communications dimensions of an issue before making decisions on policy, every memorandum to the Cabinet must include a communications plan. Departments prepare a yearly strategic plan, supported by a strategic communications plan, to lay out the major goals, objectives and strategies for the year. Government-wide, the agenda is laid out at the political level during the election campaign, at the beginning of each session of Parliament in the Speech from the Throne, and again in the Budget. From these, the key government themes are developed which guide the communications activities in all departments.

iv) *Management of Daily Communications Activities:*

In implementing a communications strategy or plan, communicators use any of the standard communications tools. These can include news releases, media briefings, news conferences, advertising, speeches, publications, telephone enquiries, use of 1 800 (toll-free) telephone lines, pamphlets, brochures, tours by ministers, special events (ceremonies, open house programmes), videos and, more recently, the use of Internet.

Monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of these activities is an important feature of the management of the communications function. Analysing the news coverage, monitoring phone calls, measuring compliance (if appropriate), or conducting surveys can be used to evaluate how well a communications approach worked.

Innovative Communications Activities

As governmental resources shrink, the ingenuity of communications professionals to find ways of reaching their publics, of responding to their needs and of ensuring the government is visible and accessible is put to the test.

Today, with the influence of special interest groups and the fact that audiences are more sophisticated, communicators must know their public, what they think, who they trust as spokespersons, and where they get their information. Part of the job of government communications is to determine how to reach a public that already is bombarded with information.

Some examples of how the federal government is reaching its audiences follow:

One example of a strategy that has caught the interest of the public is the Prime Minister's "Team Canada" approach to international trade. Because Canada is a federation with ten equal provinces and two territories, it is sometimes difficult for the public to understand - or care about - the various areas of responsibility of provincial and federal government bodies. For the public, the message that all levels of government are working together for the benefit of Canadians is an important national unity and "good government" message of the federal government. When the Prime Minister invited all provincial premiers and a cross-section of business leaders on a trade mission to Asia, The "Team Canada" idea was born. It will be reinforced through other co-operative ventures with provinces.

The influence of special interest groups was never more evident than when the federal government introduced its gun control legislation to require that all guns be registered in a national registry. Opponents to the legislation were well organised and mobilised the support of rural communities who consider guns a way of life and reject the idea of having to register them. Communications officials with the Justice Department worked with a number of third-party spokespersons, including police chiefs and representatives of victims of crime, to explain the purpose of the legislation to the public.

For complex announcements that affect Canadians directly, such as federal budget, the Finance Department sets up a temporary toll-free telephone line to field questions from the public. As a money saving initiative, last year's federal budget documents (several large books) were provided on a computer diskette, for a fee, instead of the more expensive printed documents provided in the past. An overview document was provided free of charge.

Organisation and Staff of Office

Relationships and Functions

The federal communications policy spells out the operating relationships and functions of:

- Ministers (political heads of departments);
- Ministers' personal/political communications staff;
- Deputy ministers (non-partisan, public servants who head departments);
- Heads of departmental communications;
- Programme officers.

Ministers are the primary spokespersons for the Government of Canada both individually as heads of their departments and collectively as the Cabinet. It is their role to provide leadership in establishing the priorities and overall themes of government communications. It is a ministerial responsibility to define the communications duties of the staff and to establish procedures for liaison between their own office and public servants within their departments, so that communications are co-ordinated, particularly media relations and special events.

Deputy ministers are accountable to the minister for meeting the communications priorities and requirements and are accountable to the Clerk of the Privy Council for ensuring that government-wide priorities are reflected in communications activities. Deputy ministers designate a director or director-general to head the communications function in their departments. The location of the communications office within the organisation depends on the individual department. In most departments, the head of communications is part of the senior management team.

In departments, the communications office generally is organised around the four communications functions: research, planning, media relations and production. Most departments work on a system of "account executives" - communications officers assigned to specific branches or subject areas who become familiar with their issues and communications needs. These branches become the "client" of the account executive who provides the communications support to that branch.

In all departments, there is a close working relationship between communications officers and the office of their minister. They prepare speeches, questions and answers, and "media lines" for their minister; organise tours and special events; and arrange briefings and news conferences.

In the Privy Council Office, the senior communications official is an assistant deputy minister. We have a staff of about seven communications officers who are each responsible for keeping in touch with their communications counterparts in departments. These officers are somewhat like the account executives in departments. They get to know the issues of their assigned departments and ensure that communications cross the government are co-ordinated.

Co-ordination Across Government

The co-ordination role performed by the Communications and Consultation Secretariat in the Privy Council Office includes:

- preparation of a three-week "look ahead" calendar of all announcements, ministers' speeches, news releases, and official tours;
- a weekly communication planning meeting with the Prime Minister's Office to review the calendar and major communications issues on the horizon;
- the review of all news releases and announcements from departments and liaison with the Prime Minister's Office before final approval is given;
- organising periodic meeting with heads of communications to discuss government themes, new priorities, or upcoming events;
- providing leadership to the communications community through the sharing of "best practices," new ideas, discussion of communications approaches and new technologies.

The Privy Council Office (PCO) serves another useful purpose in the communications community: it serves as a training opportunity for officers who take an assignment from their departments with the Communications and Consultation Secretariat for a period of one or two years. An assignment in PCO gives officers a chance to "see the big picture", to understand how the Cabinet decision-making process operates, and to develop a network of contacts.

Careers/Training

This kind of on-the-job training is invaluable for communications officers , most of whom make their career in communications. Other types of communications training includes:

- In-House Training: This includes media relations courses, the preparation of strategic communications plans, crisis communications management and other specialised communications courses which are offered by the federal government's training centre or are available through the private sector.
- Meetings of Communications Professionals: Organisations for government communicators provide a forum for sharing practices and ideas and stimulating discussion of communications issues. It is interesting to note that these organisations have begun to suffer a lack of membership in recent years as the pressures of the job often leave communications officers with little energy left for after-hours activities.
- Formal Education: Several Canadian universities offer courses in communications and one offers a degree in Public Relations. Students from this university are in a "co-operative" programme which include on-the-job training as part of the course. The federal government offers assignments to students as part of the co-operation programme - a benefit not only to the students but to the government as well.

