

Journalistic Pathfinding:
How the Parliamentary Press Gallery Adapted to News Management Under the
Conservative Government of Stephen Harper

by

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Abstract

Commentary on the contemporary interface between the media and governments often portrays outnumbered reporters as willingly accepting information subsidies as a way of meeting the demands of the 24/7 multi-platform newsroom. But this view fails to take into account the impact on journalistic routines of more extreme forms of government news management, which block access to information and to politicians rather than merely packaging or “spinning” them favourably.

The experience of the parliamentary press gallery in Ottawa vis-à-vis Stephen Harper’s government offers an excellent opportunity to take a closer look at the practical realities of political journalists confronted with stringent government news management tactics. A rupture in the historic role relationship between the gallery and the Prime Minister’s Office resulted in journalists adapting their techniques. They became pathfinders seeking out new routes – alternative human and data sources – to reach the information they needed to write their stories and prepare broadcasts.

Acknowledgments

One of the first things you're supposed to do when embarking on the Master of Journalism program at Carleton University is come up with a thesis topic. For someone like me, having been away from university for 16 years doing hard news, the academic ideas weren't exactly flowing freely. In the first master's course I took in 2011, Media and Society, graduate supervisor Susan Harada provided students with a thought-provoking range of writings to absorb and study. One of those was Kirsten Kozolanka's examination of the role strategic communications played in the sponsorship scandal. This article spoke to me. As a member of the press gallery, frustrated with increasingly politicized information products from the public service and restricted access to politicians, the article served as a springboard into this thesis.

Kirsten Kozolanka went on to become my thesis supervisor, an ideal match as her ongoing research into the area of political communication has provided me with exactly the type of expertise and enthusiastic guidance that I required. I must also acknowledge the support and encouragement of Susan Harada, who was a sounding board and helped me to better conceptualize the thesis.

I thank the 14 members of the parliamentary press gallery who agreed to take time out of their busy schedules to talk to me about these issues. It came as no surprise that their comments were always thoughtful, never self-reverential, and often profound.

I must also acknowledge the patience and support of my family – Greg, Gabriela and Amaya – who put up with many distracted evenings and weekends as I tried to fit school into the nooks and crannies of free time left over after work. This is dedicated to them.

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Appendix A: List of Interview Questions

Appendix B: List of Interview Subjects

Introduction

In November 2006, I was among the group of reporters that followed Prime Minister Stephen Harper to Hanoi, Vietnam, where he was attending the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) leaders' meeting. The parliamentary press gallery had already been feeling the squeeze of tight controls on information and access in Ottawa under the new Conservative government, and this trip to Asia was no different. During the very first photo opportunity with Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, a Radio-Canada reporter asked an impromptu question of the prime minister. Immediately thereafter, journalists were barred from all of the prime minister's scheduled events, with the exception of his single news conference at the close of the summit (Ditchburn "Harper's Opaque"). Photojournalists had no such restrictions placed on them.

Left with the prospect of nothing to cover for three days, the press corps searched for new paths to the information they needed. In one case, we intercepted the prime minister at a photo opportunity at the embassy of the government of New Zealand – a setting his team was unable to control. At another juncture, we sought out the spokespeople for the Chinese and the South Korean governments for details of the bilateral meetings their leaders had each wrapped up with our prime minister. Journalists adapted to the restrictions imposed on them, and not simply by reprinting the government press releases that were copiously emailed to them. In essence, they became pathfinders to get around the newest information roadblocks.

This thesis seeks to examine how journalists adapt to government news management techniques in an era of dwindling newsroom resources and intense, 24/7 newsroom pressures. The research focuses on journalists in the parliamentary press gallery in Ottawa, who are at the frontlines of dealing with the federal government's strategic communication tactics.

The victory of Stephen Harper's Conservatives in the general election of 2006 marked a period of significant change in how the federal government – and particularly the prime minister's office – approached communications and news management, now heavily influenced by political marketing concepts. From the outset, access to the prime minister, to cabinet ministers, and even to particular events or locations was severely reduced or blocked completely. Ministers were less frequently available for interviews or impromptu news conferences (colloquially called scrums), and the flow of information from government departments was throttled. The changes shook the foundations of the relationship between the gallery and the government, creating the sort of “fault line” that academic Helen Ester identified in her own 2009 PhD research into the Canberra press gallery and the government of former Australian Prime Minister John Howard.

The central question behind this thesis is how reporters have adapted to government news management. Emanating from this question are a number of other queries: What is the nature of the government news management that has been brought to bear on Canada's national reporters? Why has it developed this way? Why do reporters adapt their behaviour the way that they do? A reflection on how curtailed access to parliamentarians and government information affects the democratic ideal of an informed citizenry is also a necessary component of this research.

Thesis Structure

Chapter One will consist of a double-pronged literature review. The first component will seek to define government news management and its various forms, and review the literature on how strategic communication in government has been changing in recent decades and why. The second component will review literature on journalistic practice, focusing on topics such as the

routinization of news work and on news values, with particular attention paid to research that has dealt with journalistic responses to government news management.

In Chapter Two, I will review recent literature on how federal governments in two other Westminster systems, the United Kingdom and Australia, have attempted to manage the news. The objective is to determine what can be learned about how other similar governments have approached news management, as well as about the experience of journalists in those countries, to help demonstrate the development of a similar yet unique media/government culture in Ottawa.

In Chapter Three, I will review the history of the parliamentary press gallery and how the relationship between reporters and the government has evolved since Confederation. The state of the larger Canadian media landscape within which the gallery operates will also be examined, including concentration of ownership and technological changes.

The evolution of government news management will be the focus of Chapter Four, between Confederation and the Liberal governments of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin. This section will demonstrate how slowly the federal government was to develop its communication services, but then how television, the centralization of political power, and eventually corporate management ideals shaped the approach to media relations and the dissemination of information.

Chapter Five will zero in on the news management style of Stephen Harper's government, relying heavily on interviews conducted with 14 members of the press gallery. I will seek to explain how the barriers to access introduced by the Conservative government created a rupture in what Blumler and Gurevitch have described as a normatively bounded role relationship between the two groups.

Chapter Six will answer the central question of how reporters have adapted to government news management and altered their work routines in order to get the information they need to fill their newspapers, website and broadcasts. I term their adaptation as “journalistic pathfinding,” as they find new routes around the closed doors of politicians and public servants. The conclusion will address broader questions about journalism, the public’s access to information about government and the ensuing considerations for Canadian democracy. The unintended consequences for governments of a closed-down system of government communications will also be examined. Additionally, I will identify potential avenues for future research.

Methodology/Theoretical Framework

I employed three main methodologies to complete this thesis. The first is based on analysis of existing research in the area of government news management and journalistic practice, which is used as the foundation for understanding the empirical data that I collected. I also conducted a historical analysis of the parliamentary press gallery and government communication in Canada for the same purpose.

The empirical research is qualitative and inductive. I interviewed 14 current members of the Parliamentary Press Gallery, out of a potential pool of 52. I deliberately selected reporters who had experience reporting on two or more prime ministers, so that they could comment authoritatively on how government news management had evolved under different administrations. I sought out only those who reported on a day-to-day basis on federal politics, because they would have the most experience with dealing with government officials directly. Therefore, columnists, producers, broadcast technicians, photographers and television or radio

hosts (who did not do daily reporting) were excluded as possible interviewees. I also excluded all employees of *The Canadian Press*, where I currently work.

The journalists came from a variety of outlets, from national newspapers, to a weekly specialty publication, to radio and television networks. Two of the journalists worked for francophone publications (See Appendix A). My objective was to collect a wide range of viewpoints from a cross-section of the gallery. Only one interviewee of the 14 asked to remain anonymous. I asked the subjects both closed and open-ended questions (See Appendix B).

The core of this thesis consists of themes that arose from the answers I received. I found certain commonalities between the responses. My conclusions are broad-based, taking into account the highly subjective and qualitative nature of the work undertaken. As outlined in Brians et al. on the subject of elite and specialized interviewing, I was “concerned with discovering facts and patterns rather than measuring pre-selected phenomena” (367). In this regard, I was also influenced by Jennifer Lees-Marshment’s case study on Canadian practitioners’ perspectives on political marketing, published as a chapter in the 2012 book *Political Marketing in Canada*. Marshment states that her research methods were “inductive, so research was organic, open-ended, and exploratory, allowing rules and conclusions to flow from the data” (92).

My research used as a partial guide the theoretical framework offered by Mark Fishman in his 1980 book *Manufacturing the News*. Fishman posited that a journalist who is unable to obtain information from the usual bureaucratic avenues will routinely seek out different bureaucratic sources in order to complete an assignment. I demonstrate that this is the case with journalists on the parliamentary “round” or beat who face a much more sophisticated regime of news management than Fishman might have imagined 30 years ago. Journalists may now also

seek out non-bureaucratic sources to complete their work (Davis). In addition, I relied on the “expanded framework” for studying the relationship between politicians and the media developed by Blumler and Gurevitch, who saw the relationship between the two culturally intertwined groups as normatively bounded – a theory that could help explain the trauma felt when expectations around the relationship are not met.

Limitations

I focused my research on the years since the Conservatives took power in 2006, because of the marked changes to government communications that the party introduced. This shift has been widely noted in books, journals, public speeches and in journalistic accounts. I will, however, address changes that have been occurring to government communications and media relations for many years, particularly in the period of Liberal governments from 1993 to 2006.

I did not interview government communications officials or politicians, as the focus of this thesis is on shifts in media practice. However, I used secondary sources in order to illustrate the changes made to news management. As a result, my research can be described as “internalist,” focusing on “how the media organize their information strategies” rather than analyzing why a particular source acted in a particular way (Schlesinger and Tumber 264).

I embarked on this thesis with a practitioner’s perspective, having been a member of the press gallery since 1997. I attempted to counterbalance my particular lens by bringing in other voices from secondary sources, as well as government data – such as statistics on the use of Access to Information provided by the Treasury Board Secretariat. At the same time, I believe that my background was a great asset to the research. Reporters spoke freely; I understood the context of their remarks, and the realities of their newsrooms. I have worked both for *The Canadian Press* news service as a print reporter and as a broadcaster for CBC National

Television. I have been a member several times of the press gallery's executive, and was fortunate enough to have access to the great resources of the Library of Parliament and the gallery's own archives and expertise. In some way, I feel I am following in the footsteps of another former Carleton student and Parliament Hill journalist, Colin Seymour-Ure, who wrote a thesis about the gallery a half century ago.

Inspirations and Motivations

I would like to note sources of inspiration and the motivations for the proposed thesis. First and foremost, I have been fascinated by the work of former Canberra press gallery reporter Helen Ester, now an academic. For her 2009 PhD work on the "fault lines" that had emerged between reporters and the government of prime minister John Howard, Ester interviewed 25 members of the press gallery and provided invaluable insight into how journalists were coping with the restrictions and pressures of a more stringent form of news management. Her work went on to appear in a scholarly journal and in a chapter of the 2007 book *Silencing Dissent: How the Australian Government is Controlling Public Opinion and Stifling Debate*.

I have also admired the work of Jeremy Tunstall in his 1970 book *The Westminster Lobby Correspondents: A Sociological Study of National Political Journalism*, which is the type of work that would be wonderful to see in Canada. Michael Schudson's 2008 book *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press* is an eloquent defence of journalists in the age of government news management. Finally, my thesis supervisor Kirsten Kozolanka's work on government communications by both the Liberal and Conservative governments has filled a needed void in the Canadian literature on this issue and has greatly informed my choice of thesis topic.

Many books have been published in the United Kingdom on the “lobby,” the exclusive corps of reporters that interact daily with the prime minister’s office in that country. At least two books have been published strictly on the Canberra press gallery in Australia. But in Canada, there is precious little research that has focused exclusively on the history and the ethos of the Parliamentary Press Gallery. Because I will be speaking to a number of press gallery reporters and quoting most of them by name, I see this project as a potentially valuable documentary contribution to the historical record – a snapshot of the Parliamentary Press Gallery in 2013-14, and the state of the relationship with the government in power. My hope is that it might be of use to future researchers and possibly serve as a stepping stone to a future book or journal article. I note the important contribution that researchers Alison Loat and Michael MacMillan recently made to the understanding of the work of Members of Parliament, in their 2014 book *Tragedy in the Commons*. They interviewed 80 MPs as they left political life, providing an enduring record of their experiences and frustrations.

Journalists in this era face much criticism for being sensationalist, overly focused on process, lazy and biased. But is this not an overly simplistic view of the work of the media in a changing political landscape? Recognizing my own bias in this regard, I tend to take the perspective of Michael Schudson, who writes that “attachment to a particular vision of journalism – fact-centred, aggressive, energetic, and non-partisan – remains powerful, practically sacred, among American journalists” (*Why Democracies* 35). My hope is this thesis will provide an opportunity to delve more deeply into issues concerning reporters and government news management than has been afforded by the occasional news article or editorial.

Chapter One: Government News Management and the Way Reporters Work

In this chapter, I will review literature relevant to my research on how reporters adapt their work behaviour to government news management techniques. I will look at definitions of government news management in the modern era, and why the nature of strategic communications has been changing. The second part of this chapter will focus on the reporters themselves, examining the scholarly work that has sought to explain why they work the way they do. This will entail a brief review of literature on news values, on the routinization of newswork, and on the relationship between reporters and sources. Finally, I will look at theoretical frameworks and hypotheses that might help one understand how reporters react to government news management techniques.

Defining Government News Management

At the height of the political scandal involving three of his former Senate appointees¹, Prime Minister Stephen Harper granted three exclusive interviews to get his government's point across. He did not speak to any member of the Parliamentary Press Gallery who follows him from day to day in Ottawa, but rather to three talk-radio hosts outside of the capital – all of them with clear ties to Conservative politics.² Similarly, embattled Toronto Mayor Rob Ford, facing

¹ The Senate expenses scandal involved three Conservative and one Liberal senator with contested travel and housing expenses. The controversy grew after it was revealed Harper's chief of staff personally repaid \$90,000-worth of one senator's claims, fuelling allegations of a larger cover-up by the prime minister's office.

² Harper accorded interviews to former Ontario Progressive Conservative Leader John Tory on Toronto's 1010 Talk Radio, former Conservative staffer Jordi Morgan on Halifax's

allegations of drug use in the fall of 2013, initially did not accord reporters at Toronto City Hall a formal news conference on the matter. Instead, he spoke at length on a weekly radio talk show on November 3. The choices of venue were deliberate, and designed to help shape or manage the news product in a way that would most benefit the politician in question. Reporters hungry for comment from their leaders were forced to use material over which the politicians held much more control. Beat journalists with more detailed knowledge of the issues and context of the story at hand were deprived of the opportunity to put forward their questions and hold those politicians to account.

Relying on talk radio is just one small example of a modern method used by western democratic governments to influence the news product. Trying to exert such influence in order to win the public's support is hardly new – Walter Lippmann wrote in 1922 that “persuasion has become a self-conscious act and a regular organ of popular government”(185). Different terms have been used to describe these types of efforts, such as strategic political communication, spin, or government news management. German scholar Barbara Pfetsch offers a helpful definition of government news management, the term I will use throughout this thesis:

A strategic variant of public information whereby political actors manage communication in order to influence public opinion by controlling the news media agenda. It is a top down process of communication whereby the media are the means and targets while the strategies are determined by the political objectives of the specific actor. (6)

News 957, and to former Progressive Conservative MP John Gormley of Saskatchewan's Rawlco Radio.

Those political actors must also have an understanding of how the media world functions, in order to employ this type of strategy. Harper's staff, for example, would have understood that the national media had a huge appetite for commentary from the prime minister on the ongoing Senate controversy. The aforementioned talk-radio interviews were scheduled on a Friday afternoon, creating a situation where articles on the issue might wind up being quickly recast to feature Harper's remarks at the top – just in time for Saturday newspapers. The timing would also make it difficult to obtain reaction quickly from critics and gather context, a tactic designed to “shape and target messages so as to maximize their desired impact while minimizing collateral effects” (Manheim 106), and one that demonstrated an understanding of news routines.

In the United Kingdom, “spin” is the favoured word for describing how governments and politicians seek to manage the media, emphasizing the personal interplay between the two groups. Eric Louw defines political public relations as “a multi-prong set of strategies and tactics geared towards putting a positive spin on the politician one works for, and a negative spin on the opposition” (Louw 163). I will explore the British experience with spin later in this thesis, but it is clear in this context that spin most often refers to one or more officials attempting to persuade a journalist directly to produce news with a particular angle or frame.

Former journalist-turned-academic Ivor Gaber divides spin into “above” and “below-the-line” forms (“Damn Lies” 60). The above-the-line tactics are clear to see, and more traditional in approach: news conferences, news releases and announcements (Gandy Jr.). Below-the-line tactics are a different story. Gaber offers several examples of the more surreptitious spin techniques, including pre-empting a negative story by putting out the damaging details before the media publish their own account; leaking news item in dribs and drabs over a period of time to

maximize coverage; and choosing specific reporters for leaks while shutting out others who tend to write unfavourable stories ("Damn Lies").

Some of these techniques would be familiar to members of the Canadian Parliamentary Press Gallery in Ottawa, which I will address at length in Chapter Five. But to these definitions of news management I would add the important defining aspect of attempting to avoid the mediation of a government or party message. Strategic political communication is increasingly about keeping a politician's message completely clear of the media's "filter" or frame. In his November 2, 2013 speech to delegates at the Conservative Party of Canada convention in Calgary, Conservative Fund chairperson Irving Gerstein underlined that notion, emphasizing the importance of advertising between writ periods as a way to reach voters: "It is a fact that money facilitates political discourse and that paid political advertising is the only way for parties to communicate with citizens en masse, without the filter of the mainstream media."

Returning to the example of Harper and Ford's choice of appearing on talk radio, this is just one method of bypassing the media in order to appeal directly to the public. Former Australian Prime Minister John Howard also favoured this approach, speaking weekly on a private radio talk show (Ester "Canberra Press Gallery"). Pfetsch addresses the distinction between what we regard as "spin" and this distinctive form of news management that focuses less on personal interaction with reporters. She uses the terms "media-centred" and "political" news management to draw the contrast. With political news management, "strategic political objectives are in the centre of the strategy and the media are the means but not the ends of the action" (10). Officials engage more in political attacks, manoeuvring in the legislature and the kind of spin that Gaber has described (see above) to achieve the results they are seeking. With media-centred news management, the focus is primarily on the image, rather than the content,

with the media used as a vehicle for transmitting images and messages particularly through the use of pseudo-events³. Stephen Harper's team exemplified this approach in the fall of 2013, when it attempted to bar reporters from covering the first Conservative caucus meeting of the 41st Parliament, while permitting entry to still photographers and TV cameras (Cheadle "Stephen Harper Vs."). In that case, which we will return to, the press gallery refused to agree to a scenario where their outlets were being used only as conduits for images.

A familiar strategic technique, "going public," would fit within this definition of media-centred news management. Going public refers to building "public support for policies by speaking directly to citizens and generating positive news content through exchanges with the press" (Domke et al. 292). The Bush administration was said to have effectively embraced this strategy post-9/11, flooding the airwaves with media appearances to build support for the controversial Patriot Act.⁴ Harper appeared to be following the same sort of strategy, at least for one day, when he spoke on three radio talk shows in the midst of the Senate scandal.

The Conservative government has employed other methods that would appear to fit within a media-centred news management paradigm, including limiting physical access to politicians, radically reducing the information flow from departments and ministerial offices, and focusing heavily on pseudo-events (Buzzetti et al.; Cheadle "Secret Cabinet Meetings"; Cobb) The

³ Daniel Boorstin, in his 1962 book *The Image*, coined the term "pseudo-event," referring to events that are manufactured with the purpose of being reported by the media.

⁴ The Patriot Act was passed in 2001 in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist bombings. It gave law enforcement agencies unprecedented powers of surveillance, warrants for the search of records without judicial oversight, and warrants to search property without the knowledge of the targets, among other measures.

reporters interviewed for this research describe at length some of these techniques, which will be explored later. Communications scholar Kirsten Kozolanka refers to this style of news management as “communication by stealth,” where the Conservatives “decentralized their media management strategies, closed down channels of information flow and tightly controlled their communications strategies centrally...” (“Communication by Stealth” 223) Other jurisdictions in Canada are also experiencing that particular form of media-centred news management – in British Columbia, for example, reporters are lamenting the prolific use by political staff of emailed quotes purportedly from their ministers (Ball).

German scholar Barbara Pfetsch, who identified a distinction between media-centred and political news management, cites three environmental factors that would determine the style employed: the degree of separation between the executive and legislative branches (presidential versus parliamentary systems); the general state of media organization; and the overall media culture. A country that has an executive that is more independent of the legislature and the power struggles there, such as the United States, would tend to espouse a more media-centred or personal brand of news management. By contrast, a parliamentary system where there exist internal struggles within cabinet and external struggles in the legislature to attend to would tend to adopt political news management. Pfetsch argues that, “news management in such a situation with strong parties under high competition means to focus on issues, so the major activities lie in the thematization and dethematization, framing and spin-control” (17). Although it lies outside the purview of this thesis, it is interesting to consider how reform to Parliament in Canada might alter the type of news management used by the government. Conservative MP Michael Chong has currently proposed a rebalancing of power between the executive and the legislative branches, theoretically handing more power to party caucuses (Chong). Using Pfetsch’s

framework as a guide, this might result in more reliance on political news management to navigate internal party and parliamentary struggles than has been seen in recent years.

In terms of media organization, the degree of commercialization of the media would also be a factor in which type of news management is employed. Pfetsch theorizes that the more commercial a system, with a weak or non-existent public broadcaster, the more likely it is to espouse a media-centred news management strategy. With regard to a nation's media culture, the attitude or behaviour of journalists towards politicians – be they more or less deferential or adversarial – could also be a determining factor in whether a government or party chooses to focus more on image rather attempting to manipulate the political game at hand when deciding how to approach the news. In cultures where the media is more adversarial and sees itself less a part of the political system, such as the United States, she argues governments are more inclined to adopt a media-centred approach. As we shall see later, Canada has moved towards a more media-centred approach, as power has become more centralized within the Prime Minister's Office.

This examination of a country's media culture and its impact on political journalism has been undertaken by others. Raymond Kuhn has explored why the French media has not operated as a check on executive power in that country, allowing the presidential office to wield significant power over the news product. Like Pfetsch, Kuhn pointed to both the structure of the French media system, and its journalistic culture, where "neither investigative nor watchdog journalism has ever been a particularly strong feature," and where there can be a strong relationship between political and media elites ("The Media and the Executive" 130). In their major comparative study of political journalists from five countries, Donsbach and Patterson also found significant differences in how reporters viewed their professional roles based on the media

culture in their country. In Chapter 2, I will examine news management in the United Kingdom and Australia and briefly explore the media cultures in each of those countries, and in Chapter Three examine Canada's.

Why Are News Management Practices Changing?

While Pfetsch notes that European countries with parliamentary systems and public broadcasters might lean towards political news management, that characterization is hardly black and white. In fact, she says the evolution of the political system and media industry in places such as Germany and the United Kingdom is moving strategic communication towards a model more closely resembling the media-centered news management of the United States:

Due to processes of (post)modernization, political systems witness the weakening of political ties, increasing volatility and dissatisfaction with the political actors on the level of mass publics which all in all tend to undermine the formerly central role of party organizations and other political intermediaries. (29)

That mirrors Blumler's observations about the transformations in both society and the political sphere vis-à-vis public communication. A "more complex and fragmented society has developed," Blumler writes, without the traditional institutions and groupings that structured people's lives in the past (396). Politically, voters are less loyal to specific parties, their allegiances more volatile.

This loss of party allegiance, and the simultaneous growth in the media sector, with its 24-hour news cycles and expanding number of outlets and political programs, stimulated the use of marketing techniques in campaigns and then later in government to win power – dubbed the "packaging of politics." As British scholar Robert Franklin explained of the term he coined, "Politicians in government and political parties have revealed a growing commitment to using

the media to market their policies and their leaders to the public” (5). In Canada, some of the same changes are being felt to the larger political system (Savoie), and as I will review later, appear to be having a similar impact on the approach to news management. “External and internal government communications operates in a more fragmented, congested, competitive, suspicious, instantaneous, legalized, transparent and politicized environments,” says academic Paul Thomas ("Strategic Government" n.pag.).

Changes in the ideological thrust in western cultures also cannot be overlooked as a factor in evolution of government news management. The tighter controls on information, and the politicization of government communications, coincided with the spread of neo-liberalism and the abandonment of post-war Keynesianism, in the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, and elsewhere. As Kozolanka notes, parties that sought to introduce this new minimalist and corporate approach to government needed to harness the power of communications to persuade the public of their project and achieve legitimacy:

...When they come to power, governments that seek transformational change first look inward to the institutions of government. But they are also communicating to the public, at which point they are confronted with a powerful external force that stands between them and citizens: the mass media. (Kozolanka, *Power of Persuasion* 95)

So, the ground has shifted, but it also hasn't stopped shifting. It could be argued that the citizen is trying to reassert herself in this political communications system, through citizen journalism and through sites such as *The Tyee*, through blogs and the social media. Already, governments are being forced to interact with citizens on Twitter and Facebook, and respond to

their complaints and interests more directly. George Pitcher notes this trend in his book, *The Death of Spin*:

This empowerment has shifted the balance of communications power from its traditional source – corporations and institutions – to consumers and individuals. There will still remain the top-down cascade of information and propaganda from multi-nationals and organs of government but that cascade is now not into the absorbent soil of society, but into a wide and deep pool, with changing currents and tides, capable of changing its own shape and direction in relation to the shifting sands around it. This represents a quiet revolution against the established communications hegemonies of corporations and politics. (231)

The 2012 student protests in Quebec⁵ demonstrate that even when major media outlets such as *The Gazette* or *La Presse* might side with the government, public dissent can still wield a big stick, now enhanced by the use of social media.

Understanding Newswork to Understand Government News Management

In order to understand the relationship between journalists and the government news management practices they experience from day to day, it is essential to examine why reporters work the way that they do. After all, those who seek to shape the news product also spend much time absorbing what makes newsrooms and their employees tick, in order to ensure the best outcome for their message (Herman and Chomsky; Fishman; Manheim; Gandy Jr.). As Blumler and Gurevitch observe:

⁵ Throughout the spring and summer of 2012, college and university students in Quebec staged protests over proposed tuition-fee hikes by the provincial Liberal government.

Politicians need access to the communication channels that are controlled by the mass media, including the hopefully credible contexts of audience reception they offer. Consequently, they must adapt their messages to the demands of formats and genres devised inside such organizations and to their associated speech styles, story models and audience images. (33)

The 1960s and 1970s were a productive time for sociologists and media scholars to examine how newsrooms functioned and what made reporters and editors make the decisions they did. They paid close attention to the way news is selected and how it makes its way onto the air or into print. Gaye Tuchman referred to a “construction of reality,” Mark Fishman chose the word “manufacturing.” When posed the imaginary question, “Where does news come from?” Edward Jay Epstein offered the sarcastic response of “nowhere.” All were debunking the concept of news just occurring naturally out of thin air, and reporters dutifully transmitting what happened as mirrors of reality.

The point of Epstein’s *News From Nowhere* was to demonstrate that the routines and procedures developed inside media organizations – in his case, the major American networks – were really behind what is presented as news to the public. He noted that, “To describe network news as mirroring events thus necessarily involves seriously neglecting the importance of the chain of decisions made both before and after the fact by executives and newsmen, or, in a word, the organizational processes” (25).

