

Welcome

Government and the Media

Department of Media and Communications – 26/6/2014

GOVERNMENT AND THE MEDIA: PATHWAYS FOR RESEARCH

Part I

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Government and the Media: a crisis?

The charges?

- Spin: Truthfulness and trust undermined?
- Politicization of civil servants?
- ‘Tail wags the dog’: policy follows a media agenda?
- Focus on immediate results, not long-term?
- Chilling of policy deliberation?

- Social media intensifying all of the above?

- The alternative/ positive view: media building positive popular accountability (Scammell)?

Deeper concerns

Good government undermined?

- media values override process of civil servants' advice (*Foster*)
- rationality of policy decisions undermined (*Crewe and King*)
- over-personalization of politics (*Blumler*)

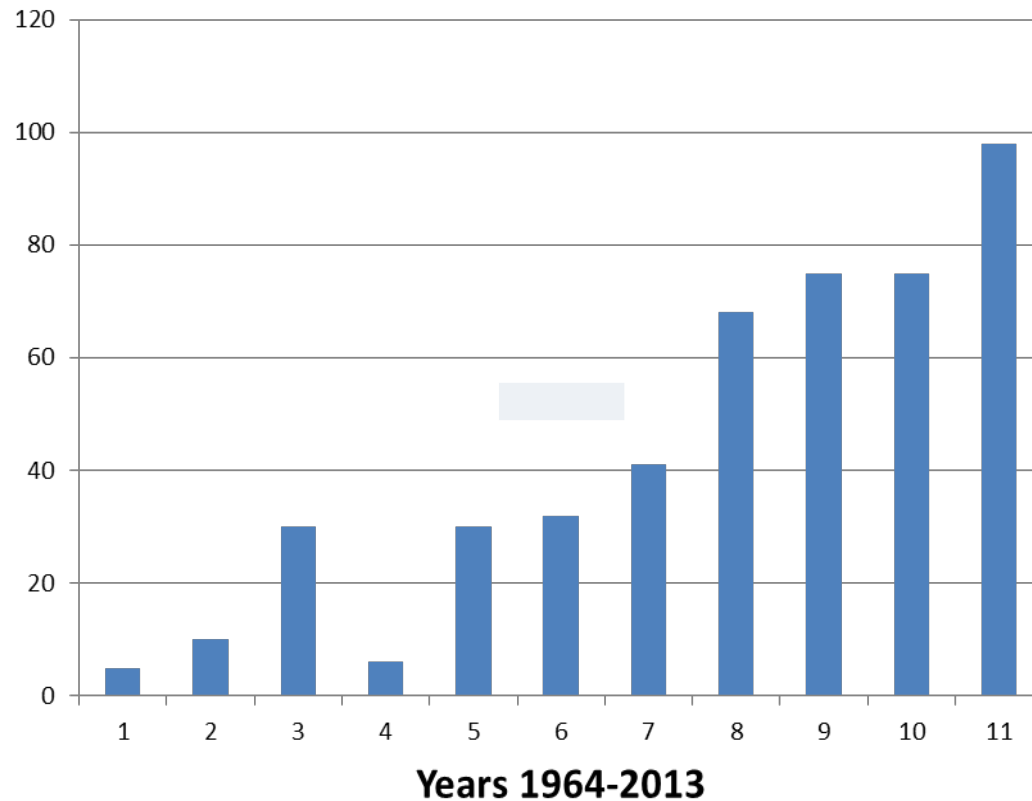
Yet policy dilemmas?

- The need for/costs of Open Government/ Open Policymaking
- The need for/costs of managing communication?
(government codes of conduct; social media guidelines)

Some key facts and figures

- The average length of articles about the Prime Minister in the Guardian and Times halved between 1945 and 2009 but the average number of articles mentioning the Prime Minister doubled (Langer 2011).
- Television news sound bites related to US Presidential campaigns shrank from just over 43 seconds in 1968 to just under 9 seconds in 1988 and less than 8 seconds in 2004 (Hallin 1994; Bucy 2007).
- In its first four-year term, the Blair administration issued 32,000 press releases (cited in Dean 2012).
- The number of civil service information officers doubled in the Cabinet Office between 1979 and 2006, tripled at the MoD and Prime Minister's office, and quadrupled at the Home Office (Davis 2007).