Working Procedures

Career Civil Servants

The public service in Canada is a professional, career institution. Most employees are recruited at entry level and remain in government for the bulk of their careers. Federal government communicators are no exception.

As public servants, government communicators are non-partisan. They must adhere to the policies laid out by the Treasury Board, the official "employer" of the public service. Like all employees of the federal government, they are required to observe conflict-of-interest guidelines.

Security

Employees with access to sensitive or secret information must obtain the appropriate level of security clearance. As part of the clearance procedure, employees are provided security briefings on the handling of secret information including Cabinet confidences, personal information such as tax returns or health, or sensitive financial information including budget secrets.

Despite security measures, the phenomenon of "leaks" - confidential or secret documents being sent anonymously to journalists - continues to plague governments. Leaked documents can range from being mildly embarrassing to the government to being a threat to the integrity of the government. If the leak is serious enough - for example the leak of confidential budget information that could affect the financial markets - the political parties in the Opposition may call for the resignation of the responsible minister.

Access to Information

While leaks represent an extreme form of getting information into the public domain, Canada has an Access to Information Act that gives the public the right to access to all government documents, with certain limited exemptions, such as Cabinet confidences, information affecting national security or personal information. The Access to Information Act sets strict limits on how long the government can take to reply to a request.

However, the Access to Information Act is not meant to replace the normal flow of information between the public and the government. In the spirit of openness that guides the government's interaction with the public, enquiries are to answered as directly as possible without making citizens use the Access to Information Act.

Language of Service

In Canada, the public has a constitutional right to be served in English or French and it is the duty of departments to make provisions to meet that right. Employees whose position requires them to learn the other official language are provided with language training and required to meet a level of proficiency that is identified for their job.

When providing service to the public, public servants are expected to provide service that is prompt and efficient and offered with due regard for the privacy, safety, convenience, comfort and special needs of the public. Most departments have an enquiry service, often located in the communications branch, where incoming calls can be directed to the appropriate place of the information provided directed.

Co-Operation with Journalists

The news media constitutes the most accessible, cost-effective and credible vehicle for reaching the public with information on government programmes and services and activities. They also represent the most uncontrollable vehicle. What does this mean for governments and for government communicators?

It means:

- establishing the basic principle that federal government institutions are open and accessible to the media;
- establishing relationships of trust and accountability with members of the media;
- respecting the right of media representatives to have access to accurate, clear, timely and relevant information about federal government policies, programmes and activities; and
- learning how to work with the media, get across the message you want and keep control in an interview situation.

Government officials and politicians who treat journalists with respect, who are honest and straightforward, who invest time with journalists, and who take the time to explain issues stand the best chance of developing a professional and useful relationship with the media.

Investing time in knowing the reporters who cover your department's issues - whether it be justice, health, the economy or agriculture - is the first step. Letting those reporters get to know you both as a representative of your department and as an individual - is the second step.

Media relations includes everything from phone calls with journalists, to lunch or breakfast meetings to formal briefings for individuals or groups of reporters by the minister, news conferences, background briefings or organised tours.

Media relations can be a phone call to tip reporters to an emerging story or to provide background information on a complex issue. The most fundamental part of media relations is returning phone calls, finding out the journalist's deadline, being realistic and honest on whether you can meet that deadline, and then getting back to him or her on time.

There are times, however, when reporters do not treat us fairly, when they may take a quote out of context, or, even worse, go after an individual on a personal basis. In these cases the decision is whether or not the issue is important enough either to the government the particular department or to the individual involved to take on a member of the news media. While there are channels available, ranging from letters to the editor, to lodging a complaint with the self-regulating body of journalists. The Press Council, the results are often disappointing.

While unprofessional conduct by journalists is the exception, it can happen and can be very difficult for public servants who are unable to defend themselves. In the vast majority of cases, however, Canadian journalists are professionals who return the respect they receive from government communicators.

Trends

Besides losing their traditional anonymity in the press, government communicators are facing unprecedented pressures in their jobs. The advent of two all-news television channels - one in each official language - has added to the pressure for an instant response and has increased demands on official spokespersons.

The growing use of public opinion polls also has had a dramatic impact on government communications. Major news outlets now publish their own weekly or sometimes daily poll results on major issues which themselves can change the dynamic of the public debate and influence public opinion. Communications specialists need to understand how to read and use public opinion polling in order to adjust their communications strategies appropriately.

With the growing emphasis on public consultation and the influence of special interest groups, policy development has moved from behind government doors and into the public domain. For communicators, this has meant trying to help shape the debate about policy proposals rather than "selling" the policy change after a decision has been taken.

With a public that is bombarded with information and advertising, communicators need to test the effectiveness of their messages to reach audiences that are more sophisticated than ever. Focus testing of messages and strategies is now an accepted part of any communications plan.

These changes have meant that government communicators must spend more time studying the public environment and developing strategies than on the operational tasks of the past, like writing pamphlets or preparing videos.

Yet ministerial offices still need the traditional communications "products" - speeches, news releases, media response lines - and communications offices must meet those demands, often with fewer resources, as the government faces spending cut-backs.

The management of communications as a function has become more demanding and complex as heads of communications must organise smaller staffs to be able to meet these dual demands for effective communications strategies and the daily need for excellent communications products. Communications, as a career in the public service today, is not for the faint of heart. But it does offer real challenges and a real opportunity to contribute to the development of government policies and programmes.

