

Modernising the Government Communication Service

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Lee Cain was Downing Street’s director of communications between July 2019 and December 2020 under Boris Johnson.

Navigating one of the most turbulent political periods in modern history, including the Brexit negotiations and the UK’s Covid response, Cain was a key strategist behind Johnson’s successful 2019 leadership campaign and the Conservative Party’s election victory in the same year. He was also a senior figure in the Vote Leave campaign.

In this paper he sets out the lessons on communications he drew from during his time in government and ways in which he believes it should be improved and modernised.

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Introduction

The Government Communication Service (GCS) is an operation of staggering scale – overseeing cross-government advertising, marketing and media operations with a budget in excess of £500 million. It comprises about 8,000 professional communicators spread across 25 departments and arm’s-length bodies (ALBs) and oversaw 162 campaigns in the 2020/21 financial year.

GCS has one purpose: communicating the ideas and actions of the government to the public. But, despite the skills of individuals, the system as a whole is failing in many of its most basic functions due to its overwhelming size, unclear command and control structures, and inability to understand and implement modern communication methods.

Despite the rapid advancement of 24/7 rolling news and the transformative effect social media has had on society, the UK government still runs a predominantly analogue system in a digital age. Important digital skills are still in short supply and broadcasting experience is extremely limited – with the emphasis still disproportionately aimed at print outlets.

For decades, the primary focus of the government has been media management – the daily news cycle, controlling the narrative and responding to (usually negative) stories. This means the prime minister’s morning meeting has long been dominated by a review of the daily newspapers and how to respond to them. Hundreds of press officers are tasked with compiling detailed press lines and scripts for a spokesperson to read out to ‘the lobby’ – the UK’s powerful political journalists – but most of these lines to take are never used. Governments of all political persuasions can quickly feel more like a media rebuttal service as they allow themselves to be shaped by events rather than shaping them with sensible policy development and focused messaging.

Yet despite the continued focus on the daily press agenda, media relations skills have atrophied over recent years. The day-to-day news management has been surrendered to special advisers, who are often less well-versed in policy than permanent civil servants and are limited to two or three per department, unlike departmental press office operations whose staffing numbers can reach into the hundreds. It is not uncommon to meet national newspaper journalists who have not had a single call from a government press officer in a year or more – and most press officers no longer see engagement with the media as a core part of their role.

During my time as Downing Street’s director of communications the government faced two of the most significant challenges since 1945 in finalising the UK’s departure from the European Union and responding to the Covid pandemic. Communicating the decisions the government was taking, and what these meant for the public, was central to both challenges.

While there is much for the government to be proud of during these periods – such as the success of the ‘Stay Home’ campaign – the strains of the system became clear as the government came under increasing pressure. The first Covid campaigns were poor,

the 'hub' system (a team of comms professionals based in the Cabinet Office to assist in the crisis) was a failure due to inexperienced staff and unclear lines of responsibility, policy development was inconsistent and leaking endemic. This resulted in the public receiving mixed messages at a critical time, damaging the government's Covid response.

This paper makes no critique of communication professionals individually. In my time as a special adviser at the Department for Food and Rural Affairs, the Foreign Office and Downing Street, I was fortunate to work alongside many press officers whose talent and dedication was unquestionable and should be lauded. Those who worked in No.10 during the height of the pandemic are some of the most dedicated public servants I've had the pleasure to work alongside. I remain incredibly grateful for their expertise and support during such a challenging period. The system as it currently operates, however, is failing those individuals.

The purpose of this paper is to outline the changes the government communication network urgently needs to deal with the modern challenges it faces. This overhaul is long overdue.

Plan for change

The following 10-point plan is what I believe should be placed at the heart of a new Government Communication Service. Much of what is listed below formed part of my change strategy for GCS while I was director of communications. It is unclear at this stage how many of these changes will still go ahead, but in my opinion these proposals would dramatically improve the current model.