In Epstein’s case, he took a front seat (and a back room) view of the American network newsrooms and found how financial considerations – including how to increase audiences – and just plain old technical practicalities, were central to the final product that viewers would see later that day. No network could claim unlimited resources to place cameras and reporters in

every corner of the United States, or overseas. Epstein referred to the guiding force inside the newsrooms as “economic logic.” He said it,

determines when the news will be scheduled, and thus, to a large extent, what type of audience will see it. The logic also dictates the amount of money and resources that can be used for seeking out, covering and producing news stories, which in turn structures in no small measure the time and space that can be routinely covered. Economics further effectively limit the range of choice of news executives and correspondents in selecting subjects. (130)

One might consider the economic logic these days and how it relates to covering the prime minister’s trips abroad. Because of the high costs of covering such trips, which can exceed \$10,000 per reporter or media technician, television networks over the past 15 years have pooled their resources to pay for two cameras and a producer/editor to collect visuals for all those who chip in for costs. This necessarily impacts the type of stories that are broadcast back to Canada, creating a sort of sameness in the coverage. A protest that might be happening on the fringes of an international conference potentially would not be covered because of the technical and financial limitations of the participating news organizations. Perhaps more relevant to the research, is the fact that the economic logic of prime ministerial trips means that the pseudo-events that the government painstakingly plans are more likely to be transmitted in full.

Mark Fishman also touched on these financial considerations when he wrote in 1980 about the increasing reliance on scheduled events and bureaucratic sources for news. Even 30 years ago, a shrinking labour force coupled with higher demands was having an impact on the news that was produced. He wrote that, “from the individual worker’s perspective, bureaucratic information is a practical necessity. From the organization’s economic perspective, bureaucratic

information is a welcomed subsidy” (152). As Gandy Jr. put it, “...the delivery of an information subsidy through the news media may involve an effort that reduces the cost of producing news faced by a reporter, journalist or editor” (62).

This same theme comes back in 2005, where sociologist Eric Klinenberg theorizes on how reporters cope with what he calls a “news cyclone” of constantly breaking news on a variety of platforms, including digital. Looking beyond those bureaucratic subsidies appears harder and harder, as “...the celebrated genres of the American journalistic craft, particularly investigative reporting, long-term projects, and penetrating urban affairs work, have lost corporate support in all but the most elite publications because of their inefficiencies and the costs of production” (Klinenberg 185).

Gaye Tuchman did not focus on the financial implications of how news is created, but did look closely at the economy of the newsroom writ large – that is, how organizations coped with the complex task at hand. She refers to a “news net” composed of wire services, stringers and reporters that is flung through space to catch the news. What is selected as news after that net comes back is “a negotiated phenomenon constituted in the activities of a complex bureaucracy designed to oversee the news net” (37). That negotiation helps newswriters cope with what Tuchman refers to as “time and the glut of occurrences.” There are obviously far too many potential news stories to go into any particular newspaper or radio or television broadcast on any given day. Part of the way that the news organizations cope with the glut is to classify news into “typifications” such as hard, soft, developing and continuing – a categorization that is rooted in time – something that is important to reporters who work on set schedules that conform to publishing and broadcasting deadlines. The typifications, Tuchman says, “impose order upon the raw material of news and so reduce variability idiosyncrasy of the glut of occurrences”(58),

while also limiting the breadth of news provided to audiences. Picking up from Tuchman, Berkowitz confirmed in his work that even breaking, unplanned news stories are subjected to typifications “as a means of creation by inducing story ideas and relevant news sources” (Berkowitz).

Fishman zeroes in on the all-important time element in news work, where reporters are “under the constraints of assembly time,” while the activities and events they watch are “under the constraints of event-time” (37). To tackle this reality, beats are often created to help reporters identify what’s news in a systematic and co-ordinated way. Reporters do the “rounds” to figure out what the news is going to be that day, often focused solely on bureaucratic or official events and sources. On Parliament Hill such a round would involve checking the House of Commons and Senate Order of the Day, verifying who is appearing at a parliamentary committee or holding a scheduled press conference, and what is being said during question period.

Once newswriters see the community as bureaucratically structured, they have at their disposal a powerful perspective which informs them of who is in a position to know virtually anything they want to know. The bureaucratic consciousness is invaluable for detecting news because it indicates where reporters should position themselves to discover happenings not yet known. (Fishman 51)

Where Tuchman talked about typifications helping to sort out the news glut, Fishman talks about “phase structures.” Essentially, reporters see events unfolding in different stages, and watch for junctures or “pegs” where a story could be hung. These phases in a story don’t necessary match those of the officials being covered, but they provide a “schemes for seeing and schemes for doing” for a reporter covering a particular beat. A parliamentary reporter would use

his or her own individual set of phase structures to determine whether a story is written when a bill is introduced, when it reaches committee stage or when it goes to a third-reading vote.

Technology can also play an important role in how news is selected and constructed by reporters. Pablo Boczkowski in his study of Argentinian newswriters found that the increasing presence of traditional news outlets on the Internet has made the journalists more apt to monitor what competitors are reporting. Checking out what everyone else has reported, and then matching it, has become part of the journalistic routine. As mentioned earlier, Klinenberg notes that convergence of different news media and the introduction of new media technologies has meant the routines are even more driven by time considerations. And Epstein noted that the technological limitations of television news also help to shape a story – because not everything can be carried live or filmed while it is happening, what the public sees is usually an event that has been reconstructed by using images that were captured after the fact.

These routines place a particular “frame” on reality that is particular to the news media and isn’t necessarily what others would see when they observe the world, but what ultimately shapes the public agenda. Journalists are actually making occurrences public events and impose meanings on them as well, “perpetually defining and redefining, constituting and reconstituting social phenomenon” (Tuchman 184).

News Values

Intermingled with the routines that reporters use to get the news product out, is a complex set of values that helps them evaluate the newsworthiness of a given event or issue. Herbert Gans says “the values in the news are rarely explicit and must be found between the lines – in what actors and activities are reported and in how they are described” (39). These values can be powerful, because they can in turn shape what is part of the national discourse. Understanding

the values that underpin newswork might also illuminate how reporters adapt to government news management techniques. A reporter's approach to the information provided, or withheld, by officials is influenced by his or her concept of what is considered newsworthy.

Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge, in the 1960s, wrote one of the most influential analyses of news values. They pointed to 19 different conditions for a foreign event to become news, including whether an event coincides with the frequency of news production, whether it has meaningfulness and/or relevance for a domestic audience, whether the intensity of the event is significant and/or whether it is on the rise, and whether something unexpected has occurred. Harcup and O'Neill reviewed these conditions 40 years later, and pointed out that sometimes what's newsworthy isn't even based on an actual event. Some news stories are based on what might have good "visuals" for television or on an identified social trend. They note, "there are considerable difficulties in defining an event – when journalists may identify a series of what may be termed "mini-events" within a larger story; or when so many stories are based on issues, trends and even speculation rather than any identifiable event." (267) Their more recent reading of news values included such categories as the power elite, surprise, bad and good news, and magnitude.

To back up a little, the historical and cultural contexts in which journalism developed are also important to consider when examining news values. Gans, the American sociologist, prefers to talk about "enduring values" in American news. They include such concepts as altruistic democracy, individualism, and social order and national leadership. Fellow sociologist Michael Schudson, playing off Gans's work, offers up another list of journalistic values, but specifically with regard to political coverage (*Unlovable Press* 64). He pointed to such values as the idea that politicians should serve the public interest, that the official norms of American government are

good, and that Americans should practice moderation in all political things. Both men drew a link between the modern sensibilities in American journalism and the progressive movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century with the “common advocacy of honest, meritocratic and anti-bureaucratic government, and in the shared antipathy to political machines and demagogues, particularly of populist bent” (Schudson, *Unlovable Press* 68).

In Canada, newspapers were also influenced by the American progressive movement (Rutherford *Canadian Media*), and the news values described by both Gans and Schudson find resonance here too. But a distinctly Canadian set of themes also evolved with the rise of the daily newspaper. Desbarats points to four (15):

- The Dogma of Modernity: Post-Confederation, patriotic Canada was viewed as a hotbed of progress.
- The Gospel of Order: Respect for the law and societal norms were expounded in the press.
- The Gospel of Harmony: The Canadian way of getting along was celebrated as a virtue.
- The Illusion of Sanity: The idea that Canada “is an island of sanity in a world gone mad.”

Rutherford sums it up by saying the press created an identity for the Dominion, as “a land of economic progress and ordered liberty, of moral rectitude and hard work, of class harmony and happy families” (Rutherford, *Canadian Media* 65). While some of these themes might no longer resonate in today’s society, such as the view of Canada as a hotbed of progress, others have persisted. The emphasis on order and harmony in both the American and Canadian journalistic traditions is perhaps key. As Ericson et al. explored in detail, reporters operate as societal watchdogs, sniffing out the events and figures who stray from a concept of what’s acceptable and normal: “deviance is the defining characteristic of what journalists regard as newsworthy and, as

such, becomes inextricably linked with journalists' methods" (*Visualizing Deviance* 4). The authors, having watched Canadian reporters at *The Globe and Mail* and CBLT TV station in 1982-3, identified their own criteria for newsworthiness. Some of the ideas mirrored those of Galtung and Ruge and of Harcup and O'Neill: the continuity of a story, its consonance or relation to something else in the news, the simplicity of a story, and the involvement of a public figure.

Perhaps most relevant to this thesis is what Ericson et al. describe as the prime criteria for newsworthiness, which is "deviance" or the unexpected. This carries into the "policing" that reporters effectuate through their stories, in the realms of organizational life, public information, cost effectiveness, politics writ large, and the excesses of bureaucracy. "Something is newsworthy if there is a suggestion of impropriety, mismanagement, or wrongdoing by officials or responsible authorities" (*Visualizing Deviance* 157). This certainly holds true for both the Senate spending scandal gripping Parliament and the Rob Ford debacle at Toronto City Hall. Moreover, the so-called "information policing" they identify is instructive when we consider the number of hurdles that are put in the way of accessing data:

An effort is made through whatever devices or strategies the journalist can visualize to force the authorities concerned to reveal instances of problems, talk about developments, and state the control efforts being made and remedies sought. The effort often entails going to a variety of sources who might possibly have information, or who themselves might be a source of pressure on the authorities to be more forthcoming. (Ericson, Baranek and Chan, *Visualizing Deviance* 161).

Danish scholar Ida Schultz lists five news criteria that are well understood in that media milieu: timeliness, relevance, identification, conflict and sensation (203). To that is added a sixth overarching criteria, which is exclusivity – a familiar impetus for reporters everywhere in a competitive, fragmented marketplace. Consider the Senate spending scandal again and the quest for exclusivity. Media outlets have tried to get a leg up on one another and break stories using sources, the Access to Information Act and computer-assisted reporting. I will argue later that the repetitiveness and blandness of today's government information and its limited quantities only sharpen the quest for exclusive content.

Added to those enduring values and criteria for newsworthiness are the overarching values of objectivity and fairness, something journalists from a variety of western countries hold as an ideal. Patrick Lee Plaisance and Elizabeth A. Skewes in their research on where the perceived values and roles of journalists intersect, found that honesty, fairness and responsibility were the values selected most often by their study respondents. They found, however, a weak correlation between those values and the journalistic roles that one might associate with those values – such as an “adversarial” or “disseminator” view of their jobs. Plaisance and Skewes posit that while more general values might have formed within a journalist's family or cultural environments, their view of their roles is likely a product of their newsroom and professional environments (844). Both influence how a reporter works. Gans also explores how journalists try to divest themselves of personal values, and reject ideology as they go about their work, at the same time as their organizations reinforce that imperative. He says, “...journalists strive to be objective, both in intent, by applying personal detachment; and in effect, by disregarding the implications of the news” (183).

Schudson again pins the origins of objectivity in American journalism on the progressive movement when “objectivity seemed a natural and progressive ideology for an aspiring occupational group at a moment when science was God, efficiency was cherished, and increasingly prominent elites judged partisanship a vestige of the tribal nineteenth century” (*Sociology of News* 82). In Canada, a similar trend took hold by the 1920s, heavily influenced by the emergence of The Canadian Press wire service. “Reporters were trained to witness rather than interpret events, to provide copy free of any personal views” (Rutherford, *Canadian Media* 57).

Over the past few decades, however, there have been suggestions that the concept of fairness has been overshadowed by a more aggressive, predatorial sort of journalism that warps the value of “altruistic democracy” and views all politicians with automatic suspicion. In his influential book *Feeding Frenzy*, Larry Sabato describes how journalists in a post-Watergate era are actually creating news rather than just following it. “More and more, the news media seems determined to show that would-be emperor has no clothes, and if necessary to prove the point, they personally will strip the candidates naked on the campaign trail” (4). Sabato refers back to the value of exclusivity, albeit in a negative way, observing how reporters are spurred on by the desire to get a scoop. “Owing to competition and the reward structure of journalism, the deepest bias most political journalists have is the desire to get to the bottom of a good campaign story (which is usually negative news about a candidate).” (91)

This same sort of criticism appears in Thomas Patterson’s examination of American campaign coverage, *Out of Order*. Patterson argues that the watchdog role of the press has been perverted over time as it has taken on a new role of election mediator (26). Reporters now see and frame politics as a strategic game that candidates are winning or losing, which Patterson says

is not the same as how the public sees politics and campaigns. “By emphasizing the game dimension day after day, the press forces it to the forefront, strengthening the voters’ mistrust of the candidate and reducing their sense of involvement,” Patterson argues (93). Twenty years earlier, Epstein identified the same thrust in political reporting, but with a more neutral spin: “The working hypothesis almost universally shared among correspondents is that politicians are suspect: their public images probably false, their public statements disingenuous, their moral pronouncements hypocritical, their motives self-serving, and their promises ephemeral” (215).

Michael Schudson offers a different, more positive perspective on what drives modern political journalism in his book *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press*, a perspective that seems relevant to what we are experiencing in the Canadian media with its recent investigations into electoral fraud, Senate spending scandals and the Rob Ford saga. Schudson salutes the lack of deference and the tendency of political reporters to cover the motives behind a politician’s actions – a sort of cynicism decried by Sabato, Patterson and others. “This kind of reporting may not be a sign of a press that motivates or mobilizes or turns people into good citizens. It may do more to reinforce political apathy than to refurbish political will. But it may be just what democracy requires” (Schudson, *Unlovable Press* 59).

How Reporters Rely On and Use Sources

Another element integral to understanding how reporters work is how they use and relate to sources of information as they construct their stories. It would be impossible to examine how journalists react to government news management without first looking at how they interrelate with official sources in particular, and how they deal with the information they are given from those sources. Those in positions of power have always been central to carrying out the political beat round.

Several scholars have underlined the primacy that such elite sources have over news content. In their ethnographic studies, Gans, Sigal, Tuchman and Fishman all noted the reliance of reporters on bureaucratic sources, as they are considered the most reliable when determining the facts of a given story and are often the most easily accessible. “Journalists not only see certain agency officials as having a special vantage point from which they observe events, but they also see officials as socially authorized and socially sanctioned knowers” (Fishman 95).

Others go even further, suggesting that the powerful have a defining role in the journalistic product. Herman and Chomsky emphasize the lengths that government officials and corporations go through to provide information to journalists – the information subsidies referred to earlier in this chapter. “The large entities that provide this subsidy become ‘routine’ news sources and have privileged access to the gates. Non-routine sources must struggle for access and may be ignored by the arbitrary decision of the gatekeepers” (Herman and Chomsky 173). Hall et al. argue that the powerful become “primary definers” of social events, as harried reporters over-access those in positions of authority in their quest to meet deadlines and appear impartial. “This interpretation then ‘commands the field’ in all subsequent treatment and sets the terms of reference within which all further coverage or debate takes place” (Hall et al. 254). Similarly, Manheim views those who have mastered strategic communication as being the “third force in the news-politics relationship,” helping to shape the news product before pen has even hit paper on a story.

Ericson et al. examined in detail the reliance that reporters have on official sources, arguing that the media is not really separate from the elites in government and business at all. The authors write that journalists, “interlock with these organizations in ownership, management participation, and social participation, sustaining an elite culture that circumscribes the ability of

the news media to be analytically detached from the elite persons and organizations they report on” (*Negotiating Control* 5). The authors also note that elite sources, with their superior resources to journalists and oppositional voices, have a greater ability to keep information away from the public through secrecy.

These points of view appear to ignore the balancing act, or constantly changing power dynamic, between sources and reporters – one that I experience on a daily basis covering federal politics. “In fact, it would be extremely difficult to detect, within any given political message, the specific contribution to its shaping that was uniquely made by either side. They are inextricably intertwined,” write Blumler and Gurevitch (26). Gans describes the relationship between the reporter, audience and elite sources as a “tug of war” over what is distributed as news. If we examine the Canadian Senate expenses scandal as a contemporary example of Gans’ tug of war, we can see how journalists and the audience can for brief moments of time successfully pull the rope of information towards their end in that game of tug of war – reporters with their quest for exclusivity and distrust of politicians, and the audience with their clamouring for more details and their moral outrage. Where Gans described a tug of war, Jean Charron refers simply to a “game” between public relations consultants and reporters with sets of rules that are renegotiated with each interaction. The exchange of information can either be characterized by a spirit of cooperation or conflict. Blumler and Gurevitch call the relationship one of “dependence and adaptation.”

Schlesinger and Tumber also afford journalists a bigger role in the media-official source relationship. The authors take issue with the view of journalists as “excessively passive” (259), pointing out that media will challenge those in authority and force them from their message or pursue lines of inquiry that are negative to those in question. On that point, Deacon and

Golding's examination of the strategic communication around Britain's poll tax⁶ is relevant. They found that although the media were vulnerable to being spun on the issue, other factors such as public opinion and the internal struggles among sources themselves also played into who ultimately defined an issue in the media. As Kuhn notes, "government actors often find themselves competing against other sources in their attempt to impose their perspective" ("Blair Government" 53). Indeed, the rise of the public relations industry has not just benefitted politicians, as we have seen in Canada through groups such as Democracy Watch, the Council of Canadians, the Canadian Labour Congress and the David Suzuki Foundation. Such voices, including unions, special-interest and pressure groups and others have also been able to capture the attention of the media, albeit to a much more limited degree. As Aeron Davis has noted, "non-official sources can do better than simply gain access. They can set agendas, and, on occasion, quite significantly disrupt their official and corporate counterparts" (54).

How Reporters Adapt to Government News Management

The central question of this thesis is how reporters adapt to and cope with government news management. I selected this question because there appears to be little research or theory specifically on this topic, one that is exceedingly apropos given the sophistication of government communication actors and the pressures on the media industry. As Pearson and Patching wrote in their extensive literature review on government media relations, "much more work is needed in the area of journalistic techniques for combating spin" (43). The existing literature that is

⁶ The poll tax was the nickname of a Conservative government initiative announced in 1986 to change municipal domestic taxation to a controversial flat-tax on all adults called the "community charge."

relevant to my research provides potential frameworks for examining how and why journalists react the way that they do.

Perhaps one of the most instructive of those frameworks is that developed by Blumler and Gurevitch for analyzing the relationship between politicians and the media. They argue it is too simplistic to view the relationship as either adversarial or as a constant two-way exchange. They propose an “expanded framework”:

It interprets their relationship as one that typically develops through patterned interactions, which are shaped and constrained in turn by requirements seated in their roles as political advocates and mass media professionals. They badly need each other’s services and dependability, but as a result of their conflicting purposes, roles and definitions of politics, they are periodically buffeted by upsets and strains. (42)

It’s the point of conflict that is potentially of most interest to this inquiry. As the title of their book, *The Crisis in Public Communication*, suggests, those upsets and strains in the relationship have intensified in recent years. The behavioural expectations that each side has for the other are breached, leading to major rifts, like the one between the press gallery and the government that I examine in Chapter Five. The authors call the adversarial climate “a chronic state of partial war” (215). Their hypotheses for what has caused the malaise include the fact there is less party affiliation among media outlets; that journalists are frustrated because the public relations state is blocking them from doing their jobs properly; that politicians are wary of media tactics, investigative and otherwise, that can harm their careers; and the increased competition that exists in both the journalistic and political arenas.

Blumler goes on to describe “the journalistic fight-back,” as reporters attempt to regain their position by writing or broadcasting stories that would expose spin itself (399). Sabato identifies the same sort of fight-back as reporters grow frustrated with politicians who restrict their access and manufactured messages. “Whether it is giving emphasis to a candidate gaffe or airing an unconfirmed rumour or publicizing a revelation about personal life, the press uses a frenzy to fight the stage manager, generate some excitement, and seize control of the campaign agenda” (85). Schudson puts it in a rather more complimentary way, referring to the professionalism in journalism that creates its own detachment: “It tutors readers in the cool and professional gaze that see through policy pronouncements and rhetorical appeals and focuses on the strategies and tactics of the political trade” (*Sociology of News* 55).

Gans describes another consequence of government/official information being shut down, or reporters being pressured to abandon a particular line of investigation. He says there are “heating effects” when journalists become angered by attempts to pressure or silence them – Watergate reporters in particular were inspired to push even further when those in power tried to dissuade their investigation. Gans writes that, “journalists also use their moral, legal and consensual power to fight back. They speak out quickly against threats to their autonomy and predict chilling effects so as to discourage anyone from trying to chill them” (268).

Taking into account such provocative terms as “fight-back,” “war,” “frenzy,” and “heating effects” when describing the state of relations between reporters and officials, it’s also important to examine the practical changes that reporters make to their work, which is my principal objective in this research. Fishman offers a framework for considering what journalists do when their traditional, official sources clam up. He describes a situation where a reporter is unable to gain information about the amount of damages from a major fire from the typical

source. In that scenario, rather than simply accepting the meagre data from the main source, the journalist sets up a whole different routine to get the information that he or she was seeking. The reporter did not turn away from bureaucratic sources, but sought out different ones – perhaps ones lower in the hierarchy or in a different body – to uncover facts. In the situation where information provided is incomplete or erroneous, Fishman says reporters will fill in the information, correct it, and even turn to other perspectives (116).

It is at this point where the concept of news values comes in, particularly those of impartiality, objectivity, accuracy and fairness. If news management is seen to obstruct these overarching values, reporters may not be prepared to fully accept the information subsidies provided, or else the throttling of information. Even going back as far as 1970, Jeremy Tunstall's sociological study of the Westminster lobby correspondents identified how and why they reacted to government news management: "Lobby men realize they cannot make accurate predictions every time, but they do want to be fairly accurate most of the time. Thus repeated attempts at news management by a minister will lead the lobby correspondents to suspend belief in his utterances" (57). Kuhn echoes this notion when examining the tactics of Tony Blair's Labour government in Britain: "The media regularly make use of other sources from a professional concern to cover an issue from different angles and in the case of public service broadcasters, because they are also subject to regulations regarding impartiality and balance" ("Blair Government" 53).

Similarly, Dutch scholar Henk Pander Maat describes how reporters will take product press releases, and add information to them – often reframing them, and even turning a promotional release into a negative report. He points to the journalistic values of factuality, impartiality and lack of bias to explain why reporters feel compelled to add in this information,

probably to the chagrin of the companies involved. Scott Althaus took a look at the question of missing or lopsided information from another angle and examined what reporters covering the first Gulf War did when given only government information. He found that they would compensate for a perceived lack of balance by locating and then using oppositional voices in their stories, or by introducing a point of opposition themselves into the story. “Journalists are trained to focus on the activities of government officials, which inclines them to see the policy world from the view of those officials, but also to seek “conflicting possibilities” from authoritative sources” (Althaus 405). It is here that the core values that journalists operate under (impartiality, fairness), can determine how they carry out the routines of their newswork.

A corollary to this is that there has been a new focus in the media on stories about “spin” and government news management itself. Blumler says reporters cover “events in a manner designed to demonstrate the reporters’ distance from propagandistic purposes, indicating that the event has been contrived, describing how it has been crafted, and presenting it as a public relations effort to be taken with a grain of salt” (399). In the United Kingdom, where much ink has been spilled on the subject of “spin” in the aftermath of the Blair years, government news management did appear to produce a new wave of reporting designed to dissect and critique those very techniques (McNair; Esser, Reinemann and Fan; Jones; Pitcher). This was true also in Canada, albeit to a lesser extent, where there was a burst of stories in 2006 about Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s approach to news management, and a few years later Lawrence Martin’s book that touched on the topic, *Harperland*. In Australia, books and papers about John Howard’s approach to the media were also published. These reactions, however, generally happen after a news event has occurred, securing the official’s position in some cases as the

primary definer of the event. This thesis is primarily interested in other types of reactions or adaptations to news management, which often occur before a story has been written.

There is another way of looking at how reporters react to strategic communications, and that is that they simply take in those “information subsidies” and the spin and reproduce it in their stories, unable to keep on top of the tsunami of information with such severely reduced numbers in the newsroom (Davis; Fishman; Manheim). Christopher Waddell points to the loss of beat reporters covering political news from Parliament Hill because of staff reductions and how that makes them vulnerable to communication actors. Waddell writes that, “it is also easier and faster to rely on comments from the legions of communications people working for government, corporations, and non-governmental organizations who are readily available – either in person, on the phone, or increasingly through email exchanges – than to look for new or different voices to comment” (119). Judy VanSlyke Turk’s extensive 1984 study of reporters and public information officers (PIOs) found that 51% of information subsidies disseminated over an eight week period were used. She also found that the frame used by the PIOs was largely picked up by the journalists in their stories (Turk). In her study of the Liberal government’s news management of same-sex marriage legislation, Denise Rudnicki lamented that reporters simply didn’t uncover news themselves and generally reported what officials wanted them to. She wrote that, “despite government’s ability to control the news agenda, there will always be news and sources that can be found the old-fashioned way – through hard work” (161).

As I will demonstrate later in this thesis, old fashioned hard work is precisely what journalists feel they are doing to combat the most controlling form of news management this country has experienced. There is one quote that stands out for me as central to my thesis, encapsulating the hypothesis that reporters alter the way they work to adapt to news management

and do not just automatically accept the information they are given. Neveu and Kuhn, who studied Tony Blair's Labour government in the United Kingdom, note that, "journalists can and do develop proactive strategies in their relationship with audiences and political sources. They are neither the powerless victims of the professionalization of politics, nor passive cogs in a communications machine" (Neveu and Kuhn 2).

Chapter Two: International Perspectives on Government News Management and Gallery Cultures

Harkening back to the prime minister's trip to Hanoi referenced in the introduction, I was among the weary group of Canadian journalists who trudged up the stairs of the Green Tangerine restaurant one evening on that trip. It had been the end of a frustrating day covering the APEC summit. Harper had barred the media from a dinner photo opportunity with Australian prime minister John Howard that evening (Ditchburn "Harper's Opaque"). There, in the corner of the restaurant, a group of merry Australian reporters was throwing back a few drinks. Why hadn't they gone to cover the event – after all, their guy hadn't banned them? "We're sick of hearing from him actually," said one Canberra gallery journalist, explaining that Howard had already spoken to them three or four times that day.

On the surface, the ways the governments of the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada handle news management bear some resemblance. Harper borrowed directly from Howard's communications handbook (Ditchburn "Aussie Mate"; Delacourt *Shopping*). There are the complaints of too much spin, of too much time and resources spent on selling government policy rather than consulting with the public. On the media side, the coverage of Parliament unfolded in similar ways in the three countries. All three have high-profile press galleries with vibrant histories.