4. GOVERNMENT INFORMATION OFFICERS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM *by Jack Gee*⁴

As information technology continues its rapid expansion, all organisations increasingly need trained staff to cope with the demands of publicity, information and public relations. Governments, in whichever country they are found, are no exception. Within departments of state and government agencies in the United Kingdom this function is carried out by a centrally managed Government Information Service. These are press and marketing officers working either within an information division of a department or for a central agency - the Central Office of Information (COI).

Each department of state and each agency has its own objectives. These are to:

- i) create and maintain an informed opinion about the subjects with which each department deals;
- ii) use all suitable methods of publicity, paid and unpaid, to help the department to achieve its purpose;
- iii) assist and advise on all matters bearing on relations between the department and its public; and
- iv) advise the department of the public's reaction to the policies or actions of the department.

My directorate in the British Department of the Environment is concerned with multimedia projects. Press officers are expected to deploy the full armoury of skills and methods when presenting a government policy to the public. For this purpose the directorate is divided into mixed skill or multi-disciplinary groups and receives training accordingly.

It deploys the full range of methodology - press briefings and conferences, news releases, publications, sponsorship when necessary, flyers, advertising in publications and on radio and television - and mixes them as necessary to hit predetermined media and public targets.

Political Dimensions of Being a Press Officer

Before describing the role of the information officer, I will comment briefly on the political implications of his or her job.

Ministers are political animals. Civil servants are not. Nowhere is this difference more likely to create difficulties than in the information division of the department. A minister expects his information officer to further the policies and objectives of the government - which may well be the subject of political controversy in the country. Nevertheless it is a duty of the press officer to present the policies of his or her department through the media and to seek to ensure that they are understood. Even if these policies are hotly contested by the government's political opponents the press officer's attitude must be one of firm support and helpful explanation of the ministerial line.

⁴ Jack Gee is the Deputy Director of Communication, Department of the Environment, United Kingdom.

There are obvious dangers in this. By furthering departmental policies and objectives, a government information officer is often advancing the aims of the political party in government. In our system this is perfectly proper and it is one of the benefits of political office that the facilities of the Government Information Service are available in this way.

However, while press officers may properly be called upon to present and describe the policies of a minister and to put forward the minister's justification in defence of them, they may not properly be called upon to justify or defend those policies in party political terms or expressly to advocate policies as those of a particular political party.

To be able to do their work properly each press officer needs to establish a position with the media whereby it is understood that he stands apart from the party political battle but is there to assist representatives of the media to better understand the policies of the government of the day - whatever the political complexion of that government.

This is a difficult tightrope to walk. But it can be done and experience shows that journalists have greater respect for the government information officer who has achieved this balance than for the committed political spokesman, who is often regarded as a "party hack".

It is impossible to treat party politics and the work of an information officer as if they are "chalk and cheese". The two are inextricably linked, not least in the minds of ministers. An information officer who is doing his or her job properly will have close contact with the minister in charge of the department and will have to show an intelligent awareness of the party political dimension.

At all times the important thing to remember is that as a civil servant - paid by the public - the information officer cannot join the political battle him or herself, and he or she must at all times see to it that the government is not open to criticism in this respect.

The Demands of Ministers

Of course ministers do not necessarily see distinctions between furthering their departments' objectives and their own images. Is the government information officer in the business of creating acceptable public images for ministers? How does he or she deal with the demands by ministers for personal publicity? There is no simple answer to these questions. Most civil servants would take the view that they are not in the image-making business.

However, an information officer who shows unwillingness to co-operate with the minister's demands for good personal publicity is likely to find him or herself in personal difficulties because there is no doubt that is a part of the information officers job to ensure that his or her minister receives the best possible press at all times. This involves seeking good media coverage for the minister's speeches and official activities and even the use of newspaper diaries, gossip columns and other media opportunities to keep the minister and by inference the department in the public eye.

Journalists do not discriminate between official and private activity - this means that press officers sometimes will find themselves dealing with enquiries about ministers' holidays, family affairs, their hobbies and private interests. If a minister wishes to co-operate with the media in this form of publicity then it is the press officer's duty to advise and make the necessary arrangements.

Working with the Department

There are some basic points which any department or government organisation for which a press officer works must understand about information. These are:

- a) Information work is an adjunct to policy and cannot take the place of policy. A press officer cannot change a bad policy into a good one.
- b) The press officer is in no way responsible for writing newspapers or producing television and radio news reports and cannot compel editors to carry or not to carry anything, or to submit stories for clearance.
- c) The best chance of influencing what is written or broadcast is to establish and maintain good relations with journalists. This cannot be done if the department is always complaining about accuracy.
- d) News is only valid on the day it happens. All press enquiries and in particular requests for radio and television news or current affairs programmes require swift replies, usually within an hour or so. Requests for information from the press officer cannot be put in the pending tray.
- e) Officials may know journalists personally from earlier contacts and be approached by them directly. But all such approaches should be referred to the relevant press officer for advice. If an official is interviewed he or she should be accompanied by a press officer.
- f) The information division should never be regarded simply as the machinery for announcing decisions and issuing news releases - as a sort of post office. It should play a part in the formation of policy by reflecting public and media attitudes and it should be consulted about the timing, method and content of any press announcement before submissions are made to ministers. Indeed all appropriate submissions to ministers should contain a section on presentation aspects contributed by the information officer concerned.

The Press Office and the Role of the Press Officer

In the British Government every department has a press office. This may consist of a head of news, a chief press officer and a number of desk officers responsible for dealing with press enquiries. If the Department is large enough to have many different areas of responsibility, and the Department of the Environment is one of these, individual officers are allocated to specialist desks.

The press office which I manage at the Department of the Environment operates 24 hours a day, every day. At weekends, and in the evenings, a duty press officer works from home. He or she is equipped with electronic means of retrieving briefing material from the computer in the main office.