1. A new centralised single-employer GCS – which would see communications staff employed by a centralised employer and not individual departments – should be established to ensure government communications are co-ordinated and speak with one clear message. This should be outlined in a strategic communications guide, which all government communicators are expected to follow. Departments should reinforce that message and amplify each other rather than cut across each other.
2. This new GCS should be headed up by several officials at director general level, giving communications professionals parity with their policy peers. It should be led by a chief operations officer and supported by director generals overseeing cross-Whitehall disciplines – Research and Insight (R&I), Marketing and Digital and Media Relations. For the first time it would provide departmental communications directors with a promotion route within their area of expertise.
3. GCS would carry out all R&I for departments to ensure value for money and coordination of effort. It would still act as a clearing house for all government campaigns, but because it would be providing the R&I for those campaigns it would be able to shape – or reject – them much earlier on rather than have them presented by departments as a fait accompli.

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4. There should be a significant reduction in staffing numbers across Whitehall, with press operations capped at 30–40 members. The bulk of the retained staff should be kept in an improved press office function. Staffing for strategic comms, internal communications and campaigns should all be scaled down, with those staff remaining able to point to proven success in delivering these disciplines. ‘Strategic communication’ titles are more prevalent than ever in Whitehall but few have the skillset capable of delivering real strategic communications, as shown in the Covid response. Reducing the headcount, centralising the function and investing in serious training would reap huge benefits.
 5. The balance of responsibilities between special advisers and senior media practitioners within departments needs to be reset. Each department’s head of news should take on an additional role of a press/official spokesperson for the department (a model that already works effectively within No.10 and the Treasury). This would allow special advisers to focus more on political matters and allow departments to provide a better service for journalists.
 6. Every department should have a dedicated broadcast team tasked with, and accountable for, achieving broadcast coverage. There should also be significant effort made to attract experienced broadcast professionals into GCS to increase this skill.
 7. Directors of communication and heads of news should regard adhering to the overall government message as a key responsibility. Getting enough of the right kind of media coverage should be seen as key in annual appraisals, not the current system that focuses solely on “management”.
 8. Government communications should continue to embrace new technology – producing and distributing government’s own content and engaging directly with the public. However to offset the risks of decreasing transparency and accountability, the government should commit to hold regularly televised press briefings fronted by the prime minister or his press secretary. The government should also conduct more in-depth long-form interviews with broadcasters, which have been dramatically reduced in favour of pooled clips (where one broadcaster asks a few snatched questions on behalf of all broadcasters). Accountability matters.
 9. ‘Digital first’ is a mantra GCS has attempted to embrace but does not translate into practice. All of its members should be digitally literate as a core part of their daily function – with training to ensure they can caption video clips, use all social media platforms, and design eye-catching graphics. Communication professionals should be thinking about digital output (and broadcast visual opportunities) as standard, with greater consideration shown in the construction of media plans. The government should develop a centralised best-practice plan for digital, with teams regularly monitored and reviewed with a central analytics unit. High-performing teams need to be identified with a view to standardise and replicate their success.

10. The government needs to move away from the rigid focus on 'media management' and the longstanding obsession with the daily news cycle, instead giving greater weight to strategic communications. The government can achieve this by outlining clear policy priorities, developing an engaging narrative which is backed by focused messaging. It is this process that drives public confidence in the government's direction and actions – letting them know elected officials are delivering for them.

The need to speak with one voice

The public see (and hear) the government as one single entity. However, by necessity the government has to do many different things at the same time. Alongside the 'business as usual' of informing the public about, for example, new apprenticeship schemes or the recruitment of servicemen and women, the central role of effective government communications is to ensure that 'the things government is doing' can be logically corralled under a small number of themes that together create a coherent narrative. This drives public confidence in the government's direction and actions.

Unfortunately, over many years we've seen that government – under whichever leadership – rarely has a unifying message. Departments treat the public like different 'stakeholders' that need to be spoken to in different ways. But no normal person sees the Department of Health differently from, say, the Department for Transport. It's just simply the government.