Thus, my selection of the United Kingdom and Australia for examination is deliberate: all three of our countries evolved in the Westminster tradition. The basic structures of their press galleries and the trajectories of news management are similar. Leaders in all three countries have become increasingly interested in bypassing the press gallery, trying to appeal directly to the public through unfiltered means – whether it be through radio interviews such as Howard

favoured, Blair's editorials written for newspapers, or Harper's photo opportunities. Inside government, there has been more use of taxpayers' dollars to advertise and promote the government's activities in a way that treads the fine line between public information and partisan promotion. There have also been moves to centralize information control, to ensure that the government is speaking with one voice. The media industry in all three countries is also facing economic pressure, and the resources devoted to political news coverage are diminishing. Still, there are important differences between the news management styles. Harper has forged his own particularly stringent style of message control, as I will show in Chapter Five, but he cannot be criticized simultaneously for being too cosy with media bosses.

In this chapter, I will look at how news management has evolved in the United Kingdom and in Australia since the late 1970s-early 1980s, an era where political communication changed in scope and style across our three countries. I will also examine how reporters in those countries have reacted to the new techniques.

News Management in the Motherland

Taken as a whole, the evidence clearly demonstrates that, over the last 30-35 years and probably much longer, the political parties of UK national Government and of UK official Opposition, have had or developed too close a relationship with the press in a way which has not been in the public interest. (United Kingdom *Inquiry Executive Summary* 26)

That was the assessment of the expansive inquiry led by Lord Justice Leveson into the "practices, culture and ethics of the press." The Leveson inquiry was sparked by the revelations that reporters at Rupert Murdoch's *News of the World* tabloid had hacked into the telephone voicemails of celebrities and others to create news stories. But the November 2012 report went

further than just the ethics of those schemes, delving into the modern history of the British media and touching on news management practices that had become so much part of the story of political life. As Leveson had found, the close relationship between governments, “the lobby” journalists with privileged access to MPs and the prime minister’s office, and media owners, was a persistent problem.

Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990) introduced American-style image politics to Britain, employing the advertising firm Saatchi & Saatchi and using public opinion research and professional consultants to help her secure victory (Kozolanka *Power of Persuasion*). Still, it should be noted that Thatcher relied on a public servant as her main press secretary for her time in office – Bernard Ingham. Ingham describes the history of government news management up to the Tony Blair years in his book *The Wages of Spin*. He says a co-ordinated and concerted information service focused on responding to the needs of reporters didn’t take root until after World War Two, nearly 70 years after the formation of the Parliamentary Press Gallery (52). It was first called the Central Office of Information, and later the Government Information Service (GIS). Ingham, who some have viewed as a pioneer of spin himself, passionately maintains that the GIS and prime ministerial press secretaries that came before him all abided by certain rules that were underpinned by the concept of non-partisanship:

I considered myself bound, as my predecessors had been, by the Civil Service rules, which required us to maintain political impartiality, never to lie or mislead or indulge in favouritism in the dissemination of news, to respect confidences and Parliamentary privilege and to observe a backroom role, avoiding becoming the story. (102)

No Conservative prime minister had ever appointed a partisan press secretary, and while Labour PMs appointed journalists who were considered partisan hires, it was their experience and loyalty they were looking for rather than their partisanship (Seymour-Ure *Power and Control*). Raymond Kuhn notes that Ingham did not hold decision-making power, whereas his counterparts in the Labour government of Tony Blair did years later.

Despite Ingham's protestations that he was just a civil servant doing his job, others have seen him as an important figure in the rise of news management. Franklin refers to Ingham as "expansionist" in his treatment of media relations at Number Ten (39), sharply controlling Thatcher's photo opportunities and news conferences so as to put on the best presentational face. As David Deacon and Peter Golding have chronicled, Ingham was part of the news management strategy around the poll tax, which involved both traditional public relations and spinning lobby journalists on the merits of the reform.

Under regular circumstances, Ingham would brief lobby journalists⁷ twice a day, and had a specific day on which he would meet with foreign and regional reporters. Such briefings had a history that went back to the Churchill years (Hennessey and Walker 119). In keeping with a long-held tradition, Ingham's comments and those of other press secretaries were not for attribution, and so their information would be described as a "source close to 10 Downing Street" or a phrase along those lines. It wasn't until John Major's years that journalists could quote an unnamed "prime minister's press secretary" (Ingham 105). But Major also rolled back some of the power of the press secretary, putting a time limit on how long they could serve in the

⁷ Lobby journalists, which numbered 176 in 2008, have privileged access to the MP's lobby beside the House of Commons, and to briefings by the prime minister's office (United Kingdom *Government Communications*).

function (Seymour-Ure *Power and Control*). Pitcher argues the Conservatives were slow to react to the impact of television and the broadcast of major international events to the public: “The Tories might not have been getting the message across, but voters were getting the message. It was being delivered by the media, rather than by politicians. And that meant a new form of political manipulation needed to be developed. Spin-culture was deepening ” (Pitcher 77-78).

That deepening came with the rise of Tony Blair’s “New Labour” political movement. The branding and marketing techniques employed by Blair’s team during the 1997 election were brought into government (Pitcher; Franklin). Margaret Scammell called it a “permanently campaigning administration” (Scammell 510). Others have called it the “Millbankisation” of government, referring to the location of New Labour’s headquarters in the Millbank Tower in London (Franklin 58). Members of Blair’s communications team, most notably minister without portfolio Peter Mandelson and press secretary Alastair Campbell, became central figures in the government and they moved quickly to change how policy was communicated. Dozens of politically appointed “special advisers” were sent out to the various departments to assist with communications strategy – a 92 per cent staffing increase between 1995 and 2008.

A government commission⁸ was struck to study the workings of the GIS, and found the longstanding government agency to be outdated and too decentralized (Scammell; Ingham). The GIS was renamed the Government Information and Communications Service (GICS), and was promptly criticized for blurring the lines between disseminating government information and selling the public the government’s policy (Franklin). A new, professionalized Strategic

⁸ Sir Robin Mountfield wrote a report for the Labour government in 1997 that reviewed the state of government communication, and found an uneven degree of professionalism and co-ordination across the system.

Communications Unit was also formed inside 10 Downing under Campbell's watch. The unit managed a "grid" system with which all government media events were tracked and managed to ensure a common message and positive outcome – not necessarily a negative development, but novel for the office. Other pockets of communications work also began springing up inside the PMO under different names and under different supervisors including the chief of staff (Seymour-Ure *Power and Control*). In an even more unprecedented move, the Privy Council granted Campbell and others executive powers, making it possible for him to give orders to public servants and "freeing him from civil service rules on political neutrality" (Jones 77-78).

Campbell began to use techniques of news management to a degree that the British press, particularly the lobby journalists, had not been accustomed to. That included strategic leaking, burying of damaging news stories, bullying some journalists personally and cultivating other reporters and their corporate bosses over others (Gaber "Damn Lies"; Franklin; Scammell; Seymour-Ure *Power and Control*). Blair also began to employ the tactic of communicating directly with regional media and the ethnic press instead of the lobby journalists, "to establish the government as the key and primary definer," of the story (Scammell 49).

It is important to note that the professionalization of public relations within the British government coincided with a time of retraction within the media industry. National daily newspapers were losing money in advertising sales and journalists were being laid off, while contract workers and freelancers were brought in to try and bridge the gap (Davis). There was also a corresponding decline in coverage about the UK Parliament as media executives prioritized different types of news (Negrine).

Eventually, spin became a hugely negative term in the UK. Figures such as Mandelson and Campbell were the subjects of negative news coverage (Esser, Reinemann and Fan;

McNair), and later many books and even the television series *The Thick of It*. “It is my contention that the techniques they have introduced have been applied with scant regard to the twin requirements to uphold parliamentary accountability and to safeguard the impartiality of the civil service,” spin chronicler Nicholas Jones wrote in *The Control Freaks: How New Labour Gets Its Own Way* (2). Pitcher says the main problem with the Blair government’s approach to news management was that behind all the presentation, there simply wasn’t enough policy substance (93). Ingham linked poor election turnout to the cynicism that spin had created: “The public have registered their protest: fewer than 60 per cent voted in the 2001 election. It is not merely No. 10 or the government that is spinning out of control: it is our democracy. The wages of spin are disrepute and decay ”(247).

Campbell saw the issues differently, telling the Leveson inquiry that that the changes he introduced helped the government communicate more effectively:

What I do accept is that at times, we probably were too controlling, that at times we did hang on to some of the techniques of opposition when we should have dumped them at the door of Number 10, but I’d also ask you to bear in mind the sheer volume of issues we were expected to deal with, be on top of. 24/7 media means just that.” (United Kingdom, *An Inquiry* 1144)

The intensity of news management appears to have waned after the Blair years but the criticism of the cosy relationship between the prime minister’s office and top media organizations did not. The next Labour Leader, Gordon Brown, told the Leveson inquiry that he had appointed a civil servant to oversee government communications, and instituted a policy whereby announcements on government policy would always be made to Parliament first. Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron found himself swept up in the phone hacking

scandal, as details of his close relationship with figures from Rupert Murdoch's media empire emerged. His director of communications testified at the Leveson inquiry that Cameron and his wife would have key journalists over to his home. "Did I spend time trying to win over proprietors? Yes. Did I spend time with the *Guardian* and *Independent*? Yes. Did I spend a lot of time with the BBC political editors? Yes I did. That is what politicians have to do," Cameron told the Andrew Marr television show in April 2012 (Bartlett). Leveson wound up urging more transparency in the relationships between politicians and media executives in his report.

As mentioned above, journalists throughout the Blair years and beyond reacted to the command and control tactics of the governments in power by focusing on the news management practices themselves, as one method of asserting their editorial independence. Kuhn says that,

in their interdependent relationship with the first Blair government, journalists frequently used their power to expose politicians, play up disagreements, demystify the political process and make a contribution to the agenda of policy-making." (Kuhn, "Blair Government" 65)

The late Sir Robert Phillis, a former Guardian CEO who published a report on government communications in 2003, told the House of Lords communication committee five years later that the new style of news management caused journalists to "challenge every piece of government information from whatever source," and "contributed to the atmosphere of mutual suspicion between the government and the national media" (United Kingdom, *Government Communications* n.pag.). Journalistic fight-back indeed.

News Management Down Under

The first real signs of modern news management styles emerged in Australia during the tenure of Malcolm Fraser (1975-83). Greg Terrill writes that it wasn't until the early 1970s that

the public service's traditional hold on information began to loosen, and the control was transferred to the politicians. He notes that,

The rise of ministerial offices, with ministerial staff capable of developing and shadowing policy, has increased the power of ministers over departments, and in recent years it would be remarkable were a minister to seek permission (as distinct from advice) from a department before releasing a document.” (36)

At the same time, the spirit of investigative, non-deferential journalism began to implant itself in the gallery, as it had previously in the United States in the post-Vietnam era (Ester "Canberra Press Gallery").

Fraser's predecessor Gough Whitlam (1972-1975) had held weekly press conferences that were open to all parliamentary correspondents, and occasionally supplemented them with extended one-on-one interviews (Lloyd 250-1). Fraser opted instead for the practice of making statements to summoned electronic media, and then handing out transcriptions of what he said to the larger gallery – a sign of things to come two decades later, when going over the heads of political reporters became more of a news management religion. Gallery biographer Clem Lloyd wrote that “This effectively stalled print journalists from probing contentious issues or following up Fraser's often perfunctory comments. Thus, in a significant innovation, Fraser effectively divided the Gallery into print and electronic media, tilting the balance of his media relationships distinctly to the electronic” (251). Fraser also perfected the ‘kerbstone’ interview, making brief statements on the fly in a manner that was a “highly effective means of media management” (Lloyd 552). Access to ministers for interviews was limited to preferred journalists, and then only to provide non-attributable quotes (Ester "Canberra Press Gallery"). The clamping down

coincided, Ester notes, with a shift towards more investigative, watchdog journalism that included even the leaking of the 1980 federal budget to a gallery journalist.

One of the most pervasive areas of news management in Australia at the time was also the most surreptitious. Australian governments from the time of Whitlam to John Howard used public information units within government to advance their political aims, as detailed by Australian lawyer and commentator Greg Barns in his book *Selling the Australian Government: Politics and Propaganda from Whitlam to Howard*. Keeping all the acronyms straight is a challenge! First, there was Labour PM Whitlam's Australian Government Liaison Service (AGLS, nicknamed "aggles") in the 1970s, which Barns says was the first significant modernization of government communications in the country's history. The body was responsible to the Department of Media, and helped craft and distribute the government's main messages. Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser picked up the baton with his Coalition government, forming the more elaborate Government Information Unit that cost \$1.4 million in its final year. Barns notes that "The AGLS and GIU were responses to the newly fashionable idea that well informed democracy is a well-functioning democracy. The days of prime ministers delivering occasional press conferences and making few attempts to communicate government policy were over" (26). The units were immediately criticized by the opposition parties – although each ultimately created their own version of the information body. Senator John Dawkins, quoted in Barns, had this to say about the GIU:

Firstly it exists to manage the news and to ensure that only the government line is reported. This is achieved by ensuring that ministers are inaccessible to the press and also by ensuring that all government statements are released through the unit, as far as possible, in such a way to circumvent the press gallery. (29)

But as noted, the GIU was merely followed up by another, even more powerful unit – this time called the National Media Liaison Service (NMLS or “aNiMaLs”) and created by Prime Minister Bob Hawke’s government in 1983. Barns says it was a “political attack weapon, the likes of which had not been seen before in Australia” (Barns 39). The NMLS was a sort of rapid response unit that provided journalists with a variety of information on different government policies and statements, monitoring what its opponents were saying and providing its rebuttals very quickly. Successor Paul Keating (1991-1996) enhanced the media monitoring functions of the NMLS, while adding to that the Ministerial Media Group and oversight by the prime minister’s office. He also introduced a highly controlled form of impromptu news conference where he would speak to reporters outside his office door in a courtyard (Ester "Canberra Press Gallery").

Liberal-National Coalition Prime Minister John Howard (1996-2007) inherited this news management infrastructure, and then used it to his full potential. In the same way that Tony Blair’s government came to epitomize spin, so too did Howard’s control and use of government marketing become part of the story about his government. Howard also had his own government-run media unit, called the Government Members’ Secretariat (GMS), which the opposition leader accused of being a “dirt machine” (Barns 50). Perhaps even more incredibly to those of us who have been following Canada’s “robocall” controversy⁹ is the fact that the GMS also worked

⁹The robocall controversy refers to allegations that one or more political parties used their voter identification systems to locate citizens who were unlikely to vote for them and then employed automatic dialling programs to either direct them to the wrong polling station or irritate them, with the goal of suppressing votes.

hand-in-hand with the Australian Liberal party's voter identification system called Feedback, helping to target government information to potential supporters of the party.

But the story of news management in the Howard government goes well beyond the use of the GMS to spread damaging information and rumours about its critics and opponents. Howard altered the relationship with the press gallery in the same way that Blair had in the United Kingdom and how Stephen Harper would eventually in Canada. One of the most marked differences was how Howard ran news conferences. He preferred speaking at a podium, where he made a few statements and often walked away without taking any questions. Ester describes how Howard would accord a weekly interview to a friendly private radio station – the interview would be taped for TV, and then the transcripts and recordings distributed to other frustrated reporters. “Who needs the gallery when you talk to millions of voters in two sessions of friendly talkback hosts and moderated calls from the public?” Ester wrote (“The Media” 118). Howard revealed to *The Australian* in 2009 why he had such a penchant for AM radio: “I used talkback radio, and of course some of the Canberra gallery resented that, because it removed them as gatekeepers. When you do news conferences, you are in the hands of editors and journalists about what is used. If you do talkback radio, at some point your argument cannot be filtered” (Salusinszky).

Very quickly, access to the prime minister was curtailed. At the same time, information from the rest of government was being more and more carefully controlled. Press secretaries were hired by the prime minister's office, and nobody had permission to speak to the media before clearing it with PMO first. Outside consultants were brought in and the hiring of communications staff inside departments increased, but in spite of that, journalists often had to send their questions in writing to get a response (Fitzgerald 171-2). “The Public Service and

agencies have been so intimidated by Government that getting any facts, let alone comment, out of 1056 communications professionals is very difficult. Their role appears to be to block the flow of information rather than to facilitate it,” wrote gallery scribe Julian Fitzgerald (172). Jim Middleton of ABC TV told Ester that Howard’s brand of spin might have been less sophisticated but was ultimately more successful: “It’s cruder but more effective. The key is simply the withdrawal of access – that’s the most significant difference” (“The Media” 118). Ester writes of her discussions about Howard with representatives of the media:

The interviews highlighted issues such as control and surveillance, and paint a picture of cumulative deterioration in sources of political news and information, describing new layers of disempowerment, frustration and disinformation. Most of the interviewees noted that the Howard Government had ushered in a decade of unprecedented executive control over political communication. (“The Media” 112)

Ester has identified several other techniques employed by Howard’s administration for controlling the media (“Canberra Press Gallery”). They included the purchase of an airplane too small to accommodate the entire press corps following his trips and pressure brought to bear on the public broadcaster, ABC, including budget cuts, reorganization, and surveillance of content to determine lack of balance or bias. (Canada’s public broadcaster, the CBC, also faced budget cuts in recent years and negative rhetoric from government MPs.) Even more alarming in Australia was the aggressive action taken against leakers of government information, including police searches, prosecutions and in one case the conviction of a public servant.

Not nearly as much has been written about the news management practices of Howard’s Labour successors Kevin Rudd (2007-2010, 2013) and Julia Gillard (2010-2013) but it would

appear that there wasn't a great deviation from the precedents set by Howard. While Howard favoured AM talk radio, Rudd favoured FM radio and soft, entertainment-style programs such as the irreverent variety program *Rove*. *The Australian* quoted an unnamed "senior gallery journalist" as saying Rudd's press secretary wanted all media questions in writing, and "his responses are invariably shorter than the questions" (Van Onselen). Retired gallery journalist Geoffrey Barker described a number of tactics employed by Rudd's "ruthless" office, including deliberately excluding journalists from events, complaining about reporters to their bosses, and selectively leaking news. Barker described one situation where Rudd's team did not tell media outlets of a visit he was making to Australia's Hunter Valley until four hours before the event began on a Sunday. "It was left to a lone courageous TV cameraman to ask questions. The prime minister had avoided scrutiny" (Barker).

Gillard was concerned enough about news management that she hired a former Blair adviser, John McTernan, as her director of communications. McTernan was Blair's director of political operations between 2005-2007. Gillard's public appearances were promptly limited as she struggled to bring her party back up in the polls (Peatling). In 2011, her government was criticized for spending \$12 million in ads to promote the new figure attached to the price of carbon. In Gillard's case, it was the press gallery's treatment of her that also came under scrutiny. One gallery reporter, Kerry-Anne Walsh, contends in her recent book *The Stalking of Julia Gillard* that the country's first female prime minister was the victim of often sexist attacks by Rudd's team and then backed up by his allies in the media.

As with the United Kingdom – and as we will see, with Canada – the changes to news management coincided with tough economic realities for the media industry. The Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance noted in its most recent report that 1,000 media jobs were lost in

Australia in 2012 (Media). The number of daily newspapers in the country has declined from 56 in 1984 to 48 today, and the country has the highest concentration of media ownership in the world (Australia).

How has the Australian media reacted to the changes in government news management, particularly in the Howard years? Ester noted a number of trends, based on her extensive interviews with gallery reporters in 2003-2004. She noted that there was much less reporting on MPs and the Commons because so much information was concentrated and controlled out of Howard's office. At the same time, she noted an increase in reporting on the Senate and its committees because they were deemed to be sources of more unfettered information. And most dramatically, protests were mounted by the media into news management practices, including a formal submission by nine gallery journalists (endorsed by the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery) in 2002 to a Senate inquiry.¹⁰ A media coalition called "Australia's Right to Know," was also created during the Howard years and funded an independent audit into the state of free speech in the country.

Media and Press Gallery Cultures in the UK and Australia

My goal in examining news management, and the "journalistic fight-back" in the United Kingdom and Australia was to help inform research into the same trends in Canada, while also discovering differences. As we will see in Chapters 4-6, some of the news management

¹⁰ The "Senate Inquiry into a Certain Maritime Incident" was focused around the "children overboard" controversy, in which the Defence minister and his staff distributed photos that appeared to show asylum seekers throwing their children overboard ships. Bureaucrats and military officials knew this to be untrue, but bowed to political pressure to keep the information from the public.

techniques found their echo in Ottawa, while Prime Minister Stephen Harper also developed his own particular media relations strategies. Likewise, the way that journalists responded in the United Kingdom and Australia to tighter information controls and aggressive spin tactics differ from each other, and also from the Canadian experience. Why is this so? A brief look at the media structure and cultures in each country is instructive, and I will give particular focus to the nature of the press galleries. As Donsbach and Patterson noted, “Western journalists operate in societies that are not identical in their press histories and traditions and in their media and political structures. These differences can be expected to produce differences in the way that journalists see and do their jobs” (252).

In the United Kingdom, several scholars – and most recently, the Leveson inquiry– have noted the cosy, symbiotic and sometimes problematic relationship between British prime ministers, their cabinets and the lobby journalists who follow them. From the 1930s onward, the lobby followed and jealously guarded ground rules that made their discussions with MPs and the Prime Minister’s Office unattributable and often based on rumour and conjecture (Sparrow). It should also be noted that lobby journalists are also located close to one another in offices in the main House of Commons building. The level of opaqueness around their work, and the clique atmosphere, has been seen by some as making them much more vulnerable government manipulation. Journalists Peter Hennessy, Michael Cockerell and David Walker published a highly critical look at the lobby in 1984, arguing that “spaniel” journalists were passive, waiting for “information to be presented on the sugared spoon held out by government public relations officers off the record” (33). The Leveson inquiry went systematically through the relationship between successive British prime ministers and major media owners, and expressed concern over the level of intimacy between the two centres of power. Ivor Gaber has referred to the “slow

death” of the Westminster lobby, arguing that its secretive and clubby culture hamstring journalists who must contend with a more aggressive and centralized system of government news management ("Slow Death").

Westminster’s attitudes towards the press gallery have long been tinged with skepticism and sometimes outright hostility, as journalist Andrew Sparrow outlined in his history of parliamentary journalism. A 1738 resolution that barred the reporting of parliamentary debates as a breach of privilege remained on the books until 1971, and right up until 1986 journalists who reported on parliamentary committee reports before they were published were subjected to inquiries and threats of the withdrawal of their privileges. Astonishingly in 2001 an MP exercised a centuries-old rule that allowed him to ask for all “strangers” to be cleared from the House during debate. Of course, some of these rules were seldom enforced, but their mere existence spoke volumes. Former Clerk of the House Sir Barnett Cocks summed it up when he said in the 1960s that “the press constitutionally, and historically is here on sufferance” (Sparrow 5). David Leigh argues in his book, *The Frontiers of Secrecy: Closed Government in Britain*, that secrecy has been one of the hallmarks of the British government. He writes:

The British media are not strong willed. This is partly for historical reasons.

Despite the lip-service paid to the idea, genuine freedom of the press has never been seen in Britain as part of the constitution. Newspapers have been seen as seditious; as house magazines for the ruling class; as vulgarly commercial. But never since the penny and the halfpenny papers multiplied a century ago on the joys of steam technology, have they really been seen as a Fourth Estate. (48-49)

The attitude of the British parliament towards the press may be explained by its history, which extends back centuries before that of Canada and Australia. Keeping the contents of

debates secret was originally a self-preservation tactic, designed to keep MPs out of trouble with the Crown (Ward; Sparrow). Unfortunately for gallery and lobby reporters, the secrecy continued long after the monarchy's hold over Parliament did.

Libel laws in Britain continue to favour the plaintiffs. The Leveson inquiry's recommendation to introduce a new media regulator, followed up by legislation by Parliament, is also seen as a chill on the media. Meanwhile, access to information legislation was only introduced in 2000, and put into effect in 2005, as compared to 1983 in Canada. Leigh writes that "They have as a consequence become extremely dependent on information from some of the more secretive power-holders of the Western world, and because of this are often channels for official or political propaganda"(49). George Pitcher comments on the British tendency towards deference and secrecy, in comparing it to the American system. "It's as though we're trying to behave like we have the best that America has to offer, while protecting our right to keep the establishment secret, under its monarchical mystique" (Pitcher 216).

The histories of the Australian and Canadian press galleries were quite similar, in that they were accepted as part of Parliament at the time of the birth of their nations. They did not have to go through the struggle that Westminster journalists did to assert their position. In the early days of both galleries, reporters had close physical access to Parliament and to the executive – propinquity as gallery historian Clem Lloyd calls it. There were spaces carved out in the Parliament buildings, and near to the House of Commons, where journalists could work and roam close to the politicians.

The Canberra press gallery has had arguably more pressures brought to bear on it over the years than Ottawa's, however. As Lloyd and Ester have pointed out, at various points in the country's history there have been attempts to silence the gallery, including charges of contempt

of Parliament. The Canberra gallery has never had its status formally declared (although guidelines were published in the late 1960s), giving the executive “the innate capacity to keep political journalists on unpredictable ground, and their rights of access to political information, subject to political whim” (Ester, *Canberra Press Gallery* 52). Freedom of Information legislation has been described as weak (Snell). Freedom of speech or expression is not spelled out in the Australian constitution and it was not until 1992 that the Australian High Court emphasized the protection for “political speech,” which is seen as encompassing the media. A recent government inquiry¹¹, inspired by the hacking scandal in the UK, has also recommended more controls on the media rather than expanding freedoms.

With regard to the culture of the Australian media system, specifically the press gallery, some have painted it as deferential, passive and even lazy. Ester says the gallery had a history of “avoiding action or complaint when major injustices were meted out to their colleagues” (“Fault Lines” 128). Greg Terrill argues that government secrecy suited the Canberra gallery, which thrived on privileged relationships with politicians and public servants, meaning “the media in Australia was not a simple force for openness” (50). Bob Burton quotes long-time journalist Gary Hughes about the relationship between government and the media in *Australia: Report of the Independent Inquiry into the Media and Media Regulation*:

The ‘feeding’ of mainstream media investigative journalists has made many of them lazy and steadily eroded investigative skills. In some organizations, the definition of being an investigative journalist is simply cultivating a long list of public relations contacts. The feeding can range from sanctioned leaks from

¹¹ Retired Justice Ray Finkelstein wrote a 2012 into the state of the media and media regulation.

ministers or government agencies to high-profile journalists at strategically important media outlets pre-empting a damaging story. (215)

Both the lobby system in the United Kingdom and the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery in Australia have been subjected to similar criticism for their journalists enjoying a privileged, too-friendly, and easily manipulated relationship with their nation's executive. As we will see later, the same criticism could be extended easily to Canadian press gallery journalists, particularly between Confederation and the late 1950s. But the physical location of the press gallery journalists, the nation's particular political history, the entrenchment of certain constitutional and legal rights, and the formal recognition of the gallery's autonomy early in its history are among some of the factors I will argue contributed to a very particular Canadian journalistic culture that also affected its approach to government news management.