The department releases, each year, approximately 1 000 press notices. These are written by one of 25 individual press officers on the staff. The releases cover the many subjects for which the department has responsibility: housing, planning, local government finance and administration, regeneration of our cities and conurbations, construction and the whole spectrum of environmental policies. Each press officer has his or her own personal training plan. Specialists in media-handling are sent on courses to learn marketing techniques and marketers are given training in press work. We aim to send everyone through a purchasing course before this year is over.

The image of the entrenched press officer, sitting at a desk dourly answering media enquiries, is not one which I encourage. The most effective press officer is one who is capable of taking the initiative, of being pro-active wherever possible.

Journalists and broadcasters often profess to be hampered by governmental "PR experts" who stand in the way between themselves and the ministers and officials with the real knowledge. If that were true it would be a serious state of affairs. In fact the reverse is true. One of the duties of any press officer is to assist the media to get all the information that can be given. So if a journalist wants an in-depth briefing, and if it appears that this would benefit the department and its ministers, then it is up to the press officer to arrange for an expert in the department to give such a briefing, and at all times it is the press officer's task to see to it that a working dialogue exists between ministers and the media.

The press officer who wishes to avoid giving the media any grounds for complaints would do well to heed the following points:

- Never tell lies - they are invariably found out, and the consequence will be a major drop in credibility, and that is something that no information officer can afford.
- Never fail to telephone back quickly when a message is left.
- If you do not know the answer to a question say so and find out quickly.
- Get a reputation for responding quickly. Journalists are usually in a hurry and long delays imply that the department hopes the problem will go away. If there is to be a delay let the journalist know.
- "No comment" is a phrase to be avoided because it will be misconstrued to imply confirmation.
- You as a press officer are not in the propaganda business. You are there to give facts and background. Use "the line to take" that is the limit of what the department is prepared to have quoted on the record.
- Never spoil a scoop. When a journalist indicates that he or she has some important information you may be pressed by the department to issue a general statement. Resist this. Exclusive information must be respected. If you spoil an exclusive journalists will not consult you the next time and you may in consequence not be in a position to kill or correct an inaccurate story.

It often pays to pre-empt a bad story by announcing it. If you wait for it to break and admit it under pressure it will look as though the department had hoped to conceal it.

Press releases targeted at specific media interests are a central and frequent duty of all information officers. Here are a few similar points to bear in mind when preparing a press notice:

- Be sparing with press notices. Do not use one unless it contains news. Unless, that is, you want it to go straight into the waste paper basket.
- Make sure the department's media release is clearly identifiable in a busy newsroom.
- Ensure clean accurate typing and a clear house style with a printed heading.
- Always put the news in the first paragraph.
- Make an embargo quite clear if one is necessary. But always satisfy yourself that there is a valid reason for putting on an embargo in the first place.
- Keep it short, any additional background or biographical information should be added to the press release in notes to editors at the bottom.
- Time it right; the ideal timing is early in the day without an embargo. It can then be used by evening papers, radio and TV newscasts and morning papers the next day.
- Target your audience by sending your press release only to those media outlets who you know have a specific interest in the subject you are writing about.

5. PRESS RELATIONS WITH GOVERNMENTS IN EMERGING DEMOCRACIES by Matthias Rüb⁵

Under communist rule many things were easier, or, to express it rather neutrally, less complex. Compared to western democratic societies there was a dramatic lack of choice in one's personal, social, and political life. The first and only question to answer was, "should I openly oppose the system or not?". The rest was a consequence of this answer. This lack of complexity required less decision-making by the individual - and that somehow made life easier.

For those who decided not to openly oppose the power structure and machinery, life was easy in the sense of not being complex, and life was secure. As the majority did not, in fact, openly oppose the system, many people in the formerly communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe still today feel a kind of nostalgia for the "not-too-bad old days".

With the market economy and democracy came a variety of changes, chances, possibilities - and risks. Life became "faster," more complicated and exhausting compared to the "slow" old days. Those who were used to following decisions taken by someone else were suddenly required to decide themselves. This is one of the reasons why former communist parties were able to regain power after a short period of being in opposition in many countries of the former East Bloc.

Covering Central and Eastern Europe in the "old days" also was much easier for correspondents, or, to express it rather neutrally, less complex than it is today. Before the *annus mirabilis*, 1989, and the changes which soon followed, correspondents who covered the region met similar conditions in all countries to which they were travelling. They had to deal with one political party, one federation of trade unions, one reservoir of political, economic and administrative elites, etc. Political and economic developments went slowly or even came to a standstill. Correspondents took a small risk in missing epoch-making events in one country while they were travelling and reporting somewhere else.

After the Change

All of this changed radically in and after 1989. Societies in Central and Eastern Europe became even more complex than western democracies. New governments, politicians, parties, federations, trade unions, clubs etc. emerged. New orientation was required for correspondents as well as for political partners in "the West".

With the improvement in both the variety and quality of media, more independent and critical information about general developments became available. It was easier to get an objective assessment about what was going on. On the other hand, relations with government information offices became more difficult.

After the era of propaganda, when (mostly useless) information was provided in abundance by a Ministry of Information, (much needed) information was not provided at all. The reluctance to provide information was perhaps a natural and unavoidable reaction: no one wanted to be blamed for continuing old propaganda in new colours.

⁵ Matthias Rüb is the Correspondent for South-Eastern Europe for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

If we look at the whole region, the situation is worst in those countries of the former Yugoslavia which are affected by war. Serbia also is affected by war, even though not a single bomb fell on the territory of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro), and not a single house was destroyed.

Perhaps even more importantly, at the same time when the fall of communist regimes in all the countries of the East Bloc was in sight, the regime of the Milosevic-led Socialist Party of Serbia became stronger and stronger. That is why the old power structures are still functioning, and why the power elites from before 1989 have never been forced to leave their posts.