The importance of a single government voice was brought home by Covid. In the earliest months, with so many new rules, and so much guidance required for hundreds of possible scenarios, the need for clarity was paramount. It necessitated the rapid introduction of a centralised communications machine to provide the Cabinet Office and No.10 with vastly greater resources. It also saw the implementation of a clear and co-ordinated approach to paid campaigns, with all messaging and creative execution being required to reflect one central, whole-of-government narrative. This centralised function had to be led by temporary external appointments as the government machine did not have the resources, skills or experience (particularly on strategic communications, message development and digital communications) to manage the pandemic.

This centralised communications function should not be confused with the creation of a Cabinet Office 'hub', launched at the beginning of the pandemic. This is a regularly rehashed procedure in Whitehall and is a purely bureaucratic exercise to provide the perception of 'grip', but in reality performed poorly due to an opaque remit, weak leadership structure and inexperienced or poorly skilled team. It duplicated the Covid-related work of the No.10 press office and ultimately became a further layer of unnecessary bureaucracy.

The centralised model I implemented took a different approach. It worked in tandem with the senior communications team inside No.10 and spoke with the authority of the prime minister, ensuring policy and communications were joined up at every level – bringing together focus groups, polling and digital feedback to help inform policy and develop the right messaging.

While various different messages or information about specific programmes of support were disseminated by individual departments throughout the crisis, as much as possible they all reflected the messaging and branding of the central government message throughout – with national public health campaigns devised and launched in weeks when they would usually take months if not years.

But without the impetus provided by the pandemic, too often government communication has become trapped in the age-old Whitehall problem of fragmented departments. Interdepartmental communication is often poor, with insight and data sharing limited and often relaying conflicting messages. There are dozens of campaigns on different aspects of a policy when there should be just one. Secretaries of state and civil service leaders guard and prize their own fiefdoms – focusing on the media spoils of a policy announcement rather than asking how, collectively, something could be communicated more cohesively.

This also creates problems in staffing. Departments are significantly over staffed, especially in areas like strategic communications or internal comms, with poor performance routinely accepted. This means talented government communicators – of which there are many – are poorly paid and often less influential than policy colleagues. The work burden is nearly always placed on the shoulders of the press office – they're the first in, the last out, and often in the direct firing line of ministers and senior civil servants.

There have been unnecessary and unhelpful departmental turf wars as officials understandably try to game the system to retain the best staff. Given the rigidity of departmental pay scales, the only way that good staff can get a pay rise is to be promoted, usually moving to another department or non-media role. I found this particularly apparent during Covid when trying to move high-performing members of staff from one department to another where demand and need was significantly greater. Those fiefdoms held on to talent, viewing their own department's needs as more important than the government's.

A centralised single-employer model, that values the collective endeavour above the current siloed mentality, will be one way of encouraging behaviour change and allow the government to communicate with one voice.

Making GCS a 'single employer'

The goal here is not to centralise communications for direct command and control. It is to provide a unifying government objective, giving each department or team the flexibility and initiative they need. And equally as important is to further professionalise and incentivise communications personnel.

As we struggled with elements of the government machine during the early weeks of the Covid crisis it became clear that a centralised system was needed. We could not communicate effectively when different departments prioritised their own stakeholders

and their specialised interests, instead of working as a single government team, communicating to the entire country. It was those experiences that led to the decision to move GCS from one where each department acted independently into a centralised 'single employer' model akin to the Government Legal Service (GLS).

The single employer model allows:

- Better prioritisation of people and skills to deliver the government's priorities.
- Reduced duplication including on recruitment, public opinion research and professional development.
- Improved agility to deploy staff to areas of greatest need, such as recently during the Covid response.
- Significant savings for the taxpayer and improved efficiency by reducing headcount by 60%.
- Emphasis on employing staff who want a career in communications, creating a new higher standard and affording equal terms across the civil service.

Communications staff at ALBs should also be brought under the GCS umbrella to provide greater cohesion and consistency of messaging. These staff, in particular, are often over-graded and over-paid as a way of compensating them for being further from power – the currency of Whitehall. All too often during the pandemic government communication plans were knocked off course by briefings from within ALBs that had not been shared with central government. This made the handling of events look chaotic, eroding public trust in the government's handling of the pandemic. This could have been solved by having a closer relationship and a clearer command and control structure between government and ALBs, with clearer understanding of clearance processes.