Number of special advisers 1964-2013



Since 1964 there has been a steady rise in the number of politically appointed special advisers, reaching 98 in October 2013. An increasing proportion perform media rather than policy roles (Hazell et al 2012, Blick 2004, Gay 2013).

Who do members of the public trust to tell the truth?

| | Doctor | Teacher | Journalist | Politician | Civil servant | Professors |
|------|--------|---------|------------|------------|---------------|----------------------------|
| 1983 | 82 | 79 | 19 | 18 | 25 | n/a |
| 1993 | 84 | 84 | 10 | 14 | 37 | 70 |
| 2003 | 91 | 87 | 18 | 18 | 46 | 74 |
| 2013 | 89 | 86 | 21 | 18 | 53 | n/a |
| | | | | | | Source: MORI (Dec 2013) |

Evidence and key themes

| Theme | Indicator/evidence | Study |
|---|---|---|
| Politicisation | Press releases/"churn"/ measures of 'politicisation' | Ingham (2003); Franklin (2004); Sausman & Locke (2004) |
| Politicians more news strategy obsessed | Interviews/ case studies of news strategies | Davis (2007); Stromback (2011); Van Aelst (2010); Rhodes et al (2008) |
| 'Wag the Dog' | Survey (of Swedish MPs opinions) Interviews (on Knesset members' perceptions of media influence) | Stromback (2011); Cohen (2008) |
| Agenda setting 'reflexivity' | Content of press releases/ stories | Van Aelst/ Walgrave (2011); Van Noije et al (2008) |
| Institutional Change | Numbers of SPADs/ roles/ Government codes of conduct and guidance | Gay (2014); Pallas (2014) |
| News Values | Framing in News Content (e.g. 'Strategy Frame' / 'Game Frame') | Regina G Lawrence (2000) |

What government policy officials say about media

“We have to appear in the news or we don’t exist”

Norwegian official (2014)

“You always have to have a headline for the press when you publish a Bill”

UK official (2004)

“Folk in the ministerial environment are scanning media endlessly and responding to it endlessly”

Australian official (2014)

“The centre appears powerful because it makes announcements... it then gets frustrated because they are not turned into delivery”

Whitehall official (2014)

Rob Whiteman, former head of UKBA, in evidence to the Public Administration Select Committee - 17 June 2014