Only in Serbia was I was honoured to have a speech delivered by the Deputy Minister of Information (of Yugoslavia) when I received my accreditation. He told me "his" truth about the war in the former Yugoslavia, and I of course could hardly believe a single word. But we got along quite well, perhaps because both of us knew that we were standing on the opposite side of the "frontline".

Confidence is Key

Generally speaking, one may say that in most of the states which emerged from the former Yugoslavia, there is a tendency towards one-party systems. This is the case in Serbia and Montenegro, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina as well. This affects the quality of the information provided by government information offices. Once a journalist has lost confidence in his partner because he realises that he has been lying, it is very hard to regain his trust.

After Croatia recaptured the Serb-held territories in Krajina in August 1995, the Minister of Defence told a press conference in Zagreb that the offensive had succeeded and was over. He authorised all journalists to visit the freed territories and to report about what they had seen. But when I tried to go to Knin on the following day, I was stopped and sent back at the very first checkpoint.

It was only possible to visit the newly liberated territories with organised bus trips guided by the Croatian Army. But even under the control and surveillance of an army officer, we could see much looting, vandalism and houses that had been deliberately burned down - all by members of the Croatian Army.

The next day Croatian newspapers reported that 50 or so foreign and domestic journalists were able to witness the discipline and professionalism of the country's army. Of course, no one asked us about our impressions.

One can understand that in wartime information given by government offices is (mis)used as one weapon among many in the war of words. But a journalist's trust in information provided by government officials once lost is hard to regain. I mention these cases from Serbia and Croatia in order to illustrate the point that fruitful co-operation between journalists and government information officials is only possible in an atmosphere of trust, professionalism and mutual respect. The cases reported might seem to be rather exceptional, but in some way all societies in Central and Eastern Europe are in an exceptional situation.

Around the Region

The more developed the political culture in a particular country, the more fruitful is the co-operation between journalists and government information officers. Compared to other countries of the region, the situation in Hungary is rather good. The political culture in Hungary is probably the most developed because even under the last communist regime there had been to a certain extent democracy, freedom of the press, and a market economy. This was not the case in neighbouring countries.

In some countries of Central and Eastern Europe, there still prevails an atmosphere of polarisation in which a foreign correspondent can become a "friend" or an "enemy" of the government and its policy, irrespective of whether that journalist remains committed to his or her principle of being sympathetic but critical.

While this is not the case in Hungary, the search for a proficient government information policy has not come to a successful end. Even under the second freely elected government the search for a new relationship between governments and the press continues. Since 1994, spokespersons have been removed from their posts very often. There is no consensus about the strategy of press relations in the Cabinet. But this endless story is an internal affair of Hungary in which observers must not interfere.

Regarding the foreign press, the Hungarian International Press Association, founded in late 1993, has proved to be a very important tool for both sides. The regular meetings of high ranking officials like ministers - and even the prime minister - with the press is one important pillar. A second pillar could be more frequent meetings of officials like state secretaries with some of the representatives of the foreign press. A third element could be to provide from time to time the foreign press with information about what is going on in different ministries, about the spokespersons in the ministries and other institutions.

As all the journalists work on computers, why not offer services and information on the Internet or via modem instead of mailing it?

As I mentioned before, it is very important to create an atmosphere of mutual trust. As the media scene in the countries in transition is usually polarised, an atmosphere of mistrust and vigilance prevails on both sides. But in the community of foreign correspondents, those journalists who are looking for the one and only big story - for the "big scandal" for which they would "betray" all their sources of information - are a small minority.

Most of my colleagues are, as I am, interested in objective news and analysis, in balanced judgement and commentary, in a continuous relationship to government information offices. They usually know how to behave as professional journalists - unlike some of their colleagues from the region who regard themselves as brilliant writers and artists rather than as reliable craftsmen.

In most cases, correspondents from western countries do not mix up news with commentary and they double-check information. Correspondents are professionals who know how to handle official and confidential information, and are interested in an atmosphere of co-operation. Both sides should understand that they need each other. In some cases it is not sufficient when government officials try to achieve a specific goal through diplomatic channels, and they might consider that articles and analysis in newspapers could be useful. On the other hand, it is important and useful for a journalist's reputation if he manages to get fresh information about new developments.

Other Shortcomings

The flow of information from government information offices generally is too slow. For instance, information bulletins from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) arrive too late. While the MFA's Press and International Information Department is quite professional (it has published a detailed press directory), there are usually no schedules made available about trips of officials to countries that might be important for certain correspondents. It took some time before an English-language translation of the weekly press briefing given by the spokesperson in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was made available.

One example of unprofessionalism was the precise schedule of the visiting Mongolian President I received from Hungary's Office of the President. The staff person that sent me the schedule obviously had no criteria for determining what is relevant for a German foreign correspondent. Further, the schedule of the Mongolian President's visit was mixed up with that of China's President, who had been in Budapest a couple of weeks before.

A typical habit of lower-ranking or local public servants is to seek out the head of the department to answer questions and to provide information when a journalist calls. No "trickle-down-effect" of responsibilities has yet taken place.

Coverage of Public Administration Reform

It is generally not easy to report on public administration reform. Newspapers like the one I am working for only have enough space for "breaking news". Public administration reform is without any doubt a very important issue in the whole process of reform. But it is going beyond the surface. Results may be very important in improving peoples' relationships with the public administration, but since this is a process going on without much noise, it is almost impossible to forge news out of it. Basically it is a long-lasting process without spectacular developments.

When foreign correspondents are to cover public administration, they should be given hints and ideas, data and prospects. I concede that because of a journalist's constraints always to cover "headline-news", important background stories on subjects like public administration reform never or seldom are written.

6. MASS COMMUNICATIONS AND THE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN HUNGARY by Sándor Orbán⁶

Introduction

Government and the media are interdependent, and the public administration is a basic source of information for the electronic and print media. At the same time, citizens' judgements and opinions, largely shaped by the media, determine to a considerable extent the success of public policies.