Installing the right leadership within GCS

Improvements to government communication will not just come through structural change. It needs the right leadership to put communication of policy on a level playing field with policy development itself. Communication is widely seen as a poor relation to policy within Whitehall and it is important that dynamic changes.

As we have seen in the pandemic, good communications can save lives and good communication practitioners should be as respected as their policy counterparts. All too often communications experts are blamed for policy failings as many observers struggle to distinguish between communications and policy issues, believing bad headlines reflect bad media management rather than problems with the policy behind the headlines. Even the best communications strategies cannot repair poor policy. The best way to ensure good policy survives first contact with the media and public is to have respected communication experts involved from inception.

The civil service does not put communications staff at the same level as those in policy roles. There are no director generals in communications and have not been since 2012, meaning the most experienced and ambitious communicators change disciplines or leave government altogether. In contrast, the Cabinet Office alone is home to 35 director generals across other disciplines.

The head of GCS is currently ranked as an executive director. At this grade they cannot operate at the level required to enforce communications requirements across the government, nor lead the reputational improvements that departmental teams would benefit hugely from. This must change.

In a centralised structure, the new head of GCS should act as a chief operating officer (COO) or director general (DG) given the necessary authority to ensure the government is co-ordinated and talking with one voice. This official should report to the prime minister's director of communications and the Cabinet Office permanent secretary.

The key strategic purpose of this move would be to make sure that those in charge of departmental communications understand that communications should serve the government as a whole, not solely the departments where they happen to work – or the carousel of ministers in them.

The fundamental objective is to transform GCS from a confederation with a weak centre into a powerhouse of talented communicators with clout, who deliver on both central government priorities and raise performance. It should also be able to take the lead and operate more effectively in moments of national crisis.

Underneath the new leadership should be three additional DGs overseeing the key disciplines of Research and Insight, Marketing and Digital and Media Relations:

- **Director general, Marketing and Digital ('paid media'):** Co-ordination and professional leadership for all paid communications activity across Whitehall – that is, advertising. The postholder would ensure not just strategic alignment with the centre but also value for money, procurement and professional leadership. They would take overall responsibility for key government priority campaigns and all campaigns with an annual budget of over £100,000.
- **Director general, Media Relations ('earned media'):** Direct responsibility and remit to improve the standard of all earned media (organically generated media coverage) work across government, with a particular focus on professional standards and ensuring that media relations teams 'win the argument' and work proactively on the central GCS narrative. The holder of this post would be specifically empowered to take control of media relations operations in particular departments facing out-of-the-ordinary challenges – for example, this person would have led the civil service media relations response to the Covid crisis.
- **Director general, Research and Insight:** Responsibility for a new centralised insight function plus evaluation, national security communications, HR, finance, and the Communications Fast Stream.

New leadership should provide fresh accountability. Departmental directors of communications have only an informal 'dotted line' to link them to central government leaders. While some functions of departmental communications teams should continue to be monitored and line-managed inside departments (for instance HR issues, budget monitoring), functional line management of directors of communication should move formally to the centre. Appointments of senior staff should be the sole responsibility of the new GCS centre and managed from there.

This new structure will provide greater co-ordination across Whitehall, help to drive forward the prime minister's priorities, save taxpayer's money by reducing overblown staffing numbers, strip back unnecessary campaigns and create a new pathway for the top civil service jobs for government communicators – meaning the retention of the most talented officials within this discipline.

Staffing: Improve quality, reduce quantity

Government communications has forgotten how to carry out its primary functions – engaging with the media and communicating with the public. Despite these falling standards, the headcount has ballooned.

When I started as Downing Street director of communications I was told the government employed approximately 4,000 communicators. When I asked for an audit of all those who considered their job to be within 'communications', it uncovered more than double this amount.