Chapter Three: The Parliamentary Press Gallery and the Canadian Media Landscape

The Freedom of the Press finds its highest expression in the reporting of Parliament... Today the enlightenment of any country may be judged by the degree to which its lawmakers facilitate information about the business of government. The members of the Press Gallery are the trustees of this heritage. They must ever preserve and keep unhindered this essential ingredient of the democratic function. (Canadian Parliamentary Press Gallery 14-15)

In the current climate of federal politics, where national parliamentary correspondents are routinely bypassed by the government and even barred from coverage of events, it is perhaps difficult to imagine a time when the work of the Canadian Parliamentary Press Gallery was accepted by those in power as important and even essential. The pendulum of relations between the gallery and the government has swung to the polar opposite of where it began at Confederation – from the cosy bedfellows of the turn of the century to the open warfare of now. It can be argued that each prime minister sets the tone for how the federal media will be treated – Liberal prime minister Pierre Trudeau was no fan of the press gallery, in much the same way that Stephen Harper bristles at the requirement to deal with federal reporters decades later. But to gain insight into why government management has evolved, and why gallery members are reacting the way they are today to strategic communications, this chapter will look back at the long history of the press gallery and its constantly changing relationship with the Government of Canada and the Prime Minister's Office. The traditions, norms and rules that have governed that relationship will also be addressed.

The press gallery does not exist in a journalistic vacuum; it is also subject to the overall changes to the media landscape in the country. Media concentration and technological changes in

the industry have had an impact on the way that politics are covered in Ottawa, and by extension how government news management has evolved to meet the changing landscape. This chapter will also examine the state of the larger media landscape that the press gallery operates within, and establish the context for subsequent chapters that address the changes to government news management in Ottawa and the changes to the work strategies of gallery reporters.

Pre-Confederation to the War Years

The Parliamentary Press Gallery's small gestures of protest over the Conservative government's heavy-handed news management style could be said to be part of a grand tradition. When reporters refused to cover a "cameras only" address by Stephen Harper to his caucus in the fall of 2013, it was in small measure meant to remind the government of the right of journalists to bear witness and also of the power the gallery wields to determine what Canadians see and read about politics (Cheadle "Stephen Harper vs."). More than 150 years earlier, in the Parliament of United Canada, the small group of reporters that constituted the gallery also once collectively walked out on the politicians for two weeks, upset that one of their own had been called to the bar and scolded for complaining that he could not hear the proceedings over the side conversation of a chatty MP. A petition followed, in which the reporters emphasized their view that they should be respected as the eyes and ears of the people, and "ought also to be provided with suitable accommodation, so as to be enabled to make known the proceedings of your honourable House; and ought furthermore to be protected from such annoyance as may prevent or impede publication of your proceedings" (Ward 57).

The struggle for the right to cover parliamentary proceedings was mostly fought before Confederation, dovetailing with the fight for responsible government in Canada. During that era journalists were routinely jailed and censured, targeted by the Crown and in Upper Canada also

by the powerful, elite families that wielded political power – dubbed the Family Compact. William Lyon Mackenzie, the man behind the failed 1837 rebellion in Upper Canada, published several newspapers pushing for reform including the *Colonial Advocate*. Contemporary Francis Collins, the courageous editor of the *Canadian Freeman*, was charged with libel against the attorney general and jailed. His lawyer in court was John Rolph, a prominent reformer who shared a practice with Robert Baldwin. Rolph's 1828 address to the jury upheld the freedom of the press, arguing that "It is the press which discusses public measures and enlightens the public mind. It is the press which criticises the public conduct of public men, and which drags them from the recesses of courts and cabinets and holds them up before the tribunal of public opinion" (Ward 100).

Arguments over whether to pay for the services of parliamentary reporters waxed and waned over many years, but midway through the 19th century, the ground began to shift and parliamentary reporting became more entrenched. There was much overlapping of the spheres of journalism and of politics in those heady days leading up to Confederation, which might explain the general openness towards the work of parliamentary reporters. W.S. Wallace notes that no fewer than five of the Fathers of Confederation were journalists and editors, including George Brown and D'Arcy McGee. Wallace calls that period after responsible government was introduced "the golden age of the journalist," as the, "Canadian people, entrusted with the complete control of their domestic affairs, turned to the journalists for guidance; and the result was seen in the rise to prominence in the public eye of a number of journalist-politicians..."(Wallace 19).

By the time of Confederation, having a permanent press gallery was simply part of the equation for the new country's Parliament, even forming part of the building itself. I visited the

rare books room of the Library of Parliament to take a look at the so-called “Scrapbook Debates” from 1867, a fragile collection of newspaper clippings from the *Ottawa Times* that were pasted onto paper by earlier librarians to stand in for an official record of the Parliamentary proceedings. There, on Friday, Nov. 8, 1867 is perhaps the first mention of the journalists in the House: “Hon. Mr. (Charles) Fisher was heard very indistinctly in the reporter’s gallery” (n.pag.). In the period between 1867 and 1874, they were the only figures informing Canadians on what was being said in the Commons and the Senate.

The small contingent of reporters and editors represented only the biggest newspapers in Canada, some of the scribes working for one than one publication (Siegel). Office space was allocated elsewhere in the Parliament buildings, and resources provided for the men to do their work. The reporters had access to both the members’ bar (which no longer exists) and the parliamentary restaurant (to which press gallery members have access to this day). A description in the *Canadian Illustrated News* of July 1875 referred glowingly to the small group of men in the gallery: “The visitor does well to watch them closely, for though they number only some twenty, as against the two hundred members of Parliament, they are literally half the House of Commons. Without them the country would not know what is going on in Parliament” (“The Ottawa Press Gallery” 70).

Some would supplement their income by recording committee meetings on the side. It is notable that a permanent, official record or Hansard of the parliamentary debates began in Canada in 1880, nearly three decades before Westminster settled on a similar permanent system after a select committee visited Ottawa (Ward). Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald himself defended the recording of parliamentary debates against an 1881 motion to ditch them:

If we can afford it – and we can afford it – every honourable member who represents a constituency has a right to have his speech reported...the youngest member has the same right, as the oldest member, to have his utterances as fully spread out in the official report as the leader of the House or of the Opposition. (Macdonald 1251)

In those early days of the Commons, the press gallery was as divided physically and ideologically along party lines as the MPs they watched below them. Siegel described gallery reporters as another form of backbencher, with a reporter virtually forfeiting, “the right to be a watchdog over government activity or indulge in realistic news analysis”(Siegel 206). By 1900, partisan daily newspapers accounted for 53 per cent of the total national circulation (Rutherford *Victorian Authority*). Turn of the century reporters wrote in their memoirs about the difficulty in getting information when their newspaper was a proponent of an opposition party. Former *Globe* correspondent John Willison lamented that appointments, policy statements and financial books were given to reporters from papers friendly to the government first, leaving the others at a competitive disadvantage. Reporter Arthur Ford wrote that, “Opposition papers could obtain any government news only through the kindness of friendly correspondents or through underground sources” (43). This is an interesting observation in today’s context, where reporters are having trouble getting government news and seeking out alternative sources, but for different reasons as we shall see later.

In contrast with some of the hostility occasionally shown to the lobby in Westminster and the Canberra press gallery, there were precious few serious incidents involving clashes with the press gallery and the Commons of the new Canadian federation. In 1894 a gallery member was censured for a story published in the *Ottawa Free Press*. *La Presse* reporter Ernest Cinq-Mars

was called to the bar of the House in 1906 after publishing a critical article about the Conservative finance critic. When Cinq-Mars addressed the accusation he had breached the member's privileges, he invoked "the privileges of the press"(Cinq-Mars 5296). Colleague M. E. Hammond described the mood as "festive," with "roars of laughter and applause," as a motion of censure was read out to him (Gwyn 424). That would be the last time that a reporter was called to the bar. Overall, the era was marked by great collegiality between the gallery and the government in what was still a small national capital, with raucous dinners, sporting events and even out-of-town trips. The tradition of the Press Gallery Dinner, with its spirit of satire and joviality, dates back to Confederation (Rodgers).

A move away from the blatant partisanship began in earnest in the early part of the 20th century, although there were appeals for neutrality earlier than that from a new breed of 'people's journals' that emerged between 1869 and 1899. Rutherford writes that they, "condemned their better established rivals for their subservience to the parties, a subservience that made a mockery of the tradition of press freedom"("People's Press" 174). Still, it wasn't until the period around the First World War that most newspapers broke free of the control of the political parties. Economics was the biggest factor in the new autonomy, as the increasingly concentrated media business became focused on bringing in money and readers rather than pleasing politicians (Sotiron; Rutherford *Canadian Media*; Levine). The creation of The Canadian Press wire service in 1917 with an initial \$50,000 federal subsidy also had a significant impact on the press gallery. Serving a wide variety of publications across the country, CP espoused ideals of accuracy and neutrality, concepts that soon influenced other newsrooms (Allen; Ford; Siegel).

The Parliamentary Press Gallery: The War Years to the 1960s

For nearly the first 60 years of its existence, the press gallery operated without formal rules or a constitution, existing instead as a sort of exclusive newspapermen's club with the implicit sanction of Parliament. As late as 1916, the members numbered only around 30 (Kesterton). But after World War I, the complexion and dynamic of the gallery began to change rapidly. A resolution was passed by the membership in 1934, followed up by a formal constitution in 1935, that stated that the press gallery would be restricted to newspaper reporters whose primary source of income was derived from writing parliamentary news and comment for at least one daily newspaper or service (Rodgers). That restrictive definition eventually broke down in 1942 when magazines began to be admitted, and then in 1959 when broadcasters were brought into the fold – after considerable pressure brought to bear by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and others.

Although the ties to the political parties had weakened drastically, there continued to be a recognition and legitimization of the gallery's role in the Canadian parliamentary system. When the Parliament buildings were rebuilt after the fire of 1916, space for the gallery was worked into the plans (Kesterton). The Canadian Parliamentary Guide of 1924, for example, included a description of the press gallery as a “voluntary, self-governing body subject to the authority of the Speaker in matters affecting House of Commons discipline and management” (Siegel). By 1927, the word “management” was changed to “membership,” emphasizing the autonomy of the gallery (Seymour-Ure "An Inquiry"). The Speaker of the House of Commons made that arm's length relationship even more explicit in 1938. Pierre Casgrain refused to wade into a membership dispute involving the Quebec Chronicle-Telegraph's correspondent. He underlined in a letter that it was up to the gallery to decide on who was accorded member status (Rodgers).

Perhaps the most obvious sign of the respect paid to the press gallery's work – and one that current members and politicians are likely not even aware of – are the elegant limestone busts of some of the most illustrious journalists, mounted on the walls outside of the Reading Room in Centre Block in 1950.

Press gallery members viewed themselves as neutral by the post-war era. “Bitter political partisanship has become unfashionable in the gallery and it would be difficult to put a definite party label on a substantial contingent of its members,” wrote long-time member and *Times of London* correspondent John Stevenson in 1956 (17). But affinities were hard to shake, and there remained deference to the government in power. For a long stretch, that meant the Liberals. Patrick Brennan chronicled that period between 1935 and 1957, the years between prime ministers William Lyon Mackenzie King and Louis St. Laurent. Brennan described a culture in the press gallery of the time where journalists viewed themselves as a responsible, civilized part of the policymaking apparatus, developing close relationships with public service mandarins and with top Liberal politicians. “In the hands of able, conscientious journalists, and as long as the government was also able and conscientious, the public was kept remarkably well informed on matters of public policy” (Brennan 179). Anthony Westell and Carman Cumming refer to reporters such as John W. Dafoe of the *Winnipeg Free Press*, Henri Bourassa of *Le Devoir* and Joseph Atkinson of the *Toronto Star* being important figures in the development of party policy.

Those types of cosy relations, while not partisan, fell out of favour by the 1960s, as a more adversarial type of journalism became popular both in the United States and in Canada and as television news grew in influence.

1960s to Present

By 1961, the numbers in the gallery had swelled to 100 largely with the influx of broadcast journalists. Carleton political science alumnus Colin Seymour-Ure, now a noted academic and author, wrote in his 1962 master's thesis that, "something of the group loyalty and camaraderie of the prisoner-of-war camp are detectable in the Gallery member who talks about the Gallery" ("An Inquiry" 4). Indeed, reporters were famously packed into the so-called "Hot Room" on the third floor of Parliament's Centre Block, spilling into the adjacent hallway. Stevenson said it resembled the "black hole of Calcutta in hot weather" (17). In the mid-1960s, Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson agreed to designate a new National Press Building across the street from Parliament Hill at 150 Wellington St. to house the growing number of reporters. The impact of that move should not be overlooked. Australian academics have commented on the impact of the move from old Parliament buildings to new ones in Canberra during the 1980s (Ester "Canberra Press Gallery"; Fitzgerald). Although the gallery remained strong as an official entity, the intense club atmosphere dissipated when the journalists dispersed. Long-time national affairs correspondent George Bain noted the impact of the scattering in a 1985 column for *Saturday Night* magazine, while also blaming the increasing power of the executive over the legislative branch for the lack of interest reporters seemed to have for the activities of the Commons. He said "Gallery members went elsewhere in search of news not so much an act of desertion as in a simple recognition of reality..." (Bain 31).

The bitter pipeline debate¹² of 1956 has been pegged as another key turning point in the relations between the gallery and the government, as reporters shared the opposition's distaste

¹²The government of Louis St. Laurent attempted to rush through Parliament without debate a bill that would grant \$80 million in financing for a natural gas pipeline.

for a perceived lack of respect shown to Parliament (Rutherford *Canadian Media*; Brennan). Clashes between the press gallery members and government began to become more commonplace. After a brief honeymoon period, Conservative prime minister John Diefenbaker also began a long period of hostility with the reporters that covered him (Desbarats). That pattern of initial fondness to eventual adversarialism played out with other prime ministers, including Lester B. Pearson, Pierre Trudeau and Brian Mulroney (Desourdie). “After 1960, much of the news media embraced dissent. Controversy was suddenly a hot item” (Rutherford, *Canadian Media* 109). Provocative programs such as CBC’s *This Hour Has Seven Days*, and more trenchant editorials in the national newspapers were changing the tone of political journalism. At the same time, sociologists and other academics in the United States (and later in Canada) began taking a closer look at the choices journalists were making in their day-to-day work. A more critical eye was cast on official sources, on marginalized sectors of society and the influence of media owners (Desbarats). Criticisms of the gallery being too much of a clique, with reporters drinking each other’s bathwater, also emerged around that time – criticisms that continue to plague the galleries in Canberra and Westminster (*Canada Task Force*).

As we shall see in Chapter Four, the rise of a more professionalized government communications staff in the 1960s and 1970s, with more elaborate news management techniques, also rapidly altered the relationship with the press gallery. The gallery’s composition itself would have had an impact on the government sphere, as the politicians adapted to the increasing numbers of reporters and the power the TV networks wielded. Gavel-to-gavel televising of the Commons began in 1977.

By 1970, there were 240 members of the press gallery, with 40 per cent of them in TV and radio (Desbarats). Still, it is worth mentioning that up until the Trudeau years, personal

relationships between prime ministers and members of the gallery were still common, and direct persuasion was still used as a technique of government news management (Desourdie; Levine; Westell; Seymour-Ure "An Inquiry").

Trudeau changed the dynamic of the relationship between the government and the press, in much the same way as Harper has done during his time in office. Trudeau had no interest in making friends with the gallery, with rare, guarded exceptions.¹³ As we shall explore in the next chapter, Trudeau also sought a more formal, centralized system of government communication that increasingly put reporters at arm's length from the prime minister and cabinet. Mulroney bore more personal interest in the gallery and reached out to certain reporters, further demonstrating that a leader's personal style can have a significant impact on their media relations approach. Still, the trend towards a less intimate, more managed style of news management was embedding itself in Ottawa. A symbol of the changed relationship is the annual Press Gallery dinner, which in 1992 ceased to be off the record – a recognition that everyone is always on the job, even during social events.

Today the press gallery numbers hovers between 375 and 400 members, a total that has been stable for 30 years (Guillon). The rapid spike in the 1980s can be attributed to the fact technicians (i.e. camera operators, sound technicians) were accorded membership in 1982. Regional representation has declined sharply. The *Edmonton Journal*, the *Calgary Herald*, the *Montreal Gazette* and Quebec City's *Le Soleil* have all withdrawn their correspondents in the last 20 years. With the exception of *La Presse*, which recently hired a researcher, every longstanding

¹³ CTV reporter Craig Oliver detailed his relationship with Trudeau in his 2011 memoirs. He noted that Trudeau did not often reveal information about government business as they socialized.

newsroom represented in the gallery has lost staff. Still, the overall gallery membership numbers have remained stable through the contractions in the overall industry. The types of outlets that are represented in the press gallery have evolved over time, replacing some of the members from traditional mediums. Now, entirely digital publications such as *iPolitics*, *Blacklock's Reporter*, and *Rabble.ca* have full-time members in the press gallery. Broadcasters such as CBC and Global employ online print reporters, in addition to their on-air journalists.

Many aspects of the press gallery have remained consistent over time. There is still a Hot Room on the third floor of the House of Commons, near the Senate chamber. The room is now mostly populated by freelance or online reporters. I work there when Parliament is in session along with two reporters from *La Presse Canadienne* in a section of the room that was long ago set aside for wire correspondents. The parliamentary press gallery receives most of its operating budget from the House of Commons, with the rest coming from membership fees paid by the various outlets and freelancers. In 2012, that meant approximately \$850,000 from the Commons and \$117,000 from the membership and a handful of other revenue-generating activities. The gallery was incorporated in 1987, and has a board of directors made up of members.

The Confederation-era rules that held that press gallery members should derive their principal income from journalism still hold today. Independent Senator Patrick Brazeau's application for gallery membership as an occasional correspondent for *Frank Magazine* was turned down for precisely those reasons (CBC News "Patrick Brazeau"). The gallery's control over its membership came up in the courts in the 1990s and 2000s, when National Capital News reporter Robert Gauthier fought the press gallery's rejection of his application for full credentials. He took the case to the UN Human Rights Committee, where the House of Commons legal team asserted Parliament's privilege over accommodation and services in its

precincts. The Speaker of the House of Commons has simply allowed the gallery to help control access to the precincts. Of particular interest to this thesis was the statement that, “the determination of membership in the Press Gallery is an internal matter and that the Speaker has always taken a position of strict non-interference” (United Nations 10). The submission to the UN committee also stated that there is “no formal, official or legal relationship between the Speaker and the Press Gallery,” with the press gallery running its affairs independently (United Nations 3). Apart from Speaker Casgrain’s expression of non-interference in 1938, this was one of the few times the nature of the relationship was addressed publicly. It served to further underscore a longstanding view of the gallery as autonomous, but also as a functional, accepted part of the parliamentary system in Canada.

While some elements of the press gallery remain the same, reporters are even more dispersed than they were 20 years ago. The National Press Building is no longer a hub for media outlets, with the CBC having built a large new building on Sparks Street in 2004, and other broadcasters and newspaper chains moving elsewhere in downtown Ottawa. The National Press Club of Canada, a gathering place for journalists, politicians and lobbyists, closed in 2007. The geographic reality for the press gallery in Ottawa has not necessarily diminished its core sense of solidarity. There have been points of protest in recent years, such as occurred in 2006 when reporters walked out on Stephen Harper news conference rather than have a political staffer make decisions on who would put questions to the PM (Cobb). I will examine this type of fight-back in detail in Chapter Five. But I would argue that the physical distance between different newsrooms, and between reporters and politicians, has instilled a more competitive, autonomous culture in the press gallery. The accusation of classic “pack journalism” may well be justified

during election campaigns, but not outside of writ periods where reporters are separated from one another physically.

Meanwhile, the breakdown in the intimacy between elected officials and journalists has freed journalists to a certain extent to pursue stories without the constraints and compromises inherent in a more cozy relationship. Observers of both the Canberra gallery and the British lobby have criticized the close, often opaque relationship between the executive and reporters as having weakened the journalistic product (Ester "Canberra Press Gallery"; Gaber "Slow Death"). On the other hand, the loss of proximity in the press gallery has also been argued by some to have eroded the collective strength of the gallery, as it is now near impossible to reach consensus on how to deal with perceived threats to press freedom and access to information. An example of this is the reaction of the gallery to the Harper government's practice of gathering reporters' names before news conferences. While there was an initial protest, eventually only a handful of news organizations (including The Canadian Press), continued to refuse to be included on the list.

One additional influence over the press gallery's culture that bears noting is that of the United States, which also sets it apart from counterparts in London and Canberra. Although the Canadian gallery system was similar to the one that struggled for recognition in Westminster, attitudes towards reporters would also have been shaped by neighbours to the south. The principle of freedom of the press was guaranteed in the First Amendment to the Constitution in 1791, and the House of Representatives allowed the recording of its proceedings from its establishment, facts that would not have escaped the notice of Canadian reporters and politicians. The adversarialism of the American media, and eventually the embrace of investigative and watchdog journalism would also have drifted across the border (Westell and Cumming). Siegel

writes that, “Canada’s media system is American in style, while its political system is British in character. This disparity presents an avenue of conflict in the interaction of press and politics in Canada” (29). Indeed, the lack of transparency of some elements of a parliamentary system as compared to the American system, would frustrate reporters working under the simultaneous assumption they should have unfettered access to information. Still, compared again to the Australian and British situations, the legal standing of Canadian journalists is enviable. The freedom of the press became entrenched in law in 1982 with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The Supreme Court of Canada further helped journalists in 2009 with a ruling that protected them from some defamation suits as long as certain criteria were met, including that the story is in the public interest and that the reporter acted responsibly.¹⁴

To summarize, there are a number of historical factors that should be considered when examining how members of the Canadian Parliamentary Press Gallery have reacted and adapted to government news management. First, the stable and rules-bound history of the press gallery has served to create expectations and norms as to the how journalists interact with parliamentarians and the government. Although prime ministers have approached the gallery with varying degrees of collegiality or suspicion, the underlying understanding of the gallery’s role within the Canadian parliamentary system has remained fairly constant – at least until the last decade, as shall be explored in subsequent chapters.

Second, the loss of propinquity in the gallery, and the departure of most media outlets from offices directly within Centre Block, can be argued to have created more autonomy

¹⁴ For a good window into the impact of this ruling, see the March 14, 2014 cover story in *The Walrus* magazine, “The Story Behind the Rob Ford Story: A Little Known Supreme Court Ruling Unmuzzled Reporters – and Changed Canadian Journalism.

between reporters, and also placed more physical distance between reporters and officials.

Third, the influence of American journalistic sensibilities would also have had an impact on the gallery's culture and approach towards politicians. These latter two factors have contributed to a more adversarial approach to covering Parliament, the prime minister and cabinet.

The next section will address the structure of the larger media industry and its economics, another major factor that will provide further context to the way journalists have adapted to government news management.

The Parliamentary Press Gallery within the Canadian Media Landscape

To gain a sense of the contemporary economic strains on the media industry, a visit to some of the newsrooms around Parliament Hill is instructive. Postmedia News Service, located in a downtown office building, has a seemingly cavernous space that was selected when many more reporters typed away with its walls. The service, for a time called CanWest News, and before that Southam News, has gone through a fairly constant period of layoffs and buyouts since the 1990s, most recently shuttering its parliamentary bureau. Its relationship with Global News came to an end with the breakdown of the conglomerate in 2009, and Global reporters decamped to another building. Across the street, at the CBC, the number of national reporters has declined as advertising revenues dip and government subsidies are shaved down. Its journalists do double or triple duty reporting for radio, television and the corporation's website. Down the street, at Sun Media, the elimination of 200 jobs across the country was announced in December 2013 (CBC News "Sun Media"). There too, reporters work on television and for the chain's newspapers.

The structure and health of the Canadian media industry necessarily has an impact on the size and composition of the Parliamentary Press Gallery and how its members work. The state of

the industry has also helped to influence how governments approach media relations and strategic communication, as journalistic routines change and political coverage has become more homogenous and centralized. Technological changes of the past five years have introduced a new wrinkle into political coverage, further changing the nature of the product produced by press gallery members. Successive Canadian governments have taken an interest in how the media world is changing, identifying an important public policy issue in how citizens receive local and national news and how the sector contributes to a national identity and culture.

Davey to Bacon: Studying the Media Landscape and Government Policy

One of the most exhaustive and influential studies of the media industry in Canada came in 1970, with the release of the Report of the Special Senate Committee on Mass Media, commonly known as the Davey report after its chairman Keith Davey. The concentration of ownership of Canadian newspapers and of television stations had been a recurring concern to parliamentarians, as they watched family-owned publications disappear and local news erode. Already at that juncture, the number of Canadian cities that enjoyed newspaper competition had decreased substantially – from 35 cities at the turn of the century to only five by the time of the report. The senators summed up the situation well when they wrote that the problem with the ideal of a polity well-informed by a diverse media, “is that it happens to be in flat defiance of economics. More voices may be healthier, but fewer voices are cheaper” (Canada, *Uncertain Mirror* 1). The report recommended the creation of a Press Ownership Review Board to examine new mergers and acquisitions, but that proposal was never realized.

A decade later, yet another major examination of the media landscape – this time focused exclusively on newspapers – was launched. The Royal Commission on Newspapers, led by chairman Tom Kent, was struck in the wake of a raft of newspaper closures. As the final 1981

report read, the commission was “born out of shock and trauma” following the shuttering of the 90-year-old Winnipeg Tribune and the 95-year-old Ottawa Journal (Canada *Royal Commission* xi). The commission put forward aggressive new recommendations, including the establishment of a “Canada Newspaper Act” that would prevent and even roll back concentration in the print media industry. Such an Act would have limited a single company from owning more than five newspapers, and from controlling circulation that exceeded five per cent of the national total. Firms that did not have newspaper publishing as their principal business would be prohibited from purchasing publications, as the commission found that, “extraneous interests operating internally are the chains that today limit the freedom of the press”(Canada, *Royal Commission* 237). Again, the recommendations would largely go unheeded, although industry-run press councils did begin to pop up across the country (Skinner and Gasher).

Concentration in the industry would only get worse as the years passed and by the late 1990s “convergence” became the new watchword as major media corporations began to take on not just newspapers, but also broadcasting entities and modes of distribution such as cable and satellite providers. In 1996, Conrad Black’s Hollinger Inc. purchased 20 newspapers from Southam, boosting its control of daily newspapers in Canada to 41 per cent (Jackson). In 2000, Bell Canada purchased *The Globe and Mail* and CTV, and CanWest Global based in Winnipeg purchased the Southam chain from Black’s Hollinger Inc. The latter arrangement would last less than a decade. In 2001, Quebec publishing giant Quebecor purchased cable firm Videotron. A few years earlier, it had acquired the Sun Media Corp. publications. Quebecor further increased its media holdings in 2007 when it bought the Osprey chain of 20 small Ontario newspapers – some of which the company is now closing.

Government continued to watch the changes with a wary eye. Liberal MP Clifford Lincoln chaired a Commons committee study of Canadian broadcasting that focused on how the fragmenting of the viewing audience, and technological change, might wind up affecting the availability of Canadian cultural products in the American-dominated media landscape. The resulting 2003 report recommended stable, long-term funding for a variety of related agencies, including the CBC and Telefilm Canada, as well as a review and potential overhaul of the broadcasting governance structure (*Canada Cultural Sovereignty*). Three years later, the Senate Committee on Transport and Communications, chaired by Senator Lise Bacon, released its report on the Canadian news media landscape. It returned to the familiar concerns of media concentration, and identified the potentially negative consequences of overly centralized coverage on national and provincial news, as correspondents disappear and news services increasingly pick up the slack. One of the report's principal recommendations was a throwback to the Kent commission: a new section to the Competition Act that would review media mergers (*Canada Canadian News Media*).