The interests of civil servants and journalists, however, are often contradictory, since ministries seek to create the best possible image about their activities, while one of the main tasks of the media is to point out the anomalies of public administration. Thus, if both function properly, a delicate balance will exist between government and the media, and the essential personal contacts between civil servants and journalists will be founded on fairness and professionalism.

In Hungary, as a reflection of the particular political scene which emerged after the seachange of 1989-90, the links between the administration and the press have developed in a rather peculiar way. The first freely-elected government attempted to use the still state-owned TV and radio as propaganda tools and overtly favoured publications which echoed its policies.

Many journalists, however, behaved as political advocates rather than objective reporters of events. The result was a communication fiasco and the so-called "Media War", which poisoned the country's social climate for years. The public was often supplied with politically-biased information while at the same time, the government was not capable of getting its messages transmitted to its citizens.

While many politicians and journalists have learned their lessons, decision-makers' attitudes have not completely changed and investigative journalism has not become predominant. Still, government officials have had to realise that media control itself cannot guarantee their political survival, and reporters and editors face the fact that their target audience has largely become immune to politically-ferish judgements presented with the news.

Such a situation creates a favourable environment for consolidating correct and professional relations between government and media. In order to improve communications, the protagonists have to be aware of each other's tasks and constraints. This paper tackles the state of the Hungarian press from a journalist's perspective and is aimed at providing practical information for civil servants seeking to deal more efficiently with the media.

Print and Electronic Media

Although the situation of the Hungarian media is far from ideal, the press can, for the most part, be considered free. Despite the imperfections in reporting and the biases of certain publications, citizens have access to a wide variety of information sources, enabling them to obtain a complex image of the political, economic, social and cultural scene. At the same time, both the print and electronic media are characterised by instability and uncertainty.

⁶ Sándor Orbán is the Deputy Director of the Center for Independent Journalism, Budapest, and former Foreign Affairs Editor for the Hungarian daily newspaper, *Kurir*.

In 1989-90 there was an unprecedented boom in the media market, and countless new publications emerged. According to recent data from the Ministry of Education and Culture, there are 8 000 registered titles in Hungary - 1 500 of those are political publications, while the number of the national, regional and local dailies is as high as 160.

Yet, many of these publications have failed (the exact number is not known), and others are on the brink of bankruptcy because of economic hardship, rising production costs, weak advertising and inexperience in the business of selling papers. Only a handful of papers and magazines have really succeeded. Among these are the daily *Népszabadság* (Peoples' Freedom), weekly *Heti Világgazdaság* (Weekly World Economy), and a few television and women's magazines. A number of well-established, prestigious or popular newspapers and magazines, including *Magyar Nemzet* (Hungarian Nation), *Esti Hírlap* (Evening Paper), *Mai Nap* (Today's Sun), and Reform are struggling to survive.

The newspaper scene is rather fragmented, wherein 12 to 14 national dailies compete for a very limited market. A future concentration is inevitable, and the fate of several publications depends on the resources of the owners, who are willing to finance the deficit of otherwise economically non-viable newspapers for the prestige and desired leverage.

In Hungary the print media is mostly privatised, but the trend is rather controversial. Five years ago, foreign investors accounted for approximately 80 per cent of the press's capital assets. Since then, their market share has considerably diminished, and due to business failure, some of them (eg Rupert Murdoch's News International and the *Hersant* Group) have sold back their shares to state enterprises or banks which have the state as majority shareholder. The government does not seem to intend to keep these publications under control, but the reprivatisation is becoming increasingly difficult, since the print media is no longer an attractive field for investment.

In general, the government's opportunities to intervene in the print media are rather limited, and the owners do not exercise direct political control over their newspapers. In practice, however, the important business partners of the majority shareholders cannot be treated negatively in the articles. This is often the case of the main advertisers, since the barely-surviving publications cannot afford to lose any income being generated from advertisements.

Although the Hungarian daily newspapers are not linked directly to political parties, most of them have a particular political orientation. *Népszabadság*, *Magyar Hírlap*, *Népszava* (Peoples' Word), and *Kurir* (Courier), for example, can be considered liberal/social liberal, while *Magyar Nemzet* is moderate/conservative and *Uj Magyarország* (New Hungary) is close to the opposition conservative bourgeois parties. However, newspapers are increasingly realising that under market conditions it is professionalism, rather than an ideological bent or a selective political philosophy, that will guarantee their survival.

The Hungarian media war has taken its highest toll at the state-controlled public TV and radio. The legal vacuum due to the lack of media law, the government's repeated attempts at political manipulation, the division of journalists into two hostile camps, the personal conflicts, and the inefficient use of the limited financial resources have had a devastating impact on the moral standards of the staff and the professional quality of the programmes.

It should be noted that the moratorium on frequency distribution was partially lifted in 1993 and 1994, allowing local TV and radio stations to emerge. Approximately 150 radio stations, 250 TV channels and 200 cable networks are registered by the Ministry of Education and Culture. However, many

of the new local stations ran into financial difficulties, and only a fraction of them broadcast on a regular basis.

These channels tend to cover local news and transmit non-political entertainment programmes. TV3 is an exception which, broadcasting via cable in the Budapest area, has launched professionally-presented news shows which compete successfully with the programmes of *Magyar* TV1 and TV2. There are also dozens of foreign satellite television channels which can be received by more than 50 per cent of Hungarian households.

The Journalists' Situation

Due to the radical transformation of the Hungarian media, journalists' working and living conditions have been profoundly altered since 1990. These changes have produced controversial effects. On the one hand, journalists are enjoying political freedom, and the newly-emerged diversity of publications offers a greater choice of employment. On the other hand, job security has disappeared, and the uncertainty about the future of non-profitable publications has resulted in a permanently stressful situation for many journalists.