Each department has an army of communication professionals overseeing the press office, internal comms, strategic comms, digital, campaigns and even events – but a great many simply do not deliver value for money. It is unquestionable that the government could deliver a higher-quality output with fewer members of staff. This would save the taxpayer tens of thousands of pounds every year.

Despite media operations with headcounts well into the hundreds, many departments are unable to conduct the most basic functions. Building constructive relationships with journalists, rebutting inaccurate stories and, in many cases, answering enquiries with anything other than an irrelevant agreed 'line to take' that fails to address the question. These are all critical requirements that go unfulfilled.

Too much time is spent writing a multitude of press releases – which some departmental officials regard as 'the last word' on a policy issue. They usually receive little or no coverage, and the scattergun approach leaves key government priorities ignored or forgotten. Meanwhile broadcast and digital expertise remains almost non-existent in many parts of Whitehall with the focus remaining solely on the print medium, despite the dramatic changes in how the public digests news. For example, the centre had no data-visualisation capability in the early days of the pandemic. Put starkly, there was nobody with the ability to create slides for the daily press conference – and even when a system was designed people struggled with the skills required, and slides were often sent only moments before press conferences were due to begin.

This is not the fault of the individual press officers. The failures reflect the culture that has been created over the past decade, which has allowed basic modern news skills to become an afterthought.

The focus has moved away from the traditional tasks of a high-functioning press operation to an ever-greater focus on 'strategic communications' and 'campaign teams'. These are vital weapons in the modern communication arsenal but in Whitehall neither are conducted efficiently or effectively. Ironically, they tend to behave in a deeply non-strategic way: often with no metrics to measure success, and no reviews of whether campaigns are working.

The vast majority of Whitehall employees working in these fields do not have an adequate understanding of strategic communications or campaigns. An example of this was the poor first iteration of the Covid campaign, which had to be scrapped and restarted with outside expertise – individuals who really understood strategic communications and campaigns. Again the system would benefit from real expertise in the new centralised GCS, stripping back the number of campaigns and staff, and improving the training for those continuing their careers.

Whitehall also suffers from an over-reliance on departmental special advisors. The workload of the 'media spad' has grown enormously over recent years with journalists feeling, not unreasonably, that it is only the special advisors who can provide the details and insight needed for their story. This has created an imbalance with special advisors being overworked to the point of exhaustion and unable to take any time away from their mobile phone, while experienced press officers feel underutilised despite often having significantly more experience of departmental issues. Journalists need to know who the key communications experts are in each department – and that they have the authority to speak for the department and their minister. In turn, key communications staff need to be empowered to do their jobs effectively. The most effective press operations are where senior civil servants and political appointments can work together and understand the remit of their roles.

If we are to improve the output of the government's communication operation the most important action needs to be a dramatic cut in personnel. No government department should have a press operation with staffing in the hundreds – in fact having a communication function with an upper limit of around 30 or 40 would help departments focus on their real priorities and end the churn of often-ignored press releases and campaigns. (GCS should have additional staffing resources to boost departments during extreme events, such as the pandemic, but these should be rare).

The bulk of these cuts should come from areas outside the press office itself – with a return to the primary function of the communications team to run an efficient media operation, building relationships with the media, placing positive stories that reinforce the government narrative and quickly rebutting inaccurate stories. However remuneration for the remaining staff should be vastly improved – especially for those in the most demanding roles in No.10 and the Treasury.

Heads of news should behave as practitioners at least as much as civil service managers. They should be the 'senior spokesperson' of the department, and be capable of engaging with and, if necessary, personally rebutting coverage. This will help take some of the pressure from special advisers and see more responsibility shared without the senior team. Special advisers should be able to focus more on matters that are explicitly political.

Every department should be encouraged to have a dedicated broadcast team tasked with, and accountable for, achieving broadcast coverage. This should involve more people who have worked within broadcast news and understand the medium and can use it inventively, for example by producing visuals to bring stories to life for broadcasters.