Once again, the Liberal and then the Conservative government did not take the committees up on their central recommendations. Instead, it would be the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) – not Parliament – that would wield the largest stick when it came to media concentration. In 1998, the commission introduced new policies that held that one company could hold only two local media outlets in one market, be they radio, television or print. A single broadcaster would also be barred from owning more than 45 per cent of a particular TV market. The regulator came back to the concentration and convergence issue again in 2011, this time addressing vertical integration or the merger of both programming and distribution entities. The policy attempts to prevent such mega-media firms

from erecting barriers to programming produced by companies outside its ownership. Perhaps one of the most significant actions taken by the CRTC to address concentration came in 2012, when it rejected the merger of BCE Inc. and Astral Media, arguing the creation of such a media behemoth would have been detrimental to the country's broadcasting industry. A year later, it approved an amended deal on condition that each firm divest itself of a number of holdings, and that it commit to keeping open local stations at least until 2017.

The overall picture of the media landscape over the past four decades appears to be one of inexorable concentration, with little action by government to mitigate the effects. Still, Skinner and Gasher argue that although concentration and contraction has continued unabated, government studies and actions, "have at least tempered commercial imperatives and provided a central lens for evaluating and helping to curb creeping commercialism" (17).

Technological Changes, Economic Downturn

What the various parliamentary committees, the broadcast regulator and press councils have been seemingly powerless to address are the economic and technological forces that have been wreaking havoc on newsrooms across the country, and by extension, newsrooms on Parliament Hill. The Canadian Media Guild estimates that the sector shed 10,000 jobs from 2008 to 2013 (*Print Media; Broadcast Industry*). Those job losses have occurred across the board, from the closure of printing plants and the elimination of in-house staff to layout the newspapers, to reporters and all the way up to publishers. In 2013, a number of historic Canadian newspapers closed their doors, including the *Lindsay Daily Post* and the *Midland Free Press* in Ontario. In the broadcasting sector, there have been a number of contractions. The CBC in 2012 lost a decade-old \$60 million budget supplement for programming, plus another \$55 million annually

from its operating budget. Local television stations have closed in the last decade, including in Windsor and Wingham, Ont., and in Brandon, Man.

The difficulties experienced by both print outlets and broadcasters have been partly due to the sharp decline in advertising dollars following the world economic downturn in 2008 (Winseck). But both print and broadcast have also had to cope with the rapid changes to how Canadians consume their news. The use of online sites, and then the viewing of online sites via handheld devices, has further fragmented the readers and audiences, as well as diluted the pool of available advertising dollars. The 2006 Senate report described the changes as “catalytic and destructive.” Media outlets have had to make expensive investments in their digital presence in order to hang on to readers. Certain publications, including the *Globe and Mail* and Sun Media newspapers, have introduced paywalls for readers in recent years. *La Presse* invested \$40 million in a tablet version of the newspaper in 2013 that could eventually permanently replace its print version. Dwayne Winseck has argued, however, that the difficulties experienced by Canadian media companies have been due to short-term and cyclical slumps in advertising, as well as poorly managed efforts at convergence and consolidation over a 15-year span. He also notes that the overall media industry has grown, with such players as YouTube and Google entering the field, which might explain why Statistics Canada in 2013 reported there were no fewer Canadians employed as journalists than a decade ago (Skelton) and why the overall membership numbers in the Parliamentary Press Gallery have remained stable.

Still, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, the recent contractions in the industry and the technological changes have been felt acutely in the Parliamentary Press Gallery. A criticism raised by the Kent commission of overly centralized national political coverage seems just as relevant today: “This is an ominous development for a nation that requires efficient and

interactive communication between the national political centre and regional centres of political and economic power” (*Royal Commission* 142). While it is true that the press gallery has added new members that reflect the changing media landscape, such as reporters for *Rabble.ca* and *iPolitics*, the biggest media companies have cut rather than expanded their representation in Ottawa and only a handful of regional reporters remain. The Canadian Press, Quebecor’s QMI, and Postmedia News are the three principal news services that are relied upon to produce federal political news for most daily newspapers in Canada, and those three companies in turn have reduced the size of their Ottawa teams. The Canadian Press, for example, had 39 employees on Parliament Hill in 1995, and now has 20.

At the same time, those who do work in the press gallery have seen their job descriptions change dramatically in the past 15 years. The majority of members interviewed for this thesis do more than just report for a single type of media. For example, Mark Kennedy of Postmedia News completed an e-book in 2013 on Prime Minister Stephen Harper for the company. He also shoots video for the service, while fulfilling his duties as bureau chief and top political correspondent for the chain’s papers. Susan Delacourt of the *Toronto Star* is a prolific poster to Twitter, and also contributes to a blog on the newspaper’s website. Susan Lunn of the CBC contributes to television and the network’s online website. In my case, as a Canadian Press reporter, I contribute to Twitter, file audio for broadcast clients, shoot and appear in video and write specifically for online publications, in addition to my traditionally newspaper-driven duties. When I began working for the company on Parliament Hill in 1997 the duties included only writing copy for print and filing audio.

These added demands, combined with the shrinking size of newsrooms, have created myriad challenges for the members of the Parliamentary Press Gallery when faced with

government news management. Time and financial constraints theoretically mean fewer resources to spend on fleshing out any given story or to verify the claims of a particular official. Newsrooms with limited staff also have difficulty maintaining hard and fast beat systems, meaning reporters must try to cover the vast waterfront of the federal government. Some of those who participated in this research, such as H el ene Buzzetti of *Le Devoir*, David Battistelli of Rogers Communications, and J oel-Denis Bellavance of *La Presse* commented on their inability to focus regularly on particular departments or issues because of the size of their newsrooms. Barry Wilson of the *Western Producer* noted that up to seven reporters would regularly cover meetings of the Commons Agriculture committee. Now he is almost always on his own, save for the odd crisis that hits the industry. This is not necessarily a new phenomenon, however. The Canadian Parliamentary Press Gallery, as noted earlier, went through decades of limited membership even though there were more daily newspapers on the scene in the past.

Christopher Waddell argues that the breakdown of the beat system, and the inability to cultivate contacts with the same ease, has had deleterious effects on the journalistic work product of the gallery. He writes that, “reporters are much more vulnerable to political parties, communication staff for ministers, and the legions of lobbyists and private sector communications people each pushing their own employer’s point of view” (Waddell 119). This takes us back to the arguments of Gandy, Fishman and others on the propensity of time-strapped newswriters to accept information subsidies. I do not dispute this increased vulnerability of the Parliamentary Press Gallery nor the negative impact on the overall quality of political coverage. But this thesis will seek to demonstrate that despite the challenges posed by the structure and economics of the media today, the journalistic values and the culture within the gallery have persisted, helping to shape the work strategies used to confront government news management.

The evolution of news management in Ottawa will be explored in Chapters Four and Five, and the nature of those work strategies in Chapter Six.

Chapter Four: The Evolution of Government News Management in Canadian Federal Politics

In this chapter, I will examine how the approach to news management has evolved from Confederation to the years leading up to Stephen Harper's Conservative government, and why it changed the way that it did. I have excluded mention of short administrations, such as those of prime ministers Joe Clark, Kim Campbell and Paul Martin. Because of the dearth of material written specifically about news management and the Canadian government, the chapter will include material on both government communications practice and the approach taken by prime ministers and their staff vis-à-vis the parliamentary press gallery in order to draw a picture of the general environment. The history of the press gallery and the Canadian media environment, as covered in the preceding chapter, is of course inexorably linked to the course of government news management.

The last 20 years in particular have seen a rise in the use of marketing practices by political parties that has also taken hold inside the federal government. This is a major part of the equation that needs to be considered when considering why news management has evolved in the manner that it has.

Personal and Partisan: Sir John A. Macdonald to Mackenzie King

Strategies for managing the media and the news have existed as long as Canada has. When the first, highly partisan reporters arrived to cover Parliament in the early days following Confederation, interactions between the government and the media were a matter of direct persuasion and personal relationships – an approach that would persist for a solid century. Prime ministers and cabinet ministers forged personal friendships with reporters as a matter of course.

Some of Canada's early prime ministers, and one notable cabinet minister, also wielded influence over the structure of the industry itself. Sir John A. Macdonald, partly in response to the power of rival George Brown's Liberal organ the *Globe*, helped launch the Tory-backed *Toronto Mail* in 1872 (Wallace; Levine). Sir Wilfred Laurier, before taking office, helped found the Liberal organ *l'Electeur* (later called *Le Soleil*) with Quebec premier Henri-Gustave Joly. Clifford Sifton, Laurier's minister of the interior, bought the *Manitoba Free Press* in 1898. Prime Minister Mackenzie Bowell owned the *Belleville Intelligencer* until his death at age 94.

Former *Globe* reporter John Willison details in his memoirs the challenges of obtaining information from government departments in the late 19th century when one worked for an opposition organ, noting that "all appointments and statements were reserved for party organs" (121). A Liberal official handed *Globe* correspondent M.O. Hammond a copy of an interview he was supposed to have had with a defecting Tory, which was promptly published in the paper the next day (Gwyn 413). Such sharp partisanship began to dissipate around the First World War, as noted in Chapter Three, even if the personal relationships did not. In terms of formal government communications services, the only co-ordinated dissemination of public information before the turn of the century came from the powerful Department of Agriculture, the Canadian Exhibition Commission, and from a network of trade commissioners (*Canada Task Force*).

More sophisticated forms of media management slowly began to emerge during the Laurier years, even though Laurier himself "was not readily available to the press gallery" (Bishop 12). Sifton commissioned and wrote editorials and partisan articles that were placed in newspapers across the country (Levine), a practice that some politicians use to this day. Ford notes that around the war, Prime Minister Robert Borden held weekly news conferences with the gallery. His Finance Minister Thomas White was the first to institute the practice of giving

members of the press gallery advance copies of the budget speech, and made civil servants available for background briefings (Ford; Bishop), an early example of the government's understanding of journalistic routines.

Although there were no specific government bodies tasked with media relations or public affairs, both political parties of the time had their own information arms – the Central Publications and Distribution Office for the Liberal-Conservative Party of Canada and for the Liberals the Central Information Office (*Canada Task Force*). The First World War brought an expansion of the *Canada Gazette*, and the creation of a Press Censorship Branch to monitor and police what was reported on the war effort. The Canadian Press was established by federal statute in 1917. Borden also established the Dominion Bureau of Statistics in 1918, which was essentially an agency focused on the gathering and dissemination of information.

The inter-war period saw gradual change in both government information services and media management by the executive. The Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission (later the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), the Bank of Canada, and the National Film Board were all established during this era. Prime Minister R.B. Bennett appointed a young Lester Pearson as a press attaché to a cabinet minister during the 1932 Imperial Economic Conference (Westell). Later, under Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, Pearson would institute off-the-record press briefings during the war (Levine). The long tradition of on-the-fly interviews or “scrums” with reporters after weekly cabinet meetings appears to have begun under King (Levine; Seymour-Ure "An Inquiry"), although he himself was not fond of press conferences and interviews. Writing in 1945, the longtime gallery reporter Charles Bishop said that “the press conference is now a solidly established institution,” although announcements always took place in Parliament first as the institution requires. He noted that when Parliament was not in session,

“the Prime Minister and others use the Press Gallery as their medium of communication with the public,” and “ministers and their staffs are always available to the Gallery members for explanations and amplifications” (96).

Author Marc Bourrie has chronicled King’s approach to strategic communications, describing how the former reporter and media consultant would use direct contact with publishers and reporters to forward his political goals. He wrote that, “King’s public relations work, taking advantage of the media’s own idiosyncratic power structures and internal culture, effectively neutralized the potentially serious threat of an uncontrolled press” (Bourrie 27). Under King, the first centralized government information body was established – the Wartime Information Board. Several other departments also created internal information divisions. Still, the post-war Canadian Information Service did not last past 1947, when it was absorbed into the Department of External Affairs (*Canada Task Force*).

Louis St. Laurent to Pearson

Following the war, more departments began to create information divisions. They included the Dominion Bureau of Statistics, the RCMP, and Public Works. For the first time, in 1946, the Treasury Board Secretariat also created a job classification for that rare breed of employee – the information officer. Although King eschewed the more public forms of news management, his successors were slightly more amenable to meeting reporters out in the open. Louis St. Laurent held informal press conferences before cabinet meetings. Aides to ministers filled a media relations role in addition to their other duties.

The National Liberal Federation employed an advertising executive, Bob Kidd, to ensure positive coverage of St. Laurent throughout the media, including in photographs (Levine). Still, personal persuasion was the principal tool for managing the press gallery well into the 1960s,

with prime ministers Diefenbaker and Pearson both cultivating relationships with reporters. Anthony Westell recounts arriving in the capital in 1956 as a correspondent for a British newspaper, shocked to discover no formal channels of government information existed:

...Relations between the government and the press were traditionally managed on a selective and highly personal basis in Ottawa. While there was very little machinery for controlling and directing the flow of news, certainly there was management for political ends. (Westell 256)

Historian Patrick Brennan notes that in the absence of sophisticated communications branches and staff in the era, senior bureaucrats also regularly briefed reporters on policy, forging relationships in which a certain elite of gallery members essentially became government insiders. Contact with bureaucrats in this manner continued right into the early part of the 21st century.

News management began to change rapidly with the increasing influence of television in politics, the increasing numbers of reporters posted to Ottawa and a more adversarial spirit developing in journalism across North America. As author and journalist Susan Delacourt has chronicled in her book *Shopping for Votes*, political advertising and marketing techniques were also seeping into Canadian politics from south of the border. Ad men Allister Grosart and Dalton Camp helped John Diefenbaker defeat the Liberals in 1957. Diefenbaker was the first Canadian prime minister to hire a formal press secretary, plucked from the ranks of the press gallery. Despite the presence of this new information officer, Diefenbaker still spoke regularly and directly with reporters.

Similarly, Pearson came to the job already having several friends in the gallery from his time in cabinet, and with a commitment to a transparent government (Levine). He instituted the first real press office within the PMO, and had a team of image and media advisers that would

become well-known figures in their own right – Tom Kent, Keith Davey and Richard O’Hagen. All three had previous ties to journalism. It was during this time that the National Press Building was established to alleviate overcrowding in the Hot Room in Parliament’s Centre Block. As had happened to Diefenbaker and Louis St. Laurent before him, Pearson’s honeymoon with the media ended and a more adversarial relationship began. Pearson, who had been so accommodating in the beginning, eventually banned reporters from the hallways of the building as media coverage of his administration became more critical.

Colin Seymour-Ure’s thesis on the gallery, written towards the end of Pearson’s time in office, gives an interesting glimpse into a system of government news management that was at the cusp of change. He describes “special assistants” to ministers as valuable sources of information, albeit cautious ones. Seymour-Ure writes that “they prefer to see their task as one of providing background information and explaining intricacies or befogged issues, rather than of acting as the ministers’ mouthpiece or making official comments” (“An Inquiry” 116). He goes on to note that press conferences were not de rigueur in Ottawa, but that cabinet members still preferred one-on-one contact with reporters. Finally, Seymour-Ure comments on the state of government information services writ large, saying they are not as useful for gleaning details as informal contacts with bureaucrats. At the time, throughout government, only one person was classified specifically as a media relations officer. External Affairs employed two press officers and held informal briefings, and National Defence held regular background briefings (*Canada Task Force*). Seymour-Ure suggests that “gallery members should be able to go to authorized spokesmen, whether of ministers, deputy ministers or divisions of Parliament, instead of having to operate like Pinkerton’s man in draughty corridors and in innuendos over the telephone” (“An Inquiry” 169).

The Task Force on Government Information reporting a few years later, which will be explored below, came to the same conclusions as Ure, saying that, “among Gallery men, public information officers are about as low on the list of sources for information and ideas they could possibly be” (*Task Force* 117). The report also noted that press gallery members complained information officers didn’t respond to their questions the same day. These points could have been written in 2014, where reporters complain of delays and of a low quality of information from departmental spokespeople as we shall see in Chapter Five. It is a good example of how the pendulum of information has swung back and forth in the federal system, unfortunately today leaning on the side of opacity by all government sources in Ottawa.

From Confederation to the Pearson years, government news management in Ottawa was underpinned by personal connections between those in power and members of the press gallery. By the mid-1950s, the collegiality had seriously waned, and the growing size of the press gallery – which included many broadcast journalists – began to put strains on what was a largely parochial, unsophisticated system of communications. The arrival of a modern-minded prime minister bent on centralizing large swaths of government activity, along with changes to campaigning introduced south of the border, would dramatically change news management in Ottawa.

Trudeau and the Modernization of Government News Management

Three decades before the new Labour government in Britain commissioned the Mountfield report on government communication, a Canadian task force released a hugely influential report to the new government of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau (1968-79, 1980-84). At that time, politicians were worried about the growing disaffection of the public vis-à-vis government, and the task force was interested in how to engage and involve citizens. *To Know*

and Be Known scrutinized the way information about the federal government was disseminated to both the media and Canadian society at large, and baldly concluded that what existed constituted a “mess” and “supreme disorder.” It pointed to a lack of a general information policy, co-ordination and standards within government. The report also complained that serving broadcast needs was generally an afterthought in government offices, stating wryly that “It is enough to make one suspect that federal officials are still sending stuffed moose-heads to London” (*Task Force 29*).

The task force made a number of recommendations, which had at their core the concept of the public’s right to have access to government information as part of a participatory democracy. It proposed a ministerial committee be created to oversee a new information policy, and that a new, centralized organization called Information Canada be created to facilitate and co-ordinate information activities across government. A new parliamentary committee would theoretically provide oversight over these initiatives, which were recognized to give the executive significant new powers.

Trudeau responded by creating Information Canada and later the Canadian Unity Information Office (CUIO), but not a parliamentary body to oversee the changes. Both these bodies later came under criticism in the Commons and in the papers for acting as propaganda arms (Rose; Westell and Cumming). The CUIO was involved in a number of information campaigns on sensitive topics, including the 1980 Quebec referendum and the National Energy Program. These would represent the seeds of controversial Communication Canada, which will be examined later in this chapter. It must be noted that the task force also paved the way for the Access to Information Act in 1983, putting Canada – at least for a time – at the international forefront of such legislation. The numbers of information officers in government grew steadily

during the Trudeau years – from 400 identified by the task force, to 1,154 by 1976 (Westell and Cumming).

What also emerged from the task force report was a centralization of communications and advertising under the Privy Council Office and the Treasury Board Secretariat, a system that persists today. Jonathan Rose says the “apex” of the centralized power was the Cabinet Committee on Communications: “Formed under Prime Minister Trudeau, its early years seem to be marked by a discussion of party politics but it has now been transformed into a vehicle for senior government ministers to conduct communications, including advertising” (80-81). It should be noted that while communications were being centralized under the ambit of the executive, Trudeau was doing the same for a number of other government activities. Former MP Patrick Boyer refers to “missing tripwires,” the disappearance of some of the mechanisms necessary for holding the government accountable. Those include the elimination of the requirement for Parliament to approve spending rather than just having budgetary estimates “deemed approved;” having the comptroller general give the green light to the estimates; the obsession with balanced budgets but the absence of contingency funds; and the weakening of Parliament’s power of oversight. Current Conservative MP Michael Chong has harkened back to this time of power centralization as he pushes for support of his Reform Act.

Comparisons between Trudeau’s news management style and that of current Prime Minister Stephen Harper might seem natural. Trudeau had little interest in cultivating personal ties or friendships with reporters, as so many of his predecessors had done going back to Macdonald. He insisted on cabinet secrecy, and wanted more control over communication (Levine). This came as a shock to the press gallery, accustomed to a certain level of collegiality and access. He also used now familiar techniques of news management, including the slow leak

of policy initiatives, sometimes released late in the day to hamper media scrutiny. Trudeau also appears to be the first prime minister to give a PMO official the job of chief spokesperson, delineating his office as the overseer of political communications and the PCO as the manager of departmental, non-partisan communications (Brown). This is the same model that is followed today.

And yet, Trudeau's level of accessibility, and that of his cabinet, would be likely celebrated as open by today's constrained press gallery. Trudeau's unforgettable comment about using the War Measures Act against the FLQ in 1970, "Just watch me," was part of an extended, six-minute-long scrum that came as reporters waited outside the west door of Parliament's Centre Block. Trudeau also employed a communication advisor and a spokesperson. Informal scrums continued in the hallways of the Parliament buildings until Trudeau instituted a formal weekly press conference (Westell and Cumming), an event that would seem unthinkable in today's climate where journalists are kept far away from the prime minister and even instructed not to ask him questions in certain situations. Still, Trudeau's approach to both media relations and larger government news management would create the foundations for future Liberal and Conservative prime ministers.

Mulroney to Martin: Neo-Liberalism and News Management

Although there has been no specific scholarly examination of Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's (1984-1992) news management style, he did employ partisan press secretaries across government. While his communications advisers encouraged Mulroney to see reporters "as neither friend nor foe," but rather as professional intermediaries between electors and those who would lead them, the former prime minister believed that personal relationships could be a factor in shaping news coverage (Fox 29). In some ways, Mulroney seemed to be

caught between the old and new communications worlds – still placing direct calls to reporters, but recognizing the increasing pressures of television and the rapidly expanding media sphere (Fox 245). CTV’s Ottawa bureau chief Robert Fife recalled in an interview for this thesis that there would be regular opportunities to put questions to Mulroney, even if he didn’t take the bait. Each day, he would walk up the stairs outside of the Commons lobby to his office, in full view of the cameras.

Levine said that after Mulroney’s election win in 1984, he tried to centralize and clamp down on communications: “Leaks were to be halted, media sources were to be silenced. But the arrangement was unworkable and led to the draconian guidelines that unhappy civil servants were to follow in their dealings with the media” (334). The policy was abandoned later that year. Peter Desbarats says Mulroney adopted U.S. President Ronald Reagan’s tactic of allowing limited access to the media, but appearing frequently on television to give the illusion of availability (156). This thesis is not focused on campaign periods, but Mulroney’s style during writ periods does offer a glimpse of the distance that was being placed between reporters and the leader. The 1988 campaign was characterized by even more news management – the classic “boy in the bubble” tactic where the leader has minimal contact with the media and the image is carefully planned. “Initially, the usual routine at every stop was to keep the journalists behind either white plastic chains or a cordon of police officers. There was little opportunity for reporters to question the prime minister, let alone get close enough to him for a scrum,” Levine wrote (345).

It was under Mulroney that the government finally established in 1988 the communications policy that the Task Force on Government Information had recommended two decades earlier. It talked of the responsibility to provide information as an inseparable concept

from representative government, and of the importance of the public being armed with information about their government (Rudnicki). The Privy Council Office's co-ordination and management role over government communications was also formally articulated, and a government communications policy established in 1988.

Meanwhile, a significant news management infrastructure was being built, imbued with the new corporate spirit that was influencing all government operations. Spending on communications within the federal government grew by 30 per cent between 1987 and 1999. Government advertising and polling was also rising dramatically (Kozolanka, "Sponsorship Scandal" 350). The Mulroney team embraced the latest marketing techniques, including direct marketing and the purchasing of lists of potential supporters. Party polling was increasingly used to target voters (Delacourt *Shopping*). The old aims articulated in the Task Force on Government Information in 1969 to properly inform citizens so they could participate in democracy, "shifted to managing information and then to public relations" (Kozolanka, "Sponsorship Scandal" 349).

Those trends would only intensify under Jean Chrétien's (1993-2003) Liberal Party of Canada, which won the first of three majorities in 1993. The Liberals sought to rebrand the Canada internationally as a progressive yet fiscally sound nation, while simultaneously combining those messages with ones about the party's accomplishments (Nimijean). Chrétien enjoyed generally cordial relations with the gallery, but maintained his distance from journalists in all but routine functions, such as the annual Press Gallery Dinner and the garden party at 24 Sussex. The more personal contacts fell to the communications team within the Prime Minister's Office. Additionally, there was an organized system of directors of communication and press secretaries in each ministerial office, mostly plucked from party ranks and following the template used by the Trudeau and Mulroney governments before him. I arrived on Parliament Hill at the

beginning of Chrétien's second majority mandate in 1997, and dealt frequently with these political employees. One journalist interviewed for this thesis, who asked to remain anonymous, noted that "ministers' offices...were staffed with people who had a command of the files their department was handling." Chrétien's former chief of staff Eddie Goldenberg recounts a conversation between Chrétien and Blair in 1997, where the new British PM was upset about not being told about something one of his ministers had said. Goldenberg says Chrétien tried to put Blair at ease: "It happens to me all the time. My ministers decide and speak on many issues within the responsibility of their departments without my being aware. That's the nature of government" (Goldenberg 72).

Chrétien and his ministers were available for short scrums every Tuesday after the weekly cabinet meeting. Several of the interview subjects for this thesis referred to those post-cabinet scrums. CBC Radio reporter Susan Lunn said reporters were nearly guaranteed to get a hold of one or more ministers they needed for comment. "There were two microphones and there were probably ten different stories that you were working on, but you had access, fairly regular access to cabinet ministers," she said. Ministers and MPs were also frequently available for comment after Wednesday caucus meetings, and following daily question period. Peter Donolo, Chrétien's director of communications, was well known for his penchant for spin. Donolo would often call reporters to offer the Liberal government's take on a particular story, a model that was being embraced in the United Kingdom under Blair's Labour government. The Chrétien administration would also send up trial balloons from time to time, leaking information about envisioned policy moves. I recall one experience of having the government's plans for same-sex marriage legislation leaked nearly in its entirety to me a few days before it was officially

released. In that instance, I dealt with a senior member of the prime minister's staff who was not specifically tasked with communications.

Most contact with either political or civil-service staff took place over the telephone, although it should be noted that the use of the Internet and email was just starting to gain momentum in the early part of the Chrétien mandate. By this time, there had been a significant evolution in information services as compared to the era described by the task force of the late 1960s. Communications employees across government had been professionalized, and were relied upon for information by reporters for background or technical information needed for their stories. Reporter Gloria Galloway of the *Globe and Mail* recalls that she could contact a departmental spokesperson with a question on an issue that arose mid-afternoon, and get an informative response within a few hours. "And the people on the other end of the line from the departments were allowed to answer questions because they knew their files," she said.

Denise Rudnicki, a former Liberal staff member, explored the government's communications approach to the same-sex marriage debate in her 2009 master's thesis for Carleton University. She described a comprehensive communication strategy that was coordinated between the Department of Justice and the Privy Council Office, and which included input from the Prime Minister's Office. The strategy was an elaborate one, with messages first tested with focus groups across the country. Those messages were communicated to all potential spokespeople, who were expected to all sing from the same songbook. Behind the scenes, and without the knowledge of the media, the government also recruited the help of outside stakeholders including gay rights activists and legal experts to produce their own materials in support of the legislation, which in turn elicited more positive news coverage. Rudnicki also identified in her research the blurring of lines between partisan and non-partisan messaging in

government communication, with some of the language used in materials produced by the civil service taking on a promotional tone.