Private newspapers tend to downsize or often employ talented but inexperienced young journalists, because they can be paid lower wages. In addition, in order to save social security expenses, at most publications journalists are asked (or forced to) establish sole proprietorships. Taxation can be advantageous for them as well, but in the case of sick leave or retirement, they face personal financial bankruptcy. Nowadays, newspapers require more articles from the more experienced permanent staff (often 30 to 40 stories per month from a reporter); at the same time they use more free-lancers, whose fees are, in general, low (US\$6 to US\$15 per page), and delays in payment are common.

State-owned TV and radio pay considerably better than the private print media. But, during the storms of the Media War, many journalists were deprived partly or completely of working opportunities, mostly for political reasons. Of the six Hungarian trade unions representing journalists, four represent the interests of TV and radio employees, and possess definite political and economic leverage. Conversely, at print publications, the number of organised journalists is very low, and they are almost completely defenceless.

Newspapers in Hungary are computerised and use modern equipment. In many editorial offices, however, there is a scarcity of terminals and the logistic background is far from desirable. Most publications lack an efficient database. The Hungarian Radio, the Hungarian News Agency (MTI), *Népszabadság*, and *Heti Világgazdaság* have well-organised archives, but they are not linked and not all of them are completely computerised. Electronic mail is not yet widely used by journalists.

The level of education and the intellectual potential of Hungarian journalists are very good. Still, slack standards can often be found both in print and electronic media, mostly due to the above-mentioned imperfections. Furthermore, it is still common for journalists to consider themselves arbiters, to combine fact with commentary, and to openly profess political convictions in their reports.

It also happens that newspapers, because of their poor economic situation, accept gifts, donations, paid trips, etc. from private firms, which makes it nearly impossible to criticise the sponsor company if it is involved in any unclear business. However, fact-based, double-checked investigative reporting is taking root, and is considered an example to follow by most professional publications.

Despite the hardship Hungarian reporters and editors face, journalism is a popular profession among young people; thus, the demand for educational programmes is high. Several universities (the ELTE of Budapest, the JATE of Szeged, the Budapest College of Theatre and Film Art, etc.), the Hungarian Association of Journalists (MUOSZ), the Hungarian Radio, a few newspapers (*Népszabadság*, *Magyar Hírlap*) and private schools offer courses and diploma programmes on different levels.

The quality of education and the fees vary as well - in some cases the tuition can reach US\$500 per semester. The number of students is estimated at around 1 000. It can be easily foreseen that only a few of them will be employed by the print media, which is barely surviving financially. However, once the new Media Law comes into effect, there might be a certain demand for new faces and voices in television and radio.

Press Officers and Journalists

The democratisation of Hungarian social and political life has created a wholly new situation in the relations between the administration and the media. On the one hand politicians cannot (or are not supposed to) intervene directly in the press. On the other hand, journalists must realise their increased responsibilities when dealing with freely obtained and uncontrolled information. The previous paternalistic relationship between civil servants and reporters has disappeared, and under the altered circumstances their relations ought to be based on a fair partnership.

According to the new model, ministry information offices offer a service when supplying the newspapers and news programmes with information, while the consumers, namely the journalists, have to respect certain principles (for example, accuracy in quotations) when reporting. In this exchange, the currency is called "news" and well-established, fair personal contacts play a predominant role.

Press officers should create solid links on two levels. It is important to be in permanent touch with the reporters who are specialised in the affairs of a given ministry. However, contacts with editors are also crucial, since they are the ones reviewing the articles and deciding what emphasis is given to a particular topic in the paper or news programme. Regular off-the-record background discussions can help considerably in building up a good partnership.

Furthermore, occasional exclusive information offered by the information offices can be rewarding when deepening links with the media. It can be taken for granted that a well-placed interview or properly-leaked information will be followed up by the rest of the press, which is also beneficial for the ministry's image. However, it is not advisable to always favour the same papers or programmes, since the rest of the press would react negatively.

In order to do a successful public relations (PR) job for a ministry, information officers must decide which major press organs to concentrate on. Obviously, the special role of the Hungarian News Agency (MTI) has to be taken into account, since all the Hungarian newspapers and news programmes use its services. In this light, the importance of the news shows of *Magyar Radio*, *Magyar TV*, *Duna TV* and *TV3* is to be emphasised. Out of those programmes, *Híradó* (Newsreel), *Objektív* (Objective), *Hét* (the Week), the *16 óra* (16 Hours) and the editions of the *Króika* (Chronicle) are the most influential.

Regarding the print media, special attention should be given to the *Népszabadság* (which has the largest circulation), *Magyar Hírlap*, the *Népszava*, *Magyar Nemzet*, and *Uj Magyarország*, which cover the whole political spectrum in Hungary. Of the weeklies, the very professional *Heti Világgazdaság*, the *Magyar Narancs* (Hungarian Organge), and the *168 óra* (168 Hours) are especially important. Nor should

the tabloid press (eg *Kurir*, *Mai nap*) be neglected, since they reach a special audience which is not necessarily reading the other papers. The same applies to TV and radio shows, like *Ablak* (Window), *Tízóra* (Ten O'Clock) and *Napköben* (During the Week), which for the most part tackle the practical issues of daily life.

Journalists' Expectations

The scheduling of media events (meetings, press conferences) must be done very carefully. The best hours are between 11 a.m. and 5 p.m. Most of the daily newspapers and programmes have editorial meetings at around 9 or 10 a.m., when they decide which daily issues to cover that day. It is a good idea to check by telephone whether they received the ministry's invitation which was faxed a few days earlier.

Press officers also should remember that deadlines can be short, not only for TV and radio but for the print media as well. For distribution reasons, the first edition of the newspapers must be sent to the printing office by around 9 or 10 a.m. Later changes are technically possible, but the production costs of a new page are very high. Thus, at many papers, the original copy is altered by the editors only in exceptional cases.