The pace of modern media means news cycles happen more rapidly than ever before and factually incorrect stories quickly gain traction. Left unchallenged, these can lead the public to accept them as facts. There should also be a rapid rebuttal unit in each department to counter inaccurate stories immediately. This unit should not seek to 'spin' but instead become a valuable and trusted journalistic tool to help separate fact from fiction.

The 'Whitehall denial' used to be the gold standard. When a press officer said a story wasn't true, it wasn't printed. This authority needs to be restored – by ensuring rebuttals are consistently fair and accurate. This will take time and patience but is in the interests of all parties. However when press officers are afraid of picking up the phone, it is difficult to begin this process.

Moving from an analogue to a digital system

One of the biggest challenges facing government communications in the next decade is how it adapts to the digital age. Innovations such as native content – paid content designed to sit naturally within a publication or website, similar to an 'advertorial' – and other new media present new opportunities but also raise questions around accountability and how traditional media will survive and stay relevant to a digital generation.

When I first entered No.10, I was amazed to find the basic model of public communication had not evolved in any significant way in decades – an extraordinary feat when we consider advancements in social media and smartphones. In short, GCS has been running an analogue system in a digital age.

There was a heavy reliance on bought-in agency expertise to devise and develop digital products. Valuing digital expertise and placing it on par with traditional communications is long overdue.

Currently digital content is seen as a split between in-house teams and agency work. The quality of in-house teams varies enormously – some, like the Department for International Trade, are extremely strong and as good as most agency teams. However,

the majority are unable to match this performance, many struggling with requests for graphics with a quick turnaround, or with requirements that stray outside standard departmental templates.

Each government department has multiple channels within each social media platform, with some used regularly and some lying dormant. There is no overarching government-wide structure or strategy for the use of digital platforms and no standardised view of how success should be determined (for example, some departments judge success on content quantity while others on engagement).

At the beginning of the Covid response there was no single platform for the 'UK Government'. Vital public health messages were distributed via a mixture of the Department of Health, Department of Transport or the Cabinet Office digital channels. While health news and information about travel disruption made user searches more intuitive, the Cabinet Office struggled as many people are unaware that it is even related to the government.

New government-wide digital assets had to be created on platforms such as LinkedIn, Instagram, SnapChat and YouTube for the launch of the 'Stay Home' campaign to ensure people understood the messaging was directly from the government.

This was a huge success, with content reaching more than 30 million people a month – and was critical in helping to saturate the market with life-saving messaging. Once developed, larger audiences allowed the government to test messaging on digital platforms, fine-tuning them before putting them in the field or adopting wholesale from audience response. This was a fresh way of working for government campaigns and was only possible thanks to the newly developed integration with digital experience and campaign teams.

However, these channels are still not developed and staffed adequately, resulting in key assets with the ability to communicate directly with millions of people languishing. In the corporate environment there would be an experienced, well-staffed and high-functioning team managing these but the government remains too rigidly focused on churning out press notices and has yet to prioritise its staffing appropriately.

Developing a strategy and building the right structure to use digital content well means understanding what the government is trying to achieve. One of the first tasks for the proposed director general for marketing and digital should be to clearly define the metrics for measuring success. All digital content – particularly within the campaign space – should come with a call to action (usually a behavioural change: stay at home, wear a mask) and its success can be easily measured using the tools readily available. There needs to be regular reviews of analytics across Whitehall (not just individual departments) to identify high-performing teams and assets with a view to standardise and replicate their success, creating a new best practice for all to follow.

The new director general for marketing and digital should oversee the following:

- The production of a centrally produced brand guidelines to go in a Strategic Communications Guide (it was not until Covid that there had been the creation of a style guide for government campaigns).
- The production of a centrally mandated set of design principles.
- A focus on ensuring that digital is on par with broadcast – every Director of Communication and departmental team should be given the appropriate resource and instructed that digital-targeted clips are prioritised alongside broadcast clips on all visits.
- Providing digital training for all members of communications team to allow them to deliver basic digital output (such as captions on clips).
- Increasing the general focus on videography – for the prime minister in particular, longer-form video for story telling showing how government works behind the scenes to 'do things for you'.