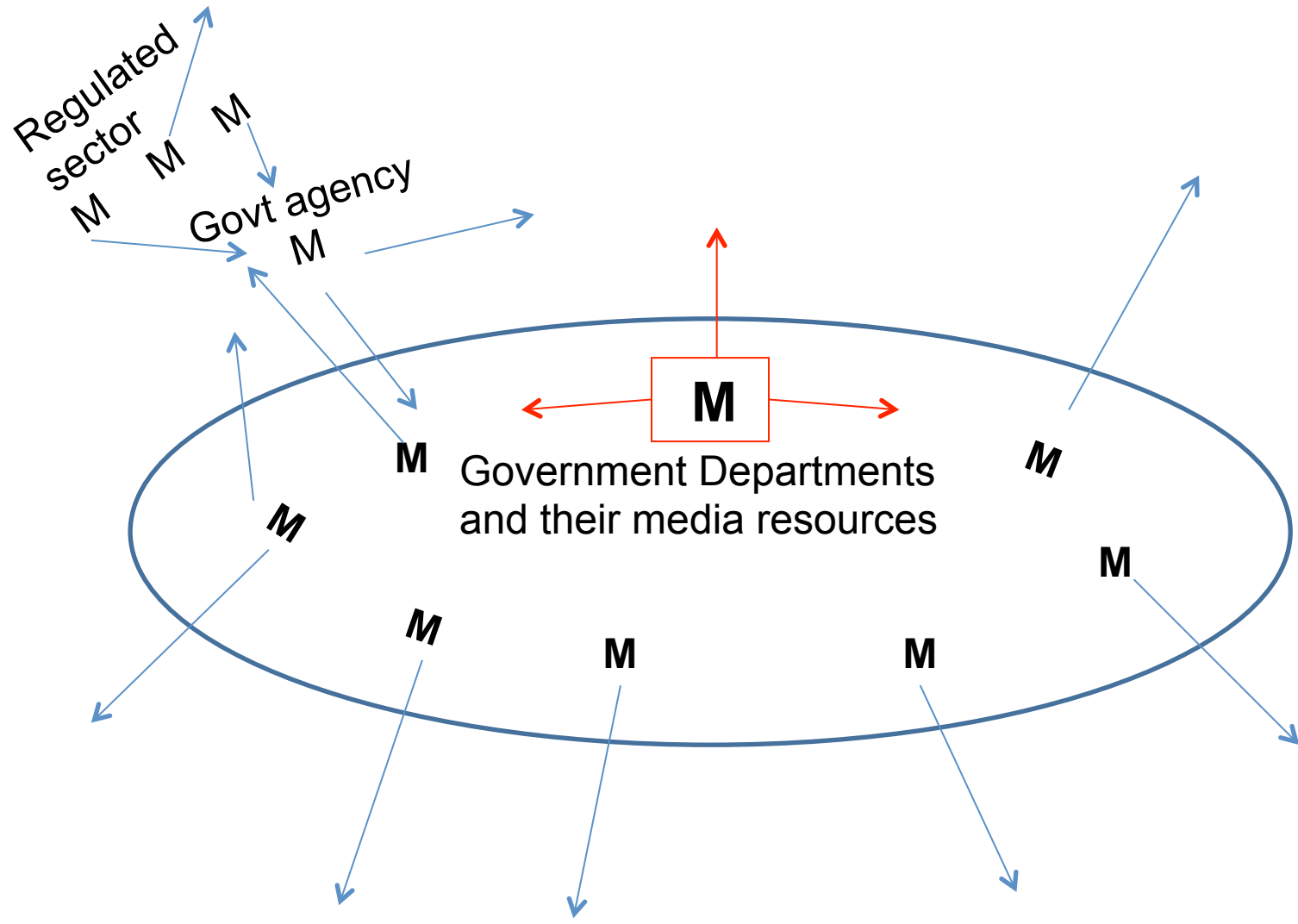
“The culture is quite short term in nature, so we have a culture where, because of the 24-hour news cycle, on the whole there is a huge amount of focus on the short term”.

“the profile the agency received—the constant attention in the media—overwhelmed it, to the degree that the senior management team could not get on with improving the work of the agency because the agency was the story.”

“the story being ‘UKBA is a terrible bit of Government’. I think to turn around culture in an organisation of that scale would take several years”.

Key Research Gaps and Challenges

1. Lots of research on media's consequences for politics, not enough on media's consequences for *government as process*
2. Research which exists does not follow through into government as a *long-term* process viz: imagining, formulating, implementing policy; dealing with responses to implemented policy; managing outcomes of implementation; managing communications. . .
3. Research needs to take into account how institutions *outside* government (agencies, NGOs, schools, hospital trusts . . .) use media to influence government, and consequences *of this* for government
4. Research needed not only on how government reacts to media but also how government (and other institutions) plan *ahead* i.e. not just media's feedback loop into government, but *feedforward* process
5. Managing communication (and the resulting resource allocations) may have not just benefits but opportunity-costs for government
6. Different managerial/organizational structures affect how media pressures play out nationally? (E.g. in UK where there is an independent, apolitical civil service).