That blurring of lines in the name of selling a policy would eventually become a problem for the Chrétien government, but not one that would necessarily change the inexorable course of politicization in government communications. The Liberals created a new pro-unity office called the Canadian Information Office (CIO) as the 1995 sovereignty referendum loomed, a cousin of the much criticized CUIO under Trudeau. The CIO morphed into a whole new department, Communication Canada, in 2001 (Kozolanka, “The Sponsorship Scandal” 353). A few years prior, the Committee of Cabinet on Communication had been re-formed. Justice John Gomery’s commission of inquiry into improper contracts and other problems linked to the government’s sponsorship program also looked at the work of Communication Canada. It underlined that many of the sponsorship and communications activities had actually little to do with promoting national unity, but aligned with more partisan and marketing imperatives. In the aftermath of the sponsorship scandal, Communication Canada and the cabinet committee were both dismantled, sending the management of strategic government into the opaque depths of the Privy Council Office and cabinet committees.

Even with Communication Canada gone at that juncture, a corporate, centralized approach to information had entrenched itself inside the government, dubbed new public management (NPM) by some. Academics Neil Collins and Patrick Butler describe the concept as “an economic model of governance in which the market, or approximations to it, is the ideal mechanism for the allocation of public services” (52). With that model came increasing reliance on marketing techniques inside government to bring the public onside to a particular policy, or more often, to a political party’s offering. As pertains to communications, NPM resulted in

governments becoming much more strategic in order to “win the contest over meaning,” with the media, as Kozolanka has put it (“Sponsorship Scandal” 348). The Chrétien-Martin years, it should be noted, overlapped with those of Tony Blair’s Labour government in the UK, an administration that shared many of the same policy ideals as the Liberals in Canada.

Reporters were left to contend with a much more co-ordinated, multi-layered government communications machine. As Rudnicki has described in her thesis, journalists who turned to political or public service spokespeople received well-packaged, focus-group tested and centralized responses to their answers. Veteran press gallery member Barry Wilson of the *Western Producer* points to the Chrétien era as the period in which information from departments began to “tighten up.” But Wilson adds that he still had regular access to more personal and ultimately less predictable sources of information – ministers and MPs. Even Rudnicki’s research on strategic communications and the same-sex marriage legislation refers to media interviews given by then Justice Minister Irwin Cotler that did not unfold the way that the government desired. The parliamentary press gallery was feeling the effects of marketing and more organized government news management, but still had some access to the kinds of avenues that had been available for most of its history.

The Canadian government’s approach to news management has evolved from a highly personal and largely uncoordinated model, to a modern approach that introduced the more cautious attributes of corporate communications including sharper message control. The influence of political marketing techniques in the United States and Britain were being rapidly absorbed into the Canadian system in the 1980s through to the 2000s, and would set the stage for the Conservative government of Stephen Harper to come.

Chapter Five: News Management Under Stephen Harper

A recent experience of mine on the job might help to illustrate how fundamentally communications have changed on Parliament Hill in the past eight years. While the scandal around improper spending by certain senators gripped Parliament Hill – and the general public – in December 2013, questions had arisen about how emails were handled within the prime minister’s office and the Privy Council Office. The former counsel to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Benjamin Perrin, had been aware of a controversial agreement struck between Harper’s chief of staff Nigel Wright and Sen. Mike Duffy to have the latter’s improper living expenses secretly repaid. Perrin left the employ of the PMO after the agreement was carried out, and the RCMP investigator looking into the matter was told by the PCO that all of Perrin’s emails had been deleted from the government computer systems.

Naturally, the opposition and reporters were interested in what laws and regulations said about the deletion of government emails, particularly in light of the Library and Archives Act and the Access to Information Act. I contacted Library and Archives asking for an anodyne background briefing on the Act it oversees. I was subsequently told that the appropriate person was out of town, and asked to send along my questions via email. Some of the answers, sent back to me by email, came more than a day later and the remainder more than a week later. Through a subsequent Access to Information request, I was able to gain a window into what was happening behind the scenes of my inquiry. Library and Archives had been prepared to set up a briefing to deal with my request with a senior bureaucrat, but had been stymied by the PCO and the Department of Canadian Heritage, with one PCO civil servant pressing to know whether approvals had been sought with the Heritage Minister’s office. At least 32 different bureaucrats

were copied on the various iterations of the answers that were drafted for my questions, explaining in part the lengthy delays.

For a reporter who has arrived to work on Parliament Hill or a public servant who joined a department's staff in the last eight years, this story might elicit a shrug or perhaps no reaction at all. The heavy and centralized layers of control and approvals for media relations have become *de rigueur* since the Conservatives took power in 2006, having grown on the foundations left by the Chrétien-Martin governments. But there were also important differences with prior governments. As the reporters interviewed for this thesis repeatedly emphasized, background briefings used to be commonplace. Personal interaction with communications staff was just part of day-to-day life, and rudimentary information fairly easily and quickly obtained.

This chapter will examine the substantial changes that have occurred to government news management and government communications since Prime Minister Stephen Harper's victory. It will rely heavily on the interviews conducted between July 2013 and January 2014 with 14 members of the parliamentary press gallery in order to lay out the extent of the changes (see Appendix B). All of the reporters interviewed had reported from Parliament Hill prior to the Conservatives winning government, and thus were able to speak to shifts in news management style they perceived. Two of the gallery members could be considered veterans, having worked during the time of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. As mentioned in the introduction, the interviewees were selected from a broad cross-section of media organizations, including French-language newspapers and broadcast outlets. The outlets also came from a range of political perspectives, from the more progressive *Toronto Star* and CBC Radio and Television to the more right-of-centre Sun Media News and Postmedia News.

Naturally, this portion of the research looks at the reporter-official relationship through a particular lens – that of journalists who feel very much that their work has been hampered. As Brians et al. have noted, the fact the elite interviewees made certain comments should be treated as data, rather than viewing their comments as facts. Their perspectives will be coupled with secondary sources including books and news articles that chronicled various aspects of the communications and media relations environment of the time. The ethos behind this different news management approach, significantly influenced by the embrace of political marketing techniques, will also be examined.

A Market-Oriented Party Enters the Stage

Two factors are essential to understanding why there was such a fundamental change to government news management in Ottawa when the Conservatives formed a minority government in 2006. The first is the political approach the party had decided to take in order to finally wrest power away from the Liberals. The second is the personal style and attitude towards the media of the leader himself, which has always impacted the tone of media relations going back to Confederation and Sir John A. Macdonald, as touched on in previous chapters.

The seeds of change were planted when the Conservatives were nursing their wounds from the 2004 election and taking stock of what had gone wrong when they tried to defeat Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin. One of the aspects of their failure was the negative headlines that emerged when certain candidates had spoken out of turn and thrown the campaign off its key messages (Flanagan; Wells). One incident that I recall vividly from the final days of the campaign, and one which is often cited, involved Conservative justice critic Randy White suggesting the notwithstanding clause should be used to overturn same-sex marriage legislation, and baldly declaring, “well the heck with the courts, eh” (The Canadian Press "Excerpts"). As

former Harper adviser Tom Flanagan said, referring to national media coverage, “Our multiple problems in earned media were a major story of the campaign...” (184).

It was during this inter-election period that the party dived head first into the world of political marketing, hiring a dynamic young adviser Patrick Muttart to work as part of the internal team developing campaign strategy. As both Susan Delacourt and Tom Flanagan have chronicled, Muttart made the party see the electorate as groups of consumers in a marketplace. The party needed to develop its brand and product to attract certain types of voters, and it needed to communicate in a consistent manner that did not confuse or distract those consumers. Such practices had already been employed by Tony Blair’s Labour in the United Kingdom and by John Howard in Australia. Daniel J. Paré and Flavia Berger’s study of the 2006 election noted that the party sought to enhance “the cohesiveness of the party’s message in a manner that minimized the likelihood of Conservative candidates going off message” (57). At the same time, there was also an internal analysis made that many of those sought-after voters didn’t actually pay much attention to the media outlets that would be trailing the leader. Communications products and plans were geared directly to potential voters, not to members of the press gallery (Delacourt *Shopping*). This new approach and this new discipline appeared to work for the Conservatives, and they defeated Martin’s Liberals in January 2006. The lessons they had learned from the campaign were simply transferred into the operations at the prime minister’s office, creating something of a trauma to reporters who had never before experienced such tight control over information and access, as we shall see later in this chapter.

The embrace of political marketing techniques, however, was not the whole story. There was also an ideological or philosophical underpinning to the changes to government news management that emerged under the Conservatives. Paul Wells’ 2013 book, *The Longer I’m*

Prime Minister, attempts to shed light on Stephen Harper's motivations. He argues that at the core was the desire to dismantle a political system, including the national media, which was long slanted towards Central Canada and the appeasement of Québec interests. To replace this way of thinking would require Harper and his party to disempower the "gatekeepers of the old consensus," such as the media, academia and the public service (61). Harper appears in some way to have been carrying out the strategy described by Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, who wrote about how a "hegemonic project works to gain consent by building a bloc of interests into an alliance of sufficient strength to engage the existing hegemony in a war of position" (Kozolanka, "Power of Persuasion" 3). Harper's former associate at the National Citizens' Coalition, Gerry Nicholls, suggested a long-time personal reticence vis-à-vis the media that resulted in the NCC holding fewer news conferences than under a predecessor. Nicholls wrote that, "He didn't trust the media to get our message out. And he believed it was a mistake to get too friendly with the press" (109).

Authors Darrell Bricker and John Ibbitson described the hegemonic project that was in place in Canada when Harper arrived on the scene as a "Laurentian consensus," and that the "best way to overcome the Laurentian biases within the Parliamentary Press Gallery was simply to ignore the gallery" (202). Harper revealed his feelings about the press gallery in May 2006, when he gave an interview to a London, Ont. radio station. "I have trouble believing that a Liberal prime minister would have this problem. But the press gallery at the leadership level has taken an anti-Conservative view," he said (Panetta "Avoid National Media"). This attitude has persisted throughout Harper's time in office. When all but one media outlet assembled on Parliament Hill in October 2013 boycotted a Conservative caucus meeting because reporters had been restricted from entry, a party fundraising appeal to supporters portrayed them as biased

opponents: “We knew they wouldn’t give us fair coverage – but this is a new low for the media elite” (McGregor "Targets Media").

There is a nexus between the political marketing impetus and the ideological attitude towards the national media. The prime minister’s speech to the Conservative policy convention in Calgary in November 2013 drove this point home, as he said, “We didn’t go to Ottawa to join private clubs or become part of some “elite.” That’s not who you are; it’s not who we are” (S. Harper). Although Harper’s former chief of staff, Nigel Wright, was a multi-millionaire and Harper had appointed such wealthy individuals to the Senate as Nicole Eaton and David Braley, the image being portrayed for voters was that Harper was the Tim Horton’s-drinking regular guy, while the latte-drinking media and his political opponents were out of touch with the average Canadian. The press gallery had become a piece of the larger marketing and fundraising plan. The next section of this chapter will delve into the ways the new approach to the media manifested itself in government news management techniques.

Government News Management Techniques of the Conservative Government

That there has been a sea change in the style of government news management under Stephen Harper’s government is a point that all 14 of my interview subjects agreed on. One word continually popped up in nearly every conversation: “frustration” or “frustrating.” Other terms that were used to describe government communication and news management included “irritating” and “despair inducing.” Information dissemination was called “abysmal,” “useless,” and “appalling,” with 13 out of the 14 reporters stating their dismay with the quality and lack of speed of communication from public servants in government departments. One journalist, who requested anonymity, referred to Ottawa as a “black box” of information.

Gloria Galloway of the *Globe and Mail* said the changes to the flow of government information were like “night and day,” changing nearly the moment of Stephen Harper’s arrival in Ottawa after the end of the 2006 campaign: “We got off the plane from Calgary and it was switched off and has been switched off ever since.” CTV’s Ottawa bureau chief Robert Fife, who has been covering federal politics since 1978, called the Conservatives “the most centralized government in terms of trying to control the flow of information...” Susan Delacourt of the *Toronto Star* said this government “is one of the most heavy-handed of the news managers.” Meanwhile, the most veteran of the journalists, including Fife, Postmedia’s Mark Kennedy and the *Western Producer*’s Barry Wilson viewed the changes as the worsening of a pattern that had been established under previous governments. Kennedy puts it this way:

I don’t think we have any illusions that just because it’s a government led by Stephen Harper’s Conservatives that all of a sudden journalists in Ottawa are faced with the problem of trying to get information out of a government, because they’ve all done it. Some are just more inclined to do it than others, and I think there’s a fair bit of evidence to show that in the last few years Mr. Harper’s government has put a fair degree of emphasis on controlling its message, and that makes it hard for a journalist to do their job.

To find out what characterized the change in government news management style, I asked the subjects a number of different open-ended questions, including how they perceived that the government was attempting to manage the news product, their opinion on the quality of information they received from both civil servants and political staff, and whether they noted a change in style from the previous government (See interview questions in Appendix A). Two main themes emerged from their responses: the curtailment of access to government politicians,

and the curtailment of access to the bureaucracy and government information. There were additional sub-themes that I will also address: the level of experience of political communications staff, and the targeting or alienating of particular reporters.

The single anonymous interview subject, who works for a major national media outlet, summed up the changes as “starving” reporters for information:

They provide as little information as possible about an event or in response to a question or in response to requests for interviews. My theory is they want to reduce the importance of the fourth estate in Canadians’ minds and the only way to do that this to render them useless, so they can speak around them through social media, or talk shows, or advertising.

1. The Curtailment of Access to Government Politicians

As described earlier in this thesis, prime ministers going back to Mackenzie King had spoken to reporters on Parliament Hill before and/or after cabinet meetings, or in the case of the early prime ministers even as they strolled up to work (Bishop). The preceding 13 years of Liberal governments had created a routine for journalists, who would arrive on the third floor outside of the prime minister’s Centre Block office and the cabinet meeting room to await Jean Chrétien or Paul Martin. A steady stream of ministers had no other way out but to pass the phalanx of reporters gathered at the exit routes. CBC Radio’s Susan Lunn described it this way:

Well, that was at least your one shot of the week where you could go stop cabinet ministers and just throw questions at them on the issues you were working on. There were two microphones and there were probably ten different stories that you were working on, but we had access, fairly regular access to cabinet ministers.

One of the first acts of news management of the new Conservative government in early 2006 was the restricting of access of reporters to those weekly cabinet meetings. In fact, the timing of the cabinet meetings was no longer publicized. The loss of these regular opportunities to interact with the prime minister and his cabinet was met with shock and alarm within the press gallery. Most of my interview subjects mentioned this when describing the new government management approach. Fife said, “It was considered a normal practice in a democracy to be able to question people after a cabinet meeting. We can’t get that anymore.” David Battistelli, the sole reporter on Parliament Hill for the multicultural channel OMNI, said the loss of “cabinet outs,” as they are nicknamed, was one of the most detrimental changes to his work routine as it eliminated one of the guaranteed opportunities to catch the prime minister or cabinet ministers. “It’s so difficult to be able to get a quick clip or scrum or position from a government minister because of the nature of the control that is being exercised, this communications control, this lockdown,” Battistelli said.

The loss of cabinet outs is part of a larger issue identified by the interview subjects of the general availability of the prime minister and his cabinet. Unlike prime ministers before him, Stephen Harper rarely enters the House of Commons through the front door, removing the possibility of approaching him with a question or even capturing that visual element for television stories. Harper also does not hold regular news conferences on Parliament Hill, having used the National Press Theatre only seven times between 2006 and 2009, and none in the years since then. The prime minister does take questions while travelling abroad or elsewhere in Canada. But for the many press gallery members whose employers do not have the resources to travel outside of Ottawa, their only opportunity to put a question to Canada’s prime minister is during infrequent bilateral press conferences with visiting foreign leaders. In those cases, media

from the respective countries are generally allotted only two questions each and press gallery members will collectively agree on the questions to be asked and the questioners¹⁵.

Conversely, Harper holds frequent photo opportunities in his office or elsewhere around Parliament Hill, but reporters and camera technicians are instructed not to ask questions. This became an issue in 2013, when CTV cameraman David Ellis asked a question of Harper during a photo opportunity in New York City. The prime minister's office threatened to bar Ellis from a subsequent trip abroad, but the CTV network refused to assign another cameraman to the job (T. Harper). On March 7, 2014, the press gallery at its annual general meeting passed a motion asserting its right to ask questions at photo opportunities and all availabilities with parliamentarians to "fulfill our function as journalists in a democratic society," but it remains to be seen whether this will have any impact (Canadian Parliamentary Press Gallery Executive).

It also bears noting that the prime minister has declined to attend the annual Press Gallery Dinner since his victory in 2006, despite the fact he had attended as an opposition leader (Akin "PM to Snub"). That year, very few Conservative MPs attended the event held at the Canadian Museum of Civilization under the orders of the new PMO. This too was something new for the press gallery, which had been holding such collegial dinners since Confederation.

Most interview subjects indicated that access to ministers had declined significantly since 2006. Some of the reporters noted that certain cabinet ministers are simply never available for impromptu scrums, including on Wednesdays following the Conservative caucus meeting. "Now, you're lucky if a third of the caucus comes out..." said Lunn. *The Ottawa Citizen*

¹⁵ For a good description of how such bilateral news conferences unfold, see Maria de Pilar Bolaños' 2012 Master's thesis for Carleton University, *The Media Circus: How Media Events Are Used in the International Struggle for Image Power*

analyzed transcripts of post-question period scrums before and after the 2011 election, and found that Conservatives accounted for 17 per cent of the words uttered between 2010-11, versus 11 per cent in the nine months afterward (McGregor "Muted Tories"). Global TV's Ottawa bureau chief Jacques Bourbeau said the government has "severely limited the interaction between politicians and journalists," and estimates that he does not lay eyes on two-thirds of the cabinet either on their way in or out of question period where he is stationed with a camera outside of the Commons. As Bourbeau describes, regular access allowed him to explore a variety of stories with politicians that weren't necessarily the main story of the day. He dubs those who take the back door to avoid reporters the "Ghosts of Parliament Hill." Bourbeau adds,

When we talk about civil society and trying to help countries emerging from dictatorships, one of the things we try to do is train their journalists, because we recognize they are an important part of accountability and transparency. I don't see how you can have that when you have politicians who as ministers wield significant executive power are not answerable in any way, shape or form to the media.

The curtailment of access at regularly scheduled events such as cabinet meetings, caucus meetings, and pre-and-post question period, is only part of the picture according to the gallery members. Some of the journalists also said they found it difficult to organize interviews with members of cabinet on different stories that they were working on. Barry Wilson of the *Western Producer* describes having regular access to Liberal agriculture ministers going back to Trudeau cabinet minister Eugene Whelan, but much more limited access to the Conservative ministers in the Harper government. In the case of the current Health Minister, Rona Ambrose, Wilson was not able to secure an interview with her although she oversaw the Canadian Food Inspection

Agency. “That’s OK,” said Wilson. “I think my readers can live without Rona Ambrose in the paper. That’s her choice.” Galloway of the *Globe and Mail* said restricting access to cabinet ministers and “not telling us anything” was one of the key ways the government managed the news: “If you ask to speak to a cabinet minister, nine times out of ten (their staff) will get back to you and say he or she is unavailable, they’re tied up today.” Lunn of CBC Radio and Elizabeth Thompson of *iPolitics* recalled that under previous Liberal governments it was customary to set up interviews with ministers on their beats at the beginning of a parliamentary session.

Thompson said,

You don’t see many of those happening, which is a pity because for a minister it’s a golden opportunity to just lay out to the public what it is they want to accomplish, what their vision is for the department, and to be able to demonstrate yes, we’re doing things.

Joël-Denis Bellavance of *La Presse* views the more limited access to cabinet ministers as a question of trust between prime minister Harper and his cabinet: “The prime minister trusted his ministers to be an adult and talk properly to the media. Now there’s not that trust it seems, between the prime minister and the cabinet ministers.” Thompson of *iPolitics* echoed that sentiment, recalling that Chrétien “gave more latitude to his ministers, he gave that rope. And if they hung themselves, that was their problem. They were out of cabinet and he was protected.”

It’s also important to note what has taken the place of the direct contact between government politicians and the press gallery. As mentioned earlier, photo opportunities or pseudo-events with no opportunity for questions have become de rigueur, but so too have photo opportunities without the presence of even press gallery camera technicians. The prime minister’s office has used audio-visual services through the Privy Council Office to record and

disseminate video of his appearances abroad and at home, but generally always in the presence of press gallery cameras. A significant change occurred in early 2014, when the PMO began to record and disseminate a video feature called *24/Seven*. Some of the videos have featured the prime minister speaking directly to the camera, including on the 2014 agreement in principle signed with South Korea on a free-trade deal (Prime Minister's Office). No similar opportunities for questions were provided to journalists who were preparing to travel to Seoul with the prime minister. When a small and entirely private cabinet shuffle including new Finance minister Joe Oliver took place in mid-March 2014, none of the politicians made themselves available for questions to reporters standing outside of Rideau Hall. Instead, the Prime Minister's Office released another video of the ministers providing commentary on their new portfolios.

The *24/Seven* videos, which are disseminated with the help of social media, are just one aspect of a new communications strategy that has replaced contact with the national media in Ottawa. During the July 2013 cabinet shuffle, details on who had been appointed to a particular cabinet post were revealed by the PMO on Twitter before any reporters had been provided with the information. "In this case, they're trying to use social media to go around the parliamentary press gallery, and also just to get their message out unfiltered, which from their perspective is a smart thing to do," said Thompson of *iPolitics*. The use of social media has also led to scrutiny of the partisan use of government resources. The prime minister's Twitter account, which as of March 2014 had more than 442,000 followers, has been used interchangeably as a vehicle to promote official government activities and as a political tool (Fekete). Harper tweeted on Feb. 25, that "Canadians are better off today under our gov't than under the previous Liberal gov't," adding a link to the Conservative party website.

More traditional forms of media have also been used to bypass national reporters. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, Stephen Harper has favoured talk radio for interviews. He has also granted a number of interviews to radio and TV sports programs, but to talk about hockey, football or curling rather than politics (O'Connor; TSN; The Canadian Press "Canucks"). And the Conservative government, as the Blair government in the UK and the Howard government in Australia, has turned to small regional or ethnic newspapers for interviews or for exclusive content. "We in the national media put a certain context on an issue that a small regional paper doesn't have the resources to do," said Lunn, noting that there are regional reporters who also take in government content with a critical eye. National media were recently shut out of a roundtable Harper held with ethnic media outlets in Vancouver (Nuttall). "I don't know if some of the ethnic media are asking questions that are as tough as they might face from others, or if they're glad to get the press release and rewrite the press release because they are trying to make ends meet," said Thompson of *iPolitics*. Courting ethnic communities has also been a major part of Conservative electoral strategy, fitting into their larger political marketing orientation (Stephens).

Battistelli of OMNI Television is an interesting case study in this regard. OMNI, owned by Rogers Media, is a multicultural news channel based in Toronto. Battistelli has been the only reporter for his network on Parliament Hill for 19 years, and must provide daily content for nightly newscasts in four different languages – Cantonese, Mandarin, Punjabi and Italian. While he expressed frustration with the news management style of the Harper government, his interactions with the PMO and ministerial offices are distinct from that of the other 13 reporters interviewed for this thesis. Battistelli said he has a single point of contact within the PMO who deals with ethnic media requests, meaning he has little need to deal with departments or

ministerial staff and response times are reduced. He is also able to co-ordinate interviews with ministers he might need by negotiating times and locations that would not be in view of other press gallery members. But Battistelli worries that with the time constraints he is under, he is at the mercy of the many photo opportunities and other pseudo-events put on by the government.

Battistelli said,

I do agree that it's easier for us to be manipulated or for the government to control the news agenda, there's no doubt about it. It's a reality that I see as a small bureau. Sometimes I feel that you can be carried away by the news of the day and there's nothing that can stop that train.

2. The curtailment of Access to the Bureaucracy and Government Information

In Feb. 2013, I sent a request to the departmental media relations staff at Natural Resources Canada for information about images seen in a television advertisement for the Conservative government's Economic Action Plan. Because the commercial touted the government's commitment to the national parks system, I wanted to know specifically which national parks were depicted in the commercial, a seemingly straightforward question. The response I received back, by email, was the following: "please note that all footage from this campaign was Canadian sourced" (Duchesne). The question did not come close to answering the simple question I had posed, nor did it appear to be in the spirit of the government's communication policy to provide accurate and clear information, without causing "undue recourse to the Access to Information Act" (Canada *Communications Policy*). Tom Spears, a reporter with the *Ottawa Citizen*, detailed a similar experience where he had asked the National Research Council for information about a joint study the council was conducting with NASA on falling snow. Aside from failing to provide the background interview Spears had requested, the several bureaucrats

involved in crafting an emailed response to Spears' query provided him with "seven snow-free sentences and an aircraft drawing, and well after the Citizen's story is substantially written."

The press gallery reporters who were interviewed for this thesis spoke at length about their frustration in dealing with public servants who worked in government communications, and the inability to easily access government information – even the seemingly anodyne or technical. Here too, the shift in the availability of information was linked to the arrival of Stephen Harper's Conservatives. But the groundwork for this tightening of government information started well before, as the influence of government news management in the United Kingdom and the United States filtered into Canada in the mid-1990s. Wilson of the *Western Producer* identified the Chrétien years as the time when the flow of government information began to become more constricted. "It's hard for me to believe that there were times when we could just call up a department and get an answer to a question, but that did happen, I don't think it's my imagination, and it was 2005," said Galloway of the *Globe and Mail*.

The central grievances that the press gallery members expressed with government communications were the lack of personal contact, the poor quality of the information received, and the slow speed of response or non-responsiveness. The loss of one-on-one contact with public servants came up repeatedly in my conversations with the reporters. As noted in chapters three and four, historically communication between senior bureaucrats and press gallery members was commonplace with the Canadian federal system – particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, where reporters regarded themselves and were regarded as part of the policymaking process. The practice of getting background briefings from bureaucrats was not unusual prior to 2006. Lunn of CBC Radio recalled being able to contact the Privy Council Office in the early 2000s to talk to the bureaucrats who were helping to draft new climate-change legislation:

If you could at least understand where they were coming from, and understand their difficulties, your story I think was better because it had more context to it. It's very hard now to get through to bureaucrats, to get them to call you back, at least in any kind of official capacity.

The anonymous interview subject also decried the near extinction of background briefings provided in the past by public servants:

There's a free-flowing conversation with policy experts in the department that is crucial for a journalist who wants to establish knowledge of a particular file, and they just don't want to offer them. For me one of the biggest disappointments in this era, the Harper era, is the lack of background briefings, because as you know, a series of questions and answers volleyed back and forth through email is no substitute for a free-flowing dialogue between a journalist and policy specialist.

David Akin, national bureau chief for Sun Media in Ottawa and host of *Battleground Politics* on the Sun News network, described trying in vain to organize lunches with senior bureaucrats with portfolios that matched with his beats when he arrived on Parliament Hill as a CTV Television reporter:

It's been clear since (the Conservatives) took over in 2006 there was no incentive for anyone outside of authorized spokespeople to speak to us on or off the record...My limited experience here and other areas where I've worked is that it's been unbelievably frustrating just to try and even meet these people, let alone get some insights from them.

Robert Fife of CTV said he believed that bureaucrats working within the Conservative government were frightened to speak to reporters:

It used to be that you could call senior bureaucrats or people at the director general level or program level who were running a certain department or certain program, and they were always open and it was much better than having to deal with a press person who didn't know what they were talking about and would have had to go to that same person in any case...