Creative teams need to be enhanced and empowered to make content that is genuinely engaging to normal people. Too often creative and digital staff are used as the personal PR for a minister creating content that has little purpose and is viewed only by a few hundred people, often within Westminster. There needs to be a focus and accountability on creating content that is viewed and shared.

Improve paid campaigns and advertising

The government's campaign budget for the 2020/21 financial year in excess of £600m was spent on more than 160 campaigns, designed to inform the public and/or encourage a behavioural change. Most of this public money was wasted on campaigns that had little impact on the public and simply weren't needed.

A small proportion of campaigns are a necessity (such as on fire safety) but this would number in the low twenties; instead, most are 'legacy campaigns' of a one-time minister who has long moved departments but a specialist team overseeing the policy remains in place. This is compounded by the incoming minister starting their own campaign for their personal pet projects.

None of this had previously been centrally co-ordinated, and there was no strategic vision to define success and often there was very little monitoring of campaign cut through. Campaign assets are not routinely shared in advance so the opportunity to amplify critical messaging is missed. This results in millions of pounds of public money being squandered annually.

The pandemic changed this. What worked particularly well during this period was GCS acting as the central command and control structure for the development, execution and monitoring of all the government's communications – most notably multi-platform paid campaigns and digital content.

It served to rectify flaws, for example, at the beginning of the lockdown there were no standalone official government digital assets. These had to be created or repurposed in order for the government to speak with one voice for digital advertising during the Coronavirus crisis.

Centrally managed campaigns benefited from economies of scale and extra eyes reviewing performance – including a central view of creative, media performance, insight for fast feedback loops and sharing of best practice across campaigns. Most government campaigns failed to get access to this.

However, it should be noted that the government is not without success in this area. The 'Get Ready for Brexit', 'Stay Home, Save Lives' and the 'Great' campaigns are cross-government initiatives that succeeded in driving awareness and behaviour change but they are the exception to the rule and lessons have not been learned from their success.

A good starting point in improving government paid campaigns and advertising would simply be to reduce the number of campaigns – dramatically – and to establish a system where pitches for new campaigns are made to the campaign head in the new-look GCS. This position would act as a quality control function, closing down campaigns that were no longer needed and ensuring new campaigns were robustly challenged with data and costs for their aims.

Centralised R&I should be the cornerstone of the new GCS

The pandemic forced a change in how the government dealt with Research and Insight (R&I). It is crucial these lessons are not lost. Initially there was insufficient strategic leadership inside the Cabinet Office to cope with a crisis on the scale of the pandemic. Several important departments had little experience in commissioning their own R&I work and did not share findings when it came in, often after serious delays. This resulted in wasted public money, resources and information that could be critical to our Covid response.

Given the emergency situation all 'opinion research' was brought under the direction of the Cabinet Office rather than any individual departments and new external leadership was brought in-house and tasked with scaling a team able to assess public mood and actions, and to test marketing materials.

This centralised model saw departments 'pitch' into the centre and requests were reviewed before research bids were commissioned. This meant that each bid was relevant to the task at hand, provided value for money and wasn't a duplication of other bids.

Centralising R&I should be a key part of any reorganisation of the whole-of-government communications. It will ensure that all communications and campaigns reflect the overarching narrative, providing a central vision and a level of control over any proposed policy-related research that may go otherwise unnoticed.

Government should increase transparency and accountability by speaking directly to the nation

The aim of all government communications is to take the new policy, ideas and arguments of the administration and explain it to the public in the most convincing way.

Traditionally this could only be done through the successful filter of the 'lobby' – the collective term for the UK's powerful political journalists. However in a bid to appease the journalists who hold them to account, politicians and advisers are unwilling to modify the traditional ways of communicating. This is to the detriment of the public it serves.

The lobby plays a critical function of overseeing government and providing checks and balances of those in power. It is to the UK's credit that we are renowned for our powerful free press. However this means that despite the technological advancements made in the past two decades the government communication machine remains stubbornly focused on print media.

