

No. 10 Press Office: the autonomy available to government communicators to behave appropriately in relation to their own codes and to provide a public service has been depleted



Amid the frantic briefing and counter-briefing that has become typical of No. 10, [Ruth Garland](#) argues that although any form of government media briefing system will struggle to maintain impartiality, this need not result in the abandonment of the attempt to maintain communication in the public interest.

Downing Street has consistently tried to argue that despite evidence of at least 16 social gatherings on government premises between May 2020 and April 2021 lockdown rules were not broken. At the very least, this attempt lacks credibility, especially given the police investigation into 12 of the 16 gatherings identified so far, but does it also call into question the current arrangements for briefing the media? Who are these often-quoted 'senior government figures', 'sources close to', 'a spokesperson from the department', 'cabinet office officials', or simply 'No.10', and on whose authority are they speaking? Much government news briefing is unaccountable and therefore deniable.

There are two sides to the media operation at Downing Street: the team of special advisers that manage the news from a political perspective, and the civil service press office that is supposed to oversee official government communications. Successive public and parliamentary inquiries into the failures of 'political spin' from the Blair period onwards have insisted that to ensure trust, the official voice of the government should be that group of civil servants specifically delegated to do this, namely, the Government Communication Service (GCS).

'Partygate' has tarnished the brand of the Prime Minister, his government and the Conservative party but what has it done for the reputation of the GCS? This body of civil servants is bound not only by the [Civil Service Code](#), which requires it to demonstrate integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality but also by its own [propriety guidelines](#). The guidelines state that communications with the public and media should 'be objective and explanatory, not biased or polemical'. Government press officers must ensure that their activities are 'always directed at informing the public'. There are concerns that during this period of existential crisis for the Prime Minister, the role of the No. 10 press officer has become defender of Boris Johnson rather than custodian of the government's public communication function.

The problem is, a government communications system that was established after the Second World War to reassure the media and public that the days of propaganda were over, has been [regularly tweaked and manipulated](#) by successive administrations, especially at No. 10. The original aim of the service was to provide technical expertise in conducting publicity without incurring the charge of propaganda. Herbert Morrison, the minister who had oversight of government communication, wrote in a 1945 memo that there must be 'no question of Government publicity being used to boost individual ministers'. Successive governments have breached even these limited safeguards. Today, the system itself can be called into question for being uninformative, inconsistent, non-transparent and politically dominated, at least at the sharp end of news management, and particularly at No. 10. Citizens now find it difficult or impossible to distinguish between public information and politically inspired news-making. The proposed creation of a [Prime Minister's Office](#) will intensify this tendency unless external scrutiny is built in from the start.

Any form of government media briefing system will struggle to maintain impartiality and objectivity, especially when the governing party and Prime Minister are 'under siege', but this need not result in the abandonment of the attempt to maintain the public interest. Emerging from its post-Iraq controversy, the Blair government faced a number of critical inquiries but in 2004 it also set up the first and only Independent Review of Government Communications, known as the [Phillis Review](#). The Review identified three minimum requirements for the practice of impartiality.

- Directors of Communication must feel able to stand back and object if Ministers' personal agendas ever lead them to press for communications that would be politically biased or misleading.

- We would not expect to see senior communications staff changing simply as a consequence of a ministerial change
- The interests of the general public should be paramount in any programme to modernise government communications.

The Phillis review was the first to propose a clear and comprehensive set of founding principles for government communications. These were initially accepted, then sidelined, and finally quietly dropped by the Cameron government. The document itself has disappeared from the public record. Even the three unexceptional recommendations shown here proved too much for a No. 10 that wanted the agility to manage the news 'under the radar,' as the Prime Minister and his aides saw fit. Morrison's claim that the government's communication service should not be used to 'boost individual ministers' now appears laughable.

The evidence of government communications in relation to the pandemic has shown that impartial and trustworthy public communication is possible, even if only briefly when public health, medical science, and ministerial survival come together. This only serves to highlight the overall failures, while partygate threatens to undermine future pandemic communications. The autonomy available to government communicators to behave appropriately in relation to their own codes, and provide a public service consistent with their own sense of public purposes, have been depleted in recent decades. This raises serious concerns about the capacity of the GCS, especially at the centre, to discern, let alone fulfill even the most basic requirements of citizens, the media, and lawmakers.

About the Authors



Ruth Garland is a Lecturer in Media and Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London, a former PR practitioner, and author of *Government Communications and the Crisis of Trust* (2021).

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