In the place of that personal contact, as noted earlier, have come emailed responses from departmental media relations staff. And the content of those emailed responses was something that stirred passionate responses from the interview subjects. A common complaint was that the answers to seemingly non-political questions put to a department did not match the questions and smacked of persuasion rather than non-partisan information. Akin of Sun Media mimicked the type of "worse than poor" exchange he would have with media relations staff within the government:

"What's two plus two?"

"Math has been a very important subject to this government for a long time."

"But yes, what's two plus two?"

"Math has been a very important subject to this government for a long time."

I'm not exaggerating...It's abysmal.

Hélène Buzzetti, bureau chief at *Le Devoir's* Ottawa bureau, offered the example of when she had contacted a government department to find out about an environmental program that the CBC had reported was about to be cut. She said she contacted the department not to confirm that the program was being eliminated, but rather to gather basic facts about it, including the proper name of the program, what it did, and how much money was spent on it. She said,

I got an answer saying, ‘Oh, the environment is important to the government.’ Basically, the sky is blue and we like it. I said, ‘Well, this is taxpayers’ money, we’re entitled to know how much money is being spent on this or that program. How dare you refuse me an answer on this.’ It’s so appalling, I have no words to describe it.

Mike De Souza of Postmedia News covers the environment and natural resources. He had almost an identical comment to Buzzetti’s, saying answers to his questions often come back vague and very general: “You could ask, what is the impact of this cut, and the answer would be ‘The government protects the environment and takes it seriously.’” Gloria Galloway of the *Globe and Mail* also felt that she was receiving “talking points” from government officials that did not answer her questions. Susan Delacourt of the *Toronto Star* joked that although the “clipped” responses she received from government departments were “professional,” they made her think of hostage statements, “and all that’s missing from them is that ‘my captors are treating me well.’”

Some of the reporters lamented that the poor quality of information was in turn hurting the quality of journalism transmitted to readers or viewers – if a journalist was unable to fully grasp an issue, neither would the intended audience. Jacques Bourbeau of Global TV said stories often tend to lack nuance and become “black and white” when information is not provided, whereas “the more people you speak to, the more sources I talk to, the story always turns greyer.” Buzzetti said the poor quality of information – or complete lack of information – stops her from lending context to different government announcements. “I cannot tell my readers, here’s what (the minister) wants to do, and here’s what already exists, and therefore you decide whether it’s an improvement or not,” said Buzzetti. Mike De Souza of Postmedia had similar

viewpoint on context, noting that when the government made an announcement on tailpipe emissions standards, he was forced to wait a number of weeks until the full details were published in the *Canada Gazette* to be able to fully understand what was being undertaken. He said,

When there are substantial issues being discussed or announced, substantial policies being introduced, there is a lack of technical briefings or background information provided to the journalists so they can ask the right questions, understand the issues, before they write about them.

An issue that went hand-in-hand with the perceived low quality of responses from departmental media relations teams was the speed of response or sometimes even the lack of response. Nearly all of the interviewees had negative comments on the length of time it would take to receive a response to questions put to public servants working in a communications capacity. “The fact that you are on a deadline is a joke,” said Susan Lunn of CBC Radio. Most also specified that response times would vary greatly from department to department, from the end of the business day to more than a week. Even Barry Wilson, whose *Western Producer* is published weekly, noted that he would often get answers to questions the day after his stated deadline.

Sometimes, no information is forthcoming at all. Bourbeau recounted asking the Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA) for information about a meeting between the agency and Chinese officials on high-tech smuggling in Oct. 2012. “I contacted the CBSA several times and they just never got back to me,” Bourbeau said. Buzzetti said she once asked the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) for basic details on the sex offender registry on the same day that the minister of Public Safety was making an announcement, and was told that she needed to

speak to the minister's office. Occasionally the frustration boils over, as happened with the anonymous interviewee:

I once wrote an email to every single communications person in the Transport Department, saying 'I called you yesterday, I left messages about a government report and no one responded.' I said, 'I could not believe you guys could operate like this.'

Many of the journalists interviewed believed that the problems they were experiencing with government information were due to a more onerous internal vetting system for responses, plus the influence of political actors over the content produced by public servants. "When I've ATIPed the questions I've asked, it's quite interesting just how many cooks are trying to contribute to the final answer the reporter receives, sometimes days after it was actually needed," said Thompson, referring to Access to Information requests she has submitted on her own media inquiries.

Indeed, the Conservative government has sharply centralized its strategic communications inside the Privy Council Office, which went about reviewing even the most mundane of communication products and media responses on behalf of the executive (Martin; Wells). Paul Wells has argued that this pervasive control of communications was put in place to protect the Conservative "team" from gaffes when it first came to power as a minority, another aspect of a market-oriented party bringing a permanent campaign into government. "Information pried out from under the rocks of state by curious citizens and their nettlesome proxies in the press gallery is almost never good news to the incumbent government," wrote Wells (33).

One oft-mentioned aspect of the new order inside the government's communications functions was the introduction of the Message Event Proposal or MEP. Any government

announcement or public activity needs to be passed first through the filter of the MEP, which sets out on paper the parameters for any given event, including the lines to deliver and the type of media coverage desired (Blanchfield and Bronskill). The Communications and Consultations Unit within PCO oversees the MEP process, and at least in the early years of the Conservative government, the final approval went to the prime minister's chief of staff (Martin). This highly centralized exercise didn't only cause information backlogs, but it also may have contributed to a general chill across the public service vis-à-vis media relations (Thomas "Communications").

The "slow-boat approach" to information dissemination, as the anonymous interviewee described it, might seem incongruous with the legions of communications professionals employed by the federal government. As of the end of the 2011-12 fiscal year, 3,865 employees were working in information services roles – a 15.3 per cent increase since 2006 (The Canadian Press "Information Services"). The online employee directory for the PMO, as of March 16, 2013, showed 26 employees involved in communications function (including the prime minister's official photographers), versus the eight who were strictly employed to do policy work. The number rises to 41 when the PMO's tour and scheduling staff, which often interact with the media directly, are added to the mix.

At one point, between 2008 and 2011, \$3.6 million was added to the PCO's budget to help with the communications strategy around the government's Economic Action Plan. That increase was eliminated in March 2011, but the government's 2013-14 main estimates note "an increase of \$1.4 million to continue to support the coordination of a government-wide communications strategy for Canada's Economic Action Plan" (Canada *Main Estimates*). While there might be substantial numbers of communications personnel to deal with media inquiries, their goal increasingly appears to be to put government activities in the best possible light, rather

than to “provide the public with timely, accurate, clear, objective and complete information about its policies, programs, services and initiatives,” as the Treasury Board guidelines suggest (*Canada Communications Policy*).

The constantly overlapping activities of the PMO and the PCO, and between political or “exempt” staff and public servants, have politicized government communications. As several of the interview subjects mentioned, the responses to questions they have put to government departments have often taken on persuasive tone, rather than a simple provision of factual information. Even government press releases have been scrutinized as overly politicized. The use of the term “Harper government” in place of “Government of Canada” began popping up across departments in late 2010 (Cheadle "Tories Re-Brand"). The aforementioned use of the prime minister’s Twitter account to make overtly political statements is a prime example of where the political drive towards re-election and the supposedly non-partisan aims of the public service can collide.

3. Experience Level of Political Staff

Another government news management issue raised by the interview subjects, without prompting, was the level of experience of the political staff under the Conservative staff that performed communications functions. These employees would include press secretaries and directors of communications for ministers’ offices and the prime minister’s office. “You no longer can have background conversations with political staff in which you can traverse the subject and get a commanding-heights view of what’s going on,” said the anonymous interview subject. “They just don’t know much about the files and that’s a watershed change from 2006.”

Susan Lunn of CBC Radio argued the lack of experience in communications roles was the Conservative government’s biggest weakness, noting that some of the directors of

communications she has dealt with are in their twenties and with no prior experience. “The Chrétien and Martin governments were much better at putting up people. There were people who did D-Comm jobs who were actually very smart and people who believed in communication and could communicate...,” said Lunn. She went on to pin the blame for the perceived lack of experience on the Federal Accountability Act, which prohibits public office holders from seeking lobbying work for five years after they leave the government’s employ. The theory is that this has dissuaded more senior and established communications professionals from taking on government jobs.

Elizabeth Thompson of *iPolitics* sees the perceived lack of experience, plus a high turnover among political staff, as linked to the concentration of power within the PMO. She argues that certain ministers have been unable to make their own staffing decisions, and in those cases the employees seem to come and go more quickly. Thompson says she sees a “marked difference sometimes in the experience level and the ability to do their jobs with the ministers that do have that power.” Robert Fife of CTV made a similar observation, saying that weak communication staff causes him to have to go through the PMO to get answers to questions on departmental portfolios.

At the same time, several of the press gallery reporters mentioned that political staff was able to get them answers to basic questions on government initiatives or programs generally quicker than departmental staff. But this would depend on the nature of the request. Gloria Galloway said,

Every so often if I need to know something and I call up the minister’s D-Comm and I say, ‘Look, I’ve got to get this in the paper for tomorrow, what’s the idea?’ They’ll say, ‘As long as we’re on background, here’s what’s going on,’ usually,

as long as it's not something that's not going to make their minister look good in which case there's nowhere I'm going to get it.

This system of political staff being used to speed up the information dissemination process, or halt it, points to a politicization of government activities. The delays experienced by reporters could be viewed as a partisan ploy to only put out the most positive information about the government and withhold that which is perceived as negative. It would seem difficult to defend a communication system as non-partisan when bureaucrats are unable to share background or technical information, and reporters must resort to political staff to act as gatekeepers of that government data.

One of the most glaring cases of the politicization of government information came in the form of interference in the Access to Information regime. Sebastien Togneri, an assistant to then minister Christian Paradis, demanded that records that were about to be released to The Canadian Press be retrieved from the mailroom and redacted. Those details came to light through another access to information request made by CP's deputy bureau chief Dean Beeby. The release of more documents through a parliamentary inquiry revealed that Togneri had directly intervened in other cases, even though he had no delegated authority to do so. After launching an investigation, Information Commissioner Suzanne Legault found that Togneri had interfered in the access request, but the RCMP ultimately did not lay charges (Beeby). In April 2014, Legault issued a second report finding "systemic interference" within Public Works and Government Services Canada at the time Togneri worked there, and found two more Conservative staff members had pressured civil servants to withhold information (Ditchburn "Staffers Interfered").

With or without overt political interference, the access to information system has been another bone of contention with press gallery members interviewed for this thesis, some of

whom wondered about the usefulness of submitting requests anymore because of lengthy delays and heavily redacted records. Legault has decried that the government is actually “contracting the amount of information that is being disclosed,” under the Act, despite promises of an open government (Minsky). In the first quarter of 2013, Legault said she had seen a 50 per cent spike in the number of complaints filed to her office. In Sept. 2013, she noted that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police had simply stopped responding to requests altogether. In releasing her 2012-13 annual report, she referred to “unmistakable signs of significant deterioration in the federal access system. In fact, I saw numerous instances over the year of institutions failing to meet their most basic obligations under the Access to Information Act” (Canada, *Info Commissioner 2*).

4. Alienation of Select Journalists

In Chapter Two, I examined some of the ways that news management took shape under the governments of Tony Blair in the United Kingdom and John Howard in Australia. In both cases, those administrations came under criticism for heavy-handedness in their dealings with individual journalists. As Ivor Gaber has described, news management tactics can be used to either favour or freeze out reporters depending on whether their coverage is deemed as favourable or negative.

Some of the press gallery members interviewed for this thesis said they had experienced bullying tactics or alienation by the Conservative government. Gloria Galloway of the *Globe and Mail* said she had been the target of an “orchestrated, organized campaign” to discredit her. Galloway’s spouse used to be employed as a senior communications aide to former Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff. Both the prime minister and cabinet minister James Moore publicly referred to Galloway’s marital link to the Liberals to suggest her reporting on a controversial issue was biased. In addition, Galloway said there was a concerted campaign by supporters of the

Conservative party to criticize her work online, such as in blogs. Galloway's husband went on to work as a reporter for Sun Media News.

This suggestion of partisan bias has also emerged in Conservative Party of Canada materials and other public statements made by Conservative politicians. A Conservative website devoted to attacking Justin Trudeau refers to "journalists fawning over" the Liberal leader, and lists the names of particular reporters alongside positive-sounding quotes from stories about Trudeau. "These journalists are entitled to their opinions, and to carefully select whatever facts they think best advance their views," the webpage reads. Former Conservative Senate Leader Marjory LeBreton delivered a June 2013 speech in the Upper Chamber in which she blasted "Liberal elites and their media lickspittles"(Stone).

Buzzetti of *Le Devoir* said a more junior employee in her office was accorded an interview with the prime minister, although the understanding was that the senior staff member – herself – would be the one to take on such an assignment. "It was clearly specified that if I was the one doing the interview, we would not get it," said Buzzetti. She also recounted that during a trip to the Arctic with the prime minister, she had been poised to ask one of only two allotted French questions of Stephen Harper. At the last minute, she was told that she would not be able to pose the question, and she says led to understand that it was because she was disliked by the PMO.

Similarly, Michael De Souza of Postmedia said he experienced difficulty getting information from former Environment Minister Peter Kent because of his propensity to ask detailed, technical questions on government policy. "They would protect or Peter Kent would want to protect himself from me, so he would be available to other reporters and not necessarily to me," said De Souza. In a published letter to Postmedia that sought to "clarify a few points" in

a story De Souza had written in late 2012, Kent referred to De Souza as an “environmental activist” (Horgan).

The alienation of certain reporters was believed to be behind the Harper PMO’s creation of “the list,” a method of controlling news conferences in Ottawa and elsewhere. The idea behind the list was that reporters would approach the prime minister’s press secretary to put their names on a list of questioners. The problem was that the taking of names was not done on a first-come-first-serve basis, but rather based on the preferences of the PMO. This became clear in April 2006, when Harper attempted to ignore CBC Television reporter Julie Van Dusen at a news conference, even though she was next in line at a microphone (Martin; Cobb). The list method so rankled reporters that in May 2006 they collectively turned heel and left a Harper news conference in the foyer of the House of Commons (Panetta "Journalists Boycott"). Some news organizations subsequently decided not to co-operate with the list system. *The Canadian Press* continues to boycott such lists, unless it is the members of the press gallery that have put forward the names and the sequence of the questioners.

The flipside to alienating reporters is favouring certain among them and providing them superior access to information or to government figures. A number of the interview subjects, including Robert Fife, Gloria Galloway, Jöel-Denis Bellavance, David Akin, and the anonymous national reporter, said they had been offered or received government leaks, but said they were unimpressed with the quality or significance of the information provided. The latter noted that favouring certain reporters is nothing new, and that the Chrétien government had journalists it preferred over others. Indeed, favouritism is a tradition that goes back to the years of Sir John A. Macdonald, as mentioned in Chapter Three.

The Rupture of the Role Relationships

As explored in previous chapters, the relationship between the press gallery and the executive has gone through various states of alliance, exchange and adversarialism since Confederation. I would argue that there have been certain constants in the relationship that were first forged in the same cultural crucible. Journalists and politicians argued in favour of responsible government and the creation of the Dominion of Canada together, and in some very notable cases the fathers of Confederation were reporters or publishers themselves. This meant that the press gallery and the Hansard system took root very early in the Parliament of Canada, and were viewed as a natural part of the parliamentary system. Indeed, for nearly the first 50 years, gallery reporters were near appendages of the political parties. In the intervening decades, the personal relations between reporters and ministers (and even prime ministers) continued to flourish, albeit within a different political and journalistic context.

As the partisanship of the newspapers diminished, reporters took on an elite status in Ottawa, engaged in close relationships with the executive and public service mandarins. Even when that stage waned and the era of television news, Watergate and watchdog journalism emerged, the press gallery's fundamental position on Parliament Hill was not called into question, perhaps because of the elite nature of both journalists and politicians living in a capital city that often feels like a small town. (This might also account for the number of journalists who have ended up with Senate appointments or even the title of Governor General over the decades.) Blumler and Gurevitch note that "the structure and operations of the political institutions of society are products of the same cultural forces" as those of mass media structures (35).

This intersecting history resulted in the development of a shared understanding of what the norms of the interactions would be. Looking further into Blumler and Gurevitch's expanded

framework for analyzing the relationship between journalist and politicians, the authors argue that “exchange and the tussles of mutual influence are normatively bounded. In addition, behaviour on both sides is conditioned by expectations of how each will, because they should, behave towards the other” (35). Further to that, Schlesinger and Tumber have referred to the “social process” that sources and journalists engage in, where “such non-economic considerations as trust and confidentiality come into the equation on many occasions” (263).

In the case of the press gallery and the successive governments it reported on from 1867 to 2006, there were a number of firmly entrenched expectations – some of them clearly expressed by the reporters interviewed for this thesis. Those expectations on the side of reporters would include regular access to the prime minister and his ministers, access to public servants on points of policy, the provision of timely and accurate information by government communication actors, and overall civility. On the government side, expectations would include balanced, accurate and unbiased reporting, respect for the private lives of politicians and especially their families, respect for Parliament, and overall civility and decorum. Conservative Sen. Hugh Segal decried “shallow, cheap-hit and congenial, celebrity-inebriated content,” in a 2009 speech to the Canadian Journalism Foundation, pointing to the notion that reporting should be more thoughtful and policy oriented – more about accountability than mere aggressiveness, as Robert Entman has put it. The government of Jean Chrétien reacted negatively in 1998 when a leaked email by CBC TV reporter Terry Milewski to a protester at a Vancouver APEC summit referred to government officials as the “forces of darkness,” which it argued implied a bias against the administration (CBC News "Clears Milewski").

Carleton graduate Catherine Lanthier has noted the hesitation of national journalists to report on the health of Canadian politicians until their symptoms are obvious, a further indicator

of one of the expectations politicians would have of the press gallery. Other commonly understood expectations on both sides include the meaning of “off-the-record,” “for background purposes,” or “not for attribution,” interviews.

The particulars of these expectations are far from static and have been continuously evolving. For example, reporters would no longer expect to bump into the prime minister walking to work, nor would they feel entitled to enter the members’ lobby outside the Commons – a level of access that disappeared decades ago. Politicians no longer expect comments that they make in casual venues to be “off-the-record,” including at the Press Gallery Dinner or on airplane trips. Respect for the private lives of politicians is also an ever-changing norm. Families of political figures, their sexual orientation and the stability of their marriages continue to be somewhat insulated from media scrutiny, especially as compared with coverage in the United States or the United Kingdom. However, once public figures display some moral or ethical failing, or are considered to have engaged in some level of policy hypocrisy, their private lives appear to become fair game. This has been the case with the Senate spending scandal, and the delving into the personal details of disgraced senators Mike Duffy, Patrick Brazeau and Pamela Wallin in particular.

Blumler and Gurevitch say the ground rules of the shared culture change after a cost-benefit analysis is made on each side of whether it is worth conforming to these norms. Stephen Harper and his team, focused as they are on maintaining power through a market-oriented approach to governing, appear to have made the assessment that there was no real benefit to abiding by the long-held norms of the press gallery-government relationship.

While government news management had been rapidly evolving since the Trudeau years, and became more sophisticated under Chrétien and Martin, the reactions of the journalists

interviewed for this thesis indicate the new order on Parliament Hill represented a sort of trauma. Where previous governments would make information – albeit carefully presented information – readily available, the new government had taken a different approach to strategic communication. As former Trudeau aide Patrick Gossage has noted,

Controlling the message is nothing new and all kinds of tricks have been tried to achieve that – restricting media access being a standard part of the tool kit.

Trudeau used it and so did Mulroney. But, normally, you try to mitigate that lack of access to the prime minister with briefings from officials – to feed the media’s voracious appetite for information. You don’t have that today and that’s a serious omission (Cobb).

The modus operandi was no longer spin, the “political news management” described by Pfetsch common in parliamentary systems, but a more closed, “media-centred” or American-style form of news management that restricted access and even abandoned spin. As the anonymous interviewee noted, “My suspicion is the Harper government has made us much more like the American system where there’s more deference to the president, there’s less access to the president...” This might account for why several of the press gallery journalists felt that they had become *better* journalists in the last eight years because they were no longer “spoonfed” material, but had to work harder to find stories that weren’t always sanctioned by the government.

There are also ample indications that the Harper government’s approach will be emulated by other federal parties that attain power in the future. At the 2014 Liberal party policy convention, leader Justin Trudeau left the event without holding a closing news conference. NDP strategist Brian Topp, who worked on Adrian Dix’s unsuccessful campaign to form government

in British Columbia, wrote an analysis of the campaign's failures that included communications. In it, he suggested the more prevalent use of message control and that more restricted access to the leader should be employed in future campaigns: "Exposure through tour scrums should be kept to a minimum in order for the Leader's message of the day to carry through to air and print time" (37). Former Progressive Conservative Sen. Lowell Murray has argued that opposition parties will do little to change the "command and control" style of governance they will one day inherit. He says,

the inevitable early ministerial misstep or two, elevated in the media to 'crisis' status, will be enough to persuade PMO that maybe the Harper Conservatives had it right all along; and PCO will helpfully provide a redrafted communications blueprint (with an orange NDP or red Liberal cover) that is essentially the same as the Conservative original.

Tom Flanagan, in his 2010 critique of the Conservative party's obsession with electoral readiness, made the same observation, saying that "If the era of permanent campaign and its arms race logic continues, the Conservative organizational model may well persist and even be imitated by other parties trying to survive in the Darwinian world of electoral competition" (Something Blue 10).

Still, the Harper era's impact on the media-government relationships cannot be dismissed as mere navelgazing and bellyaching on the part of the parliamentary press gallery. Blumler and Gurevitch, who have analyzed political journalism in the UK and the United States, addressed the kind of rupture that press gallery journalists felt they experienced with the arrival of the Conservatives, saying that understanding established role relationships,

also helps to explain the note of outrage that is sometimes sounded during adversarial episodes – reflecting the injured party’s conviction, not merely that its interests were damaged, but that supposedly moral boundaries had been overstepped. (35)

This perception of violated moral boundaries has been made abundantly clear by the members of the press gallery and others in the national media. The Canadian Association of Journalists penned an “open letter to Canadian journalists” in June 2010 warning of a “genuine and widespread threat to the public’s right to know” (Buzzetti et al.). The letter emphasized that when access to information and politicians is blocked, “we can’t hold your government to account on your behalf.”

Eleven of the 14 interview subjects expressed some concern that the key democratic principle of a free press was being undermined, and that ultimately citizens would be the biggest victims. Barry Wilson of the weekly agricultural newspaper *Western Producer* said,

Because I’m a reporter, I believe that in a democracy information is really the oxygen of a functioning political system, and balanced information and sometimes critical information. The more information about the people that govern us is restricted or manipulated, I just think the weaker the body politic gets.

Susan Delacourt of *The Toronto Star* held a similar view:

It’s a matter of democracy and citizens’ rights, not journalists’ rights. It sounds Hallmark-ish and high-falutin’, but I would like future journalists to know that what we’re trying to fight against was on behalf of our readers and citizens and not on behalf of our own working conditions.

Other voices beside journalists have also noted the change in the relationship between the government and the media. Paul Thomas of the University of Manitoba has said there have always been efforts by the PMO maximize favourable coverage, including attempts to “co-opt” the media, yet “Prime Minister Stephen Harper seemed to have contempt for the media, especially the Ottawa press gallery. Almost immediately he started restricting access to himself and his cabinet ministers” (“Communications”). W. T. Stanbury of the University of British Columbia says the Conservatives have been “governing outside the box,” including the limiting of media access, where the government has gone beyond the “bounds of legitimate (or acceptable) behaviour in terms of the games and tactics it has employed to achieve its goals.” Lowell Murray says Harper has superimposed on an already highly centralized system,

a tightly-run communications regime in which ‘message control’ is the very essence of governance. Under this system, even strong ministers often become passengers on their own departmental ships, their destination and course set by remote control from Message Central at PCO/PMO. Parliament is not even in the picture.

What then is the consequence of the rupture in the role relationship between government and media on Parliament Hill, and the abandonment of certain shared norms? Blumler and Gurevitch have identified the “journalistic fight back” as one of the consequences, where reporters will respond to the manipulation and the roadblocks put up by political actors by writing more process stories, attempting to pull back the curtain on the marketing ploys of politicians. Certainly, this would match the experience in the United Kingdom, where as we saw in Chapter Two, the concept of “spin” was demonized in the media. Other commentators have characterized the journalistic reaction to government news management as something of a

vengeful act. Bricker and Ibbitson sought to explain the coverage of the robocall affair in Canada as revenge from journalists upset that the Conservatives won a majority. Similarly, Sabato has blamed some of the “feeding frenzy” around politicians on the disgruntlement of constrained reporters, who “strike back” and “fight” the stage managers (85).

In Canada, collective approaches to fight heavy-handed news management have been relatively tame. There is the 2010 open letter by the Canadian Association of Journalists; the ad-hoc gallery boycotts of two prime ministerial events in 2006 and 2013; and various letters and interventions by the gallery to try and loosen up access to politicians and to information. Canadian Journalists for Freedom of Expression (CJFE) has written extensively on hindrances to the access-to-information system and the muzzling of government scientists, and publishes an annual Review of Free Expression in Canada. The Canadian Media Guild, a union representing The Canadian Press, the CBC and a number of other outlets, also comments from time to time on news management issues.

Still, Canada has not seen the type of major, industry-backed initiatives of Australia or the degree of public discourse around news management as have the United Kingdom and the United States. In 2007, a dozen major media organizations got behind an audit of freedom of expression through a campaign called “Australia’s Right to Know.” It is no coincidence that campaign began during the tenure of prime minister John Howard. The Media, Entertainment, and Arts Alliance, a cross-sectoral union formed in 1992 in that country, also keeps track of press freedom and transparency with an annual report. Nine journalists from major outlets, backed by the Canberra press gallery, intervened at a Senate committee hearing on the “children overboard scandal” (see Chapter Two).

In the United States, a high-profile study by the Committee to Protect Journalists has taken aim at the Obama administration's tight controls over the media. In the United Kingdom, as touched on in Chapter Two, many books, editorials, journal articles and even television series and films were critical of the news management style of the Tony Blair government. A two-day conference in 2012 at Toronto's Ryerson University commemorating the 30th anniversary of the Charter heard criticism that Canadian journalists don't speak out enough about their rights and freedoms. *Toronto Star* editor Michael Cooke said, "We are far too knee-bending to political and judicial elites and we allow them to function in secret far too often."

I propose a different way of considering the reaction of journalists to the rupture of the role relationship and the overturning of accepted norms. Instead of looking only at the reactive actions of journalists, I believe it is useful to consider the adaptive measures taken by the media when they experience government news management techniques which threaten their understanding of the reporter-politician relationship. The adaptation or coping mechanisms that I have observed, and have learned about through my interviews with press gallery members, I refer to as "journalistic pathfinding." The following chapter will detail this concept, as well as provide examples for how journalists have adapted their work routines to cope with government news management.

Chapter Six: Journalistic Pathfinding

Elizabeth Thompson of *iPolitics* shared an anecdote during an interview for this thesis that encapsulates the concept that I refer to as “journalistic pathfinding.” Thompson worked for *The Montreal Gazette* during the Oka crisis of the summer of 1990¹⁶. Reporters who wanted to speak to either the protesting Mohawks or the provincial police officers working in the area during the early days of the crisis, found their main access point blocked off. The Sureté du Québec (SQ), the provincial force, had set up guard gates on the principal road, and according to Thompson refused to talk to journalists or let them through. “What happened was that reporters do as reporters do – they didn’t go through the road, so everyone went through the woods, (or) rented boats and got there by water,” she explained. In other words, journalists found new paths to get to the information they needed to tell a story when one or more of the routes was blocked or restricted.