In 2021 print is no longer the primary source of news to the general public. Data from the 2019 general election campaign showed more than 60% of the public received their information from broadcast news outlets, meaning it was the dominant source of news for most people. However, it was also striking that more people said they took their news from digital platforms than print titles.

This does not mean that the government should abandon its focus on the print media, which despite falling circulation is still read by millions and shapes much of the political discourse and provides a vital role as a check on power. What this data highlights is how more should be done to increase expertise and output in broadcast and digital outlets to reach new audiences.

When Boris Johnson came to power in July 2019, we tried to make progress – with a greater focus on fresh digital content communicating directly with the public. However, none of this was sufficient to significantly change how the government collectively thought about communication; the traditional methods were too entrenched.

The pandemic forced change. The public demand for the latest information was at unprecedented levels, which was met with the launch of regularly televised press briefings.

The format allowed the government to communicate directly to the public about the latest policy decisions that were dramatically affecting their lives. It also allowed the media and members of the public to hold the government to account.

At their peak the daily press conferences regularly drew audiences of 10 million while the prime minister's address to the nation in March 2020 attracted 27 million. Although undoubtedly heightened by a unique situation, the press conferences showed there is an appetite from the public to hear directly from its leaders about the challenges

it is facing and how it is solving them. This is why it was decided the televised press briefings should continue after Covid.

There are legitimate concerns about how such a transformative shift in communication strategy would affect politics in the UK, especially having unelected advisers as such prominent faces within the government (having more than one spokesperson would dilute this effect). And it would also be a gross error for the briefings to go ahead without the government imposing some limits on time, regularity and potentially with some kind of embargo.

It is also said that televised briefings would increase the impact of negative stories for the government. Government should not reject increased transparency because it may not also be universally positive, but I also believe the assessment that difficult stories are less likely to top news bulletins without an on-camera briefings is false. The Covid briefings were seen as a net positive for the government as it allowed it to explain decisions in depth and direct to the public. This should be replicated after Covid.

In Washington and Brussels we see the executive held to account by the media with regular on-camera briefings, in London it is still conducted behind closed doors with the lobby solely in charge of shaping the narrative.

Advances in digital technology mean the government is now able to produce and publish its own content, and this should be welcomed as it allows those who lead us to engage and be engaged with those who elect them to high office – and connect with audiences previously unavailable to them.

The introduction of initiatives such as People's PMQs (Prime Minister's Questions) – where the prime minister is asked questions by members of the public – and in-house photographers should be welcomed to provide additional insight into the workings of government.

However here I also urge caution as such measures are no substitute for the scrutiny of the free press – which is why the televised press briefings were such a key part of the communication shake-up in 2020. If the UK is to embrace government creating and distributing its own content, the government must also look for ways to apply transparency and accountability. Sunlight remains the best disinfectant.

It would have also provided a powerful stimulus for communications professionals within the government to develop skills for the modern media environment, with increased focus on broadcast and digital expertise.

While for now the televised press briefing has been halted, the change is inevitable. There is increased demand for content by media organisations and the public.

A compromise of the earlier plan would be for the prime minister – an excellent communicator – to take the lead and commit to holding a regularly televised press briefing after Covid and continuing to keep the country up-to-date on the political challenges faced by the government. In the UK's legal system we rightly believe that

justice should not only be done but be seen to be done, this should be the same with our elected officials.

The government should also commit itself to increasing the number of long form in-depth broadcast interviews, which have been in slow decline in favour of 'pool clips' – short, easily edited videos that rarely shed much light on the issues covered.

For this approach to be successful, broadcasters have a responsibility to try and engage the interviewee and inform the audience. The current taste for 'gotcha-style' interviews sees an increasingly frustrated interviewer pitch increasingly aggressive questions to their guest, who in turn attempts to say as little as possible to avoid giving away any unhelpful news lines. This style of questioning means all parties – especially the audience – feel like little was achieved from the exercise. By giving journalists more time to explore the issues they will feel less pressured to locate the ever-important news line and reset on the style of interviews conducted.

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September 2021

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