Government and the Media: Pathways for Research

Cross-cutting issues? The problem of time in government

- 24/7 media are speeding up, reducing the time in government to react, deliberate, formulate policy, defend policy . . . (Foster, Crewe/King, social theorist of time Hartmut Rosa)
- Digital media (archiving) increases leakiness of all institutions including government, multiplying inputs to 24/7 media cycle (Bimber, *Information and American Democracy* 2003)
- increasing (necessary?) *centrality* of media planning within government affect work-patterns and resource allocations across wider government [Role of 'planning grids']

Outcome: time for deliberating reduced? Anticipation of reduced time affects longer-term parameters of policy formulation?

With consequences for the possibilities of good government?

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Part II

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Policy priorities and guiding principles influenced by media

- *Gilad* (2012) examined policy at the Financial Services Authority before the 2008 banking crisis and found that a “media led allocation of resources” led to an excessive focus on mis-selling rather than bank liquidity
- Looking at New Labour policy development in a range of areas, *Dean* (2012) claimed that radical populist shifts in direction in education and penal reform could be explained by governing politicians’ fear of and need for media visibility.
- *Diamond* (2014) interviewed 50 senior civil servants, special advisers and ministers, concluding that to avoid policy fiascos, “the quality of policy analysis needs to take precedence over ministers daily appetite for ...short term headlines”.

Politicians see media as both crucial and powerful

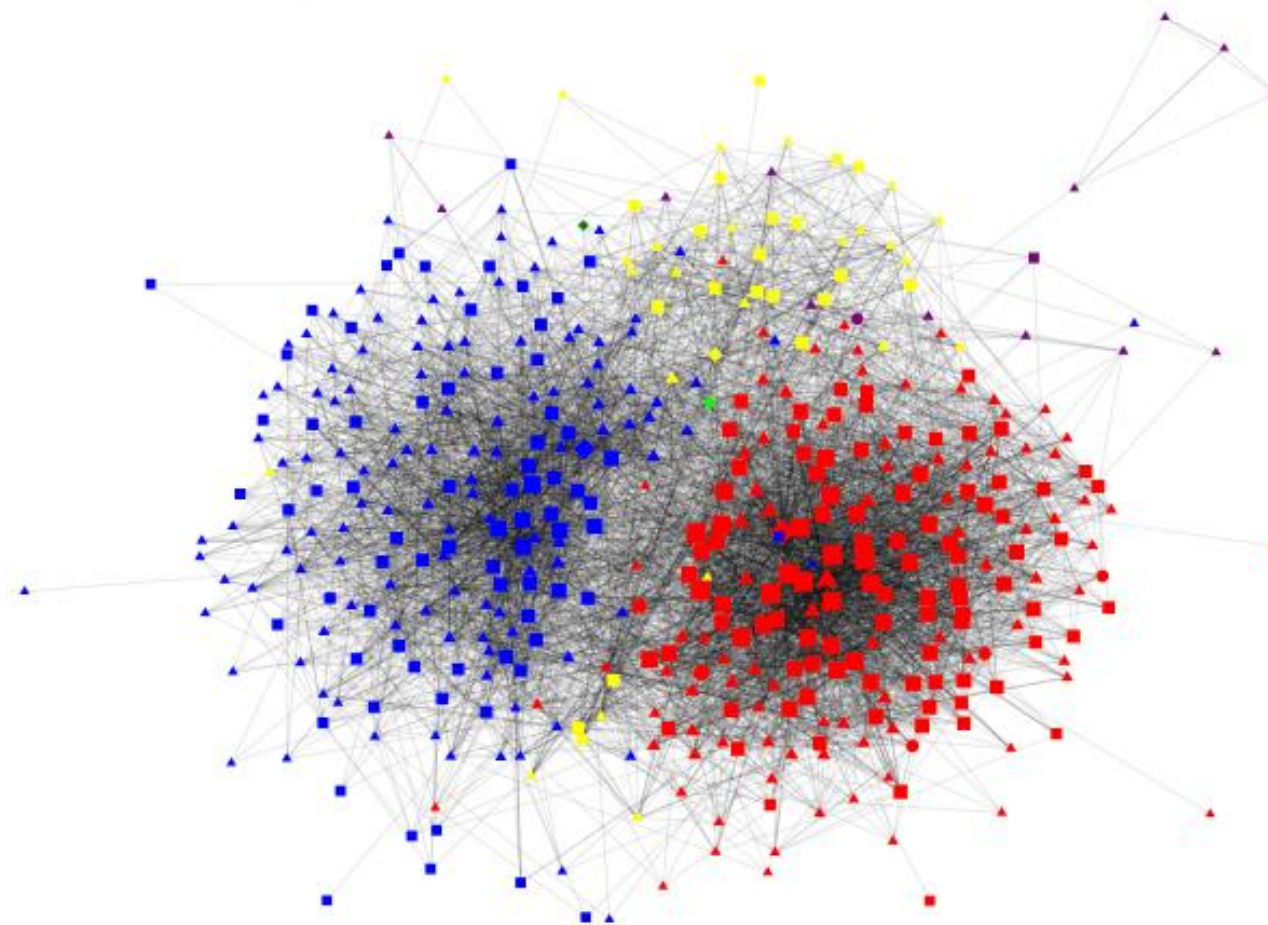
- A survey of 158 Swedish MPs, found that 75.5% agreed that media rather than politicians decide what issues are important, while 86% say that media can make or break politicians (*Stromback* 2011)
- Interviews with MPs in four countries found that they almost universally consider the mass media to be agenda setters on a par with or greater than the Prime Minister and political parties (*Van Aelst* 2011).
- A study based on content analysis of news and parliamentary debates saw the displacement of Parliament by the media as an agenda setter in Britain and Holland (*Van Noije et al* 2008).
- An analysis of media coverage and the progress of bills through the Dutch Parliament, and interviews with MPs, found that the legislative process itself was influenced by media attention. MPs introduced more amendments in anticipation of media coverage (*Melenhorst* 2013, 2014).