Journalists expect clear, concise, up-to-date information from public servants, and often demand interview opportunities with top officials. Obviously, these requirements cannot always be met, since ministers are generally short of time, or because it may be too early to release news about a certain issue. But, even in those cases, journalists should never feel they have been neglected, and press officers have to prove their good intentions and willingness to be helpful.

TV interviews are a special case. The politician being interviewed should never lose his temper and, if possible, should prepare in advance a few brief lines which can be easily quoted when the interview is being edited. Since TV news reports are short (one to two minutes), it can be taken for granted that long sentences will be condensed, and thus might lose their original meaning. Furthermore, seemingly minor things such as the haircut and the dress of the person being interviewed, and the background (books and plants versus a plain white wall) make a big difference.

It sometimes happens that journalists abuse information provided by civil servants or quote politicians incorrectly. But, only in the most extreme cases is it recommended to complain to the paper or news programme. Holding back information in the future when it is required is a more effective means of "punishment". It should be noted that most journalists are not willing to alienate their sources for the sake of a forced "scoop".

In the case of upcoming major events affecting a ministry (strikes, parliamentary debates, personnel changes), it is recommended that press officers try to anticipate the possible reactions in advance and make a plan about how to deal with the press on that issue - for example, the way the Ministry of Transportation and Communication handled the last railway strike can be mentioned. The co-operation between the media and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Justice generally has been good. On the contrary, the case of the inevitable economic austerity measures (the so-called Bokros package) adopted in earlier this year has once more revealed the shortcomings of PR work at the government level.

Final Remarks

To a considerable extent, the prospects of the Hungarian print media depend on the pace of economic recovery at the national level, since a better advertising business and a wealthier population able to spend more on publications, could consolidate the now rather shaky financial situation of the media. But, even in the best of cases, in the long run the small Hungarian market will not be able to support all the existing newspapers, and a concentration will inevitably occur.

Regarding TV and radio, new competing programmes are likely to appear, and the importance of the local channels is going to increase. The desired financial stabilisation in the print media and the professional rivalry in the electronic media would presumably have a positive impact on journalistic standards. Such a trend would be favourable for government information offices dealing with the media as well, since partnerships based on accuracy and professionalism would prevail in the daily contacts between journalists and civil servants.

ANNEX 1

A Code Of Ethics For Journalists

We journalists, bearing in mind the international standards of journalistic ethics, adopt the conditions of this code of professional ethics and are willing to follow it in our work.

1. The most important ethical principle which journalists should follow is the principle of objectivity - the unprejudiced provision of information about the activities, approaches, and views of both the majority and the minority.
2. The journalist has the right to choose the way in which information is presented; but he/she must ensure that neither content nor objectivity are negatively affected by the manner of presentation. The journalist bears a personal professional responsibility for his personal comments and opinion. He/she must protect the identity of sources of confidential information.
3. The journalist may collect information in the following ways:
 - a) from official sources;
 - b) through journalistic inquiry; or
 - c) by purchasing information.
4. The object of any transaction can only ever be information - never the position of the journalist.
5. The journalist should oppose extremism and restrictions on civil rights.
6. The journalist should be aware of the social and political consequences of his activities and bear moral responsibility for them; he/she should work on the principle of causing minimal harm.
7. The journalist has no right to occupy a post in any political, governmental, legal or legislating authority.
8. The journalist regards the following as incompatible with his/her professionalism:
 - a) libel and slander;
 - b) forgery and concealment of information;
 - c) plagiarism;
 - d) hidden advertising;
 - e) use of professional position, rights, and authority for personal economic gain.
9. The journalist should respect and protect the professional rights of his colleagues, and respect the rules of open competition.
10. The journalist should reject any mission which violates one of the above principles.

This code was adopted by a number of journalists from the Commonwealth of Independent States attending a conference in Kiev, Ukraine, sponsored by the European Institute for the Media. The conference, held in May 1994, was entitled "Media and Elections: Lessons for Political Journalism".

ANNEX 2

NAGC Code of Ethics

Members of the (United States) National Association of Government Communicators (NAGC) pledge and profess dedication to the goals of better communication, understanding and co-operation among all people. We believe that truth is inviolable and sacred; that providing public information is an essential civil service; and that the public at large and each citizen therein has a right to equal, full, understandable and timely facts about their government. Members will:

- Conduct themselves professionally, with truth, accuracy, fairness, responsibility, accountability to the public, and adherence to generally accepted standards of good taste.
- Conduct their professional lives in accord with the public interest, in recognition that each of us is a steward of the public's trust.
- Convey the truth to their own agencies' management, engaging in no practice which could corrupt the integrity of channels of communication or the processes of government.
- Intentionally communicate no false or misleading information and will act promptly to correct false or misleading information or rumors.
- Identify publicly the names and titles of individuals involved in making policy decisions, the details of decision-making processes, and how interested citizens can participate.
- Represent no conflicting or competing interests and will fully comply with all statutes, Executive Orders and regulations pertaining to personal disclosure of such interests.
- Avoid the possibility of any improper use of information by an "insider" or third party and never use inside information for personal gain.
- Guarantee or promise the achievement of no specified result beyond the member's direct control.
- Accept no fees, commissions, gifts, promises of future consideration, or any other material or intangible valuable that is, or could be, perceived to be connected with public service employment or activities.
- Safeguard the confidence of both present and former employees, and of information acquired in meetings, and documents as required by law, regulation and prudent good sense.
- Not wrongly injure the professional reputation or practice of another person, private organisation or government agency.
- Participate in no activity designed to manipulate the price of a company's securities.

When a member has evidence or suspicion that another has committed an unethical, illegal or unfair practice, including violation of this Statement, the member shall present the information promptly to proper authority, who may include the President of NAGC, or the Chairman of NAGC's Ethics Committee.