Academic literature on government news management has mainly focused on the use of “information subsidies” by journalists, portraying them as compliant figures in the government news management world. I would argue that examining the impact of government news management on journalists requires a richer understanding of how journalists adapt to the strategies of government actors, and requires us to view them as active participants in the media-

¹⁶ The summer-long crisis erupted over the proposed expansion of a golf course and condo development in the town of Oka, QC onto what local Mohawks of the Kanesatake reserve considered burial grounds. Aboriginal protesters, including those from Kahnawake and Akwesasne, erected barricades to cut off access to the area, and a standoff ensued with the provincial police force. The Mohawks ultimately surrendered, after the Canadian Forces were brought in.

government relationship rather than just passive recipients of information. The *Collins Dictionary* defines pathfinding as “the process of finding a way in new circumstances; trailblazing”, and of a pathfinder as “a person who makes or finds a way, esp through unexplored areas or fields of knowledge.” Pathfinding matches the experience of the reporters I interviewed for this thesis, as well as my own, when examining the different adaptation techniques of journalists. Thompson’s anecdote had reporters literally finding physical paths and routes, whereas most of the time reporters are relying on more virtual paths to the information they seek. Unlike Blumler and Gurevitch’s description of a “journalistic fight back” (399) or Gans’ “heating effects” (252) to describe how reporters react to attempts to block their work, pathfinding is not a negative term and instead connotes a proactive course of action.

This chapter will review what press gallery members said about how they have changed their work habits to respond to the government news management techniques of Stephen Harper’s Conservative government. This period in the government’s history provides an excellent opportunity to address this question, because the change in the approach to communication has been so remarkable, as established in the previous chapter. I also touch again on the literature and theoretical frameworks, reviewed in Chapter One, that might guide an understanding of how journalists adapt and how their work routines and values play into their actions.

When the Road is Blocked

As we saw in the last chapter, journalists on Parliament Hill have seen their roads blocked both figuratively and literally. Physical access to politicians, including the prime minister and his cabinet, has been restricted, while access to government information has been limited and increasingly politicized. The experiences of the press gallery members call to mind

the example provided by Mark Fishman in 1980 of a local reporter who is unable to get information from fire department officials about an incident. The journalist did not simply return to his desk and write that no details of the fire were available, but instead could turn to “other perspectives on the event which could provide different accounts” (116). Scott Althaus, in the context of the first Gulf War, wrote about journalists seeking out different information from other credible sources. This is not to say that journalists are turning away from official sources, but just that they are sometimes using different elites as sources. As Fishman noted, “routine news leaves existing political order intact, at the same time that it enumerates the flaws” (139). In Australia, Helen Ester noted that the Canberra gallery turned to the Senate as a “last bastion of alternate news sources,” as the “journalists’ proactive search for alternate sources of news and information was blocked at almost every turn” (“Canberra Press Gallery” 202).

To establish how members of the press gallery adapted to the more stringent government news management of the Conservative government, I asked two core questions: “How have you changed the way you work to cope or adapt to news management,” and “has this made you a better journalist, a worse journalist, or no change at all?” (Appendix A). I also asked follow-up questions where more detail was warranted. The reporters interviewed for this thesis described two principal ways that they explore new paths to get to the information they need: through the use of alternative sources, and through the use of documents and data. Some of the words and phrases that came up in conversation are noteworthy: “get around,” “creative,” “more resourceful,” “dig more,” “cultivate,” and “work my way around it.”

As examined in the preceding chapter, there has been intermittent collective journalistic fight-back to government news management through various organizations, such as the parliamentary press gallery itself as a body or the Canadian Association of Journalists. But the

reality is that it has made little discernable impact on the daily work reality for political reporters. The result is that the most effective tools at their disposal for dealing with the barriers put in their way has been at an individual or newsroom level, as they developed strategies to find another route to the information required.

1. Alternative Sources

Barry Wilson of the *Western Producer* watched over the past 15 years as his federal bureaucratic sources of information dried up under ever-tightening news management regimes. In 2012, federal-provincial-territorial negotiations were underway for a new five-year agricultural policy called Growing Forward II. Wilson had a suspicion that there would be major contractions in federal spending as part of the policy, but could get neither the minister's office nor the assistant deputy minister to speak to him. Wilson said he intensified his focus instead on the other figures around the table – namely provincial officials and farm lobby groups – to “get around” the federal government's blockages:

What I try to do is cultivate provincial sources, because they're involved in all the negotiations with the feds over policy, certainly work the lobby groups to find out what they're hearing about what's coming up inside government, so there are other sources more than I think on most beats, just because of the consultative nature of the agriculture portfolio.

Ultimately, Wilson was able to find out about the new agricultural policy through a source with the Ontario government.

The theme of seeking out more talkative sources outside of the federal government who were privy to policy or political discussions came up repeatedly. Jacques Bourbeau of Global TV summarized the approach well, saying

You also do end-runs and try to find people that have some access and some portal into the political machine, and ask them for information when you can't get it other ways. You have to be nimble. Before the lines of information were more direct. Now they're more indirect at times.

The reporters referred to NGOs, lobbyists, academics, foreign governments and provincial governments as alternative sources. Kuhn has noted in the case of the Tony Blair government in the UK that interest groups emerged on the British scene as a direct result of the government's policies. These new sources would in turn be used by the media. Kuhn writes that "while this does not mean that in general journalists actively seek out a large variety of alternative sources, evidence for which seems scant, it does suggest that they routinely access information from a range of official sources, both within and outside government" ("Blair Government" 67). Davis also referred to interest groups and their place in modern political coverage, arguing that, "Smaller, oppositional groups have become better at accessing news media and challenging primary definers" (58).

Susan Lunn of CBC Radio, who has a number of policy beats, said she routinely relies on "outside groups," whereas in the past she was mainly communicating with government figures and opposition politicians. "I just find you tend to widen your circle out of people that you call on a regular basis to find out what's going on, because sometimes some of those interest groups have good contacts into the department that you don't have, and they'll tell you what's going on..." Lunn said. It should be noted that only Gloria Galloway of the *Globe and Mail* made mention of the opposition as a potential alternative source. This could be due to the fact that the other federal parties have faced some of the same frustrations as journalists when trying to obtain government information. Although parliamentary privilege gives all parliamentarians the right to

compel witnesses and documents, even this privilege has run into roadblocks. In 2009, the Conservative government refused to release unredacted documents to a parliamentary committee about the treatment and transfer of Afghan detainees by the Canadian Forces stationed in that country. House Speaker Peter Milliken ruled in 2010 that the refusal constituted a breach of privilege, but it took until 2011 for the documents to be released. That same year, the Conservative minority government fell in a vote of non-confidence over a similar contempt of Parliament issue: the Conservatives had stonewalled requests for financial information on their crime legislation and the purchase of new fighter jets. Opposition MPs and senators might be able to provide reporters with context and commentary for their stories, but their timely access to information on government activities has also been curtailed in recent years.

Mike De Souza of Postmedia News, who also has policy beats, said that the heavy-handed news management he's experienced has caused him to "learn all of the different possibilities and options for getting information." De Souza added that he speaks to,

academics, people who are outside of government, they can be helpful too.

Sometimes they have contacts. The same with some of the NGOs or industry groups, sometimes they have a certain access or some form of privileged

information. Anyone who can have contact with the government or government officials can be an interesting source.

Similarly, Galloway said she will rarely go to the government for information anymore because of the poor quality and slow speed of the responses. "For the most part, on aboriginal issues I just don't bother with them. I go to the First Nations or the Inuit or Métis and who cares what the government says because it's useless," said Galloway.

The idea of bypassing government officials, who in turn are bypassing gallery reporters, came up repeatedly. The anonymous interviewee said that he/she relies on lobbyists and outside analysts much more than before. “I think it’s good to get independent information,” said the journalist. “We’re really given up on civil servants as a regular and ongoing source of information, and I find that just terrible.” Bourbeau said he finds himself “trying to do more of those stories where there are very knowledgeable experts and people that can even talk about the political perspective, but you’re not beholden to a department or a minister to do the story.” He added that his bureau speaks often to Parliament’s various watchdog agencies, which are not constrained from talking to the media. H el ene Buzzetti of *Le Devoir* said she often turns to academics “who know their stuff,” to find out more about a government decision instead of calling an untalkative department.

Sometimes pathfinding can lead right outside of Canada. Where Wilson used provincial sources to help him with his coverage, David Akin of Sun Media says he has used foreign government officials to help cope with blocked access to information. As the example used in the introduction to this thesis suggested, sometimes international sources can be of assistance, particularly during major conferences. “What is our Canadian government doing? Ask the Chinese, ask the Australians, ask the Brits,” said Akin. He recalled one Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) where British government delegates actually entered the Canadian media’s filing room to talk about their push for more climate-change action, and explain how Stephen Harper was “gumming it up.” Said Akin, “Whenever I go to international summits I’m looking for the other journalists from other countries, I’m looking for the other delegations. Our government talks to people.”

There are more traditional ways of journalistic pathfinding on Parliament Hill that don't necessarily require the use of sources outside of government. Although these sources have become much harder to access under the Conservative government, Canada has not seen the aggressive and chill-inducing investigations into leaks of government information that have been unfolding in the United States under the Obama administration (Downie). Mark Kennedy of Postmedia News, Bob Fife of CTV and Jöel-Denis Bellavance of *La Presse* referred to the cultivation over time of anonymous political sources for information. "I just go to other people that I know," said Fife. "I'm fortunate enough to have worked in this town long enough, that you usually know people who would have access to information, so you go to them and get it, but it's always usually not for attribution." Depending on anonymous sources has its own set of negatives, however. Stories with unnamed sources harm the overall credibility of the journalism. As *New York Times* public editor Margaret Sullivan has noted, "...For many readers, anonymous sources are a scourge, a detriment to the straightforward, believable journalism they demand."

2. Documents and Data

Alternate human sources of information were not the only type of path that journalists found to the information they needed. Several of the interview subjects described using different types of records, sometimes in novel ways, to replace the information that they were having a difficult time obtaining through government departments.

Some of the gallery members said they had come to rely more on the provisions of the Access to Information Act to get around obstacles to government information. De Souza of Postmedia News said he filed dozens of requests every month. Kennedy said he believed "reporters in Ottawa are trying to use the Access to Information Act more than we ever did." Fife had the same reflection, noting that "everyone's using Access to Information more."

In the case of *La Presse*'s Ottawa bureau, an extra staff member was hired to focus exclusively on that method of uncovering government information. Jöel-Denis Bellavance said they hired the researcher in 2007 as a specific reaction to the Conservative government's new approach to government news management. He said the number of access requests his bureau submits has gone up "dramatically." Bellavance noted that "*La Presse* didn't use to do Access to Information requests. We did once and a while, once every two months. Now we do it systematically." *La Presse* also routinely asks for lists of briefing notes that are given to ministers by public servants, so that "I know what the minister is going through on a monthly basis."

Akin of Sun Media also developed a routine use of the Act, requesting "question period cards" or "House cards" of government departments – the list of answers to hypothetical question period queries that public servants produce for ministers on a regular basis on anything that happens to be in the news. The records include background and/or historical information on any given issue. Akin takes those records, digitizes them, and uses them as his own repository of information on policy issues. He also maintains an "Ottawa Spends" database in which he inserts the financial details of any government spending announcement. "At any point in my career when I wanted to know something and I've been slow at getting the information or someone is putting up a roadblock, (I think) is there another way of finding this out," said Akin. "And that's working sources or working other kinds of information databases, computer-assisted reporting."

Information Commissioner Suzanne Legault drew a link between the Conservative government's news management approach and the use of the Access to Information pathway in a 2013 interview with CBC Radio:

What I can say is one of the reasons why people make access to information requests is to basically sift through....something that is being massaged as a message as opposed to what are the facts. And oftentimes when people make access to information requests it is because they want to find out the facts that are underlying certain decisions or certain positions that are being made public.

The government's statistics on Access to Information requests, published by the Treasury Board Secretariat's InfoSource service, shows that inquiries from the media went from 2, 835 in 2003-04 to 8,321 in 2012-13, a 210% increase versus a 119% increase overall for requests (Canada *Info Source Bulletins 30-36b*).

But the problems with the Access to Information system have made filing requests a less than ideal situation. "I do a lot of access to information requests, but it's really like scratch-and-win tickets," said the anonymous interviewee. Some of the reporters interviewed said they did not make regular use of the Act because they felt the return on the time investment was not worth the trouble. Getting replies to requests can take years in some cases. As Rubin and Kozolanka have found, the Conservative government has found new ways to clamp down on and manipulate the access system, fostering an environment "in which it is the norm to delay responses to requests for ever-longer periods, and when the information is finally received, to be thinner and lighter in content because of the many deletions" (210).

Elizabeth Thompson of *iPolitics* bypasses the Access to Information Act itself, and looks for other sources of documentation to help her cover government and Parliament. She calls it the "hiding-in-plain-sight school of journalism." In other words, she uses public sources of information that might escape the notice of many journalists. For example, she will peruse the *Canada Gazette*, the supplementary budget estimates and the public accounts for new leads. She

will also seek out the responses given to order paper questions, the official queries that parliamentarians can make of the government to compel responses with 45 days. Thompson said,

This is information the government has to make public, so I've focused a bit more on that, which again, means that people trying to control the message probably have more surprises when they wake up in the morning than they might have when my days were busy trying to report on policy initiatives or write off that half-hour long minister's interview about their priorities.

It bears noting that although the reporters interviewed for this thesis said they did not devote much time to long investigative pieces of journalism, there have been significant stories that have emerged from the press gallery in recent years as a result of such work. The robo-calls controversy was first brought to light by the reporters Stephen Maher and Glen McGregor of Postmedia News. McGregor was also one of the first to raise questions in the national media about Sen. Mike Duffy's primary residence, while Fife used anonymous sources to break one of the biggest stories of the decade – the payment of Duffy's expenses by Harper's chief of staff Nigel Wright. I have also made greater use of documents and investigative tools in the past eight years. In 2012, I reported on International Co-operation Minister Bev Oda's expensive switch of hotel rooms in London, and her purchase of a \$16 glass of orange juice ("Aid Minister"). The story was entirely based on records obtained under the Access to Information Act, as was another that year about bureaucrats from Citizenship and Immigration Canada being asked to pose as new immigrants at a misleading ceremony broadcast on the Sun TV network ("Citizenship Ceremony").

Behind Journalistic Pathfinding

Even David Battistelli, the single reporter in OMNI's Ottawa bureau, found small new pathways to getting what he needed. Of all the interview subjects, he was the most vulnerable to government messaging because he had such limited resources to put together his TV items. But Battistelli did have his own strategies. For example, he would find out where a particular minister was appearing on a given day, and make sure that he went out to intercept them with his camera – anticipating that whatever that event might be about, it might be the only opportunity to see that minister (or any minister) that day.

But what compels journalists to be pathfinders in the face of government news management? One element is work routine, and having to fill newspapers and newscasts with interesting stories on increasingly tight deadlines. The prevailing argument is that time-pressed journalists will accept information subsidies to help fulfill their work routines. But this view does not take into account situations where the subsidies have been reduced to repetitive and dull talking points. Gandy noted that, “More frequently, information subsidies from the executive branch are delivered to the press in the form of leaks, off-the-record interviews, or backgrounders, which provide reporters with enough information to construct a news story without identifying its sources” (72). Reflecting on the blocked access that the reporters had described, it is clear that these forms of information subsidies simply do not exist as they did before. As Elizabeth Thompson put it, “If you don't give them something to cover, they will find something to cover.”

Journalistic values, as reviewed in Chapter One, provide a clue as to why journalists have adapted their techniques. Ericson et al. pointed to “deviance” or the unexpected as the key concept behind newsworthiness. Journalists look for what deviates from the accepted or the

normal in society. When journalists receive talking points and propaganda, or else no information at all, they must look harder and in different places with different sources to find the deviations that constitute the heart of an interesting news story. The suspicion that something is being concealed appears to signify a deviation in and of itself, waving a sort of red flag in front of journalists to take a closer look. This was an idea noted by some of the interview subjects. Jacques Bourbeau of Global TV said, “I think journalists are a breed that the more barriers you put in front of us, the more dogged we become.” Gans would call that the “heating effects” (252).

Another key news value which is obvious, but should be mentioned, is that something be *new*. Some of the press gallery members who participated in this research noted they ignore politicians when they repeated funding or policy changes that they had already announced previously because they are simply not newsworthy. That goes for the emailed quotes and information sent to reporters by political aides or public servants. In the absence of something new from the usual official sources, such as an interview with a minister or a scrum outside of a cabinet meeting, the reporters go looking elsewhere. This phenomenon was noted in Peter Hamby’s study of reporters covering the Mitt Romney presidential campaign in 2012. He found that veteran reporters opted not to board the bus because of a lack of news and access to the candidate, and instead wrote different stories from their newsrooms and elsewhere. The frustrated journalists who did “embed” in the campaign tended to focus on gaffes or process stories to fill the news hole when nothing noteworthy was happening (Hamby).

Closely related to newness or novelty is the value of exclusivity, one noted by Danish scholar Ida Schultz. With a more fragmented media scene, and more competition within the press gallery, the quest for original, fresh news ideas is paramount. Kuhn noted this in his research on

the Blair government's news management style. He said, "In a highly competitive media system, driven by the relentless pursuit of audiences and advertisers, the operationalization of news values frequently pushed journalists into a critical or even adversarial stance with regard to the Blair government" (62).

Susan Delacourt of the *Toronto Star* spoke to this point when she said that a story based on a government news release has little chance of getting into her newspaper because it is something that every other reporter will have received too. "When space is limited and resources are limited, you want to do something that makes you unique, and we're encouraged to find things that are our own," she said. Elizabeth Thompson of *iPolitics* also noted a tendency for gallery reporters to be looking for the next exclusive: "If someone gets a scoop, the tendency now rather than to say, oh wow we've got to match that scoop, is to say, OK, it's out there, they're the first to get it, let's go out and get something else...." The scattering of the press gallery over the past 40 years has also contributed to a greater sense of competition and independence among the various outlets, as examined in Chapter Three.

The Perfect Situation for Government News Managers

Journalistic pathfinding is nothing particularly new or different. Journalists must adapt to obstacles that are put in their way all the time. In the early days of the press gallery, reporters who did not work for newspapers that were sympathetic to the government were forced to find new sources of information. Charles Bishop writes of the Laurier years that a "newspaper correspondent of any stripe, can usually find what he seeks to find if he go about it with the right approach and has friends, properly placed, to assist" (12). In an email exchange with Herbert Gans, the now retired journalism scholar from Columbia University, he said finding ways to information is, "a basic part of the journalistic job, competition against others who might get the

story first, and pride in beating them to the story by identifying new and different sources. And of course now there are so many peers to compete against” (“Greetings”).

But the risks are far higher for the media than they have ever been. Governments are now equipped with armies of communications personnel who vastly outnumber the reporters that cover government. Most of the gallery members interviewed said their work had become much harder over the past eight years. Buzzetti of *Le Devoir* wondered how much better a product she would be able to turn out if she didn't have to spend her days trying to ferret out basic information.

Battistelli was perhaps the most pessimistic about the ability of reporters to properly inform the public, he being the single reporter in his newsroom. Although he did not feel his life was made harder by the government news management practices of the Harper government, he recognized that his work product was being managed by political forces:

I want people to know that we're in jeopardy of not being able to truly have a responsive journalistic product. In the end if we don't have journalists being able to do their jobs properly without hindrance, interference, control, what have you, then it's going to have an impact on everyone. I want people to know that this is not a democratic way.

Elizabeth Thompson of *iPolitics* says the current media environment presents a perfect situation for governments that want to manage the news. “The fact that so many newsrooms have been cut back so much, coupled with a government that wants to control the message, there are fewer inconvenient questions and fewer people knocking down the barricades of government to try and get the information,” she said. As long as there are journalists who are bred with the values of objectivity, fairness, the need for newness and the exclusive, pathways to information will be

found – but not nearly enough of them to keep government truly accountable and the public adequately informed.

Conclusion

It is probably no surprise that journalists have found few allies in arguing for greater media access to politicians and to government information. Political journalists are criticized, often with good reason, for being process-obsessed, lazy about reporting on policy and too easily swayed by scandal and the political misstep. Critics worry about the overall impact of these trends on civic engagement, calling it a “media malaise” (Norris) or a “crisis of public communication” (Blumler and Gurevitch). There is no doubt that media organizations could stand to take a breath and reflect on how Parliament and government is reported. When Stephen Harper first came to power, even media commentators criticized the press gallery for balking at restrictions on access. “We expect them to keep us informed no matter how hard the government makes it,” former gallery member Iain Hunter wrote in the *Victoria Times Colonist*. “We don’t expect them to complain about their working conditions as if democracy itself was at jeopardy.”

But beyond the whining perceived by some, it is the parliamentary press gallery that has shone the light on the deepening politicization of the public service, and of government communication in particular. How else but with the help of journalistic scrutiny would Canadians have learned of the Message Event Proposal, the use of the “Harper Government” in communication materials, the millions spent on the Economic Action Plan advertising, political interference in the Access to Information system, and myriad other examples of the blurred lines between the political and the public. These stories could be dismissed as “process” or “inside baseball,” but they speak to important changes to the system that might have previously been picked up by parliamentary committees in a less centralized system. As Donald Savoie has

noted, with the increasing centralization of power in the hands of the executive, Parliament has “turned over at least some of its responsibility of holding the government to account to officers of Parliament and to the media...(202)”. These two groups often work in tandem to strengthen accountability. Officers of Parliament, such as the auditor general, the information commissioner of Canada and the chief electoral officer, with their investigative powers, are often able to turn up information that eludes reporters. On the other hand, journalists are sometimes able to uncover information that serves as a catalyst for probes by these watchdogs of Parliament, the Senate spending scandal being a prime example. News coverage led to investigations by the auditor general of spending by senators, and even to RCMP investigations. Unfortunately, officers of Parliament, like the media, have themselves been targets of government hostility or stonewalling.

The issue of more stringent government news management is not just about how lives of reporters have been made harder, or how the government of Stephen Harper has broken an unwritten covenant with the gallery. It is also about the role the media plays in a representative democracy. Informing the public, or creating a civic forum to discuss politics, is a key role. Schudson says, “The educational function of journalism puts the public in the front seat and enables the citizenry to participate in self-government” (*Unlovable Press* 11). Schudson and Norris have also noted the watchdog role of the press in a democracy. Norris says it,

implies that journalists and broadcasters should not simply report on political speeches, campaign rallies or photo opportunities ‘straight’ or unfiltered from politicians to the public without also providing editorial comment, critical analysis and interpretive evaluations of political messages to help readers and viewers place these events in context (29).

Interestingly, removing that journalistic filter is precisely the goal of shutting down access to information and relying more on government advertising, direct marketing and the cultivation of poorly equipped regional or ethnic newsrooms. If reporters are viewed as proxies for the public, asking governments and parliamentarians the tough questions that they want answers to, then blocking the media from those decision makers has direct consequences for public participation. An “exclusive” video “interview” produced by the Privy Council Office with the prime minister can be no substitute for an unrestricted journalistic interview or a press conference.

This reflection on the media dovetails with recent literature on modern political marketing. Political marketing applies business marketing techniques to the political arena as seen in chapter four. It is simultaneously celebrated as a way for parties and governments to be more responsive to the needs of the public and critiqued as only representing certain parts of the population to leverage power while ignoring others. Strategic communications are naturally part of the political marketing picture, aiming to sell the public on a party or a government’s main policies or messages. But as Kirsten Kozolanka has noted, “a burgeoning literature has yet to fully analyze how governments use promotion after an election (“Buyer Beware” 117).

One of the main aspects missing from the analysis is the cause-and-effect of the marketing-linked strategic communication techniques. Setting aside the democratic concerns laid out above, there can be unintended consequences for parties that choose to severely clamp down on information and access. Tony Blair’s experience with the demonization of spin should provide ample evidence of this. If the experiences of the reporters interviewed for this thesis are any indication, information is still making its way into news articles and broadcasts, but not necessarily the information that the government desired. External interest groups (including other governments), the access to information system, and investigative reporting, are all sources of

information that are much harder for a government to control and manipulate. Deacon and Golding argued this point in their examination of the Thatcher government's poll tax, saying "not only does primary definition have to be won, it must also be sustained interpretatively and evaluatively through a series of battles, in which its political vulnerability may progressively increase" (202). Schlesinger and Tumber have referred to this dynamic as "source competition" (260). Journalists faced with stringent news management have no alternative but to turn to these other sources. As Waddell has noted,

The Harper government's rigid control of communications and frequent refusal to comment since 2006 is all the more shortsighted and hard to fathom, considering the ease with which it could get its message out consistently merely by talking regularly to reporters who are facing deadline pressures and are desperate for quotes (120).

I would argue that the result of the change in journalistic routine, brought on by the crackdown on access, has only increased the intensity of scandal-centred coverage as reporters try to dig up what is hidden. Herein lies a vicious cycle: governments argue their message is not getting out, so they crackdown on access and rely more on politicized communication. In turn, reporters become fixated with what they might be missing. A chronic state of partial war, as Blumler and Gurevitch have put it.

Still, journalists must continue to seek innovative ways of finding information in an increasingly closed down system of government communications. They might also consider more collective approaches to pointing out government secrecy and attacks on the media. To date, the few protests by the parliamentary press gallery and other press organizations have appeared to make little impact. Australia's Right to Know and US-based Committee to Protect

Journalists are examples of organizations that have commissioned major studies on government transparency and the treatment of the press. Journalism schools can play a role in educating students on the roadblocks they will undoubtedly face, and foster a better understanding of news management and political marketing as part of the regular curriculum.

Finally, there is a need for more research into how reporters have reacted or adapted to news management. Content analysis of certain political announcements or events would provide a window into how reporters deal with a highly throttled flow of information. A look at how news management has been covered by the Canadian media, as Thierry Giasson has done with reporters and political marketing, would help to establish whether that coverage has genuinely become a form of “journalistic fight-back” in Canada. If strategic communication becomes demonized, as “spin” did in the United Kingdom, trust between citizens and the state could become further eroded.

There’s little doubt that Stephen Harper’s own distrust of the media, as described by Nicholls, Flanagan and Wells, has contributed to the overall approach to government news management. As Paul Thomas notes, prime ministers wield considerable influence over the tone of communications. But members of the press gallery know instinctively that access lost, generally means access lost forever. New leaders will look to the political success of the Conservative party and attribute that, in part, to their media relations approach. One hopes that other voices, outside of journalism, will speak up for the concept of an unfettered press and see it within the larger context of a healthy democracy and a functional parliamentary system.

Appendix A: List of Interview Questions

How many years have you been/were you a member of the Parliamentary Press Gallery?

How many years have you been professionally employed as a journalist?

Have you reported on politics in another jurisdiction?

How many people work in your newsroom?

What beats are you responsible for covering, if any?

What are your tasks in the newsroom?

How much time do you have to undertake enterprise or investigative work in your current position/last position in the parliamentary press gallery?