Civil servants are highly responsive to media – not only in the UK

- *Thorbjornsrud et al* (2014) observed and interviewed civil servants in a Norwegian government department over one year, and found that officials adapt to news rhythm, change language and format, adopt news values, reallocate resources and responsibilities and change decision-making, even policies and laws.
- Interviews with Finnish policy decision makers in central government and external agencies found differences in responses to media pressures but that even civil servants most insulated from direct media influence anticipate the media anxieties of ministers and take account of this in their policy deliberations (*Kunelius & Reunanen* 2012)

Social networks and political communication

Twitter conversations among Members of Parliament



Created with NodeXL (<http://nodexl.codeplex.com>). Harel-Koren Fast Model

Social networks and political communication

- Techniques such as this can also be applied to government communication networks.
- We can use them to start to understand communication in a more multifaceted way
 - How information is disseminated within groups;
 - Are conversations occurring?
 - In both cases, are online conversations following established offline hierarchies, or are new patterns emerging?
- What questions could we usefully address for you?

Government and the Media: Pathways for Research

Our 3 core questions:

1. At each stage of government process, what are the *benefits, costs, constraints* for each institution that flow from their involvement with media?
2. For government overall, what resources are needed to *manage* those costs? what *consequences* flow from managing its resources that way?
3. What are the longer-term *implications* of 1. and 2. for the quality of government?

Are these the right questions?

Is the sort of research you would like to see done?

Answering these questions will require:

Government and the Media: Pathways for Research

Proposed steps in our research

First stage (second half of 2014)

Initial interviews with civil servants

Report on insights from today's and one more private seminar

. . . leading to major funding bid

Second stage 2015- (subject to funding)

Media analysis: agenda setting and framing of public policy

Documentation review: analysis of codes of conduct and internal guidance

Fieldwork: short periods in government departments and agencies

Case study: government dealing with social media [Nick Anstead]

Case study: media management during a crisis

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Thank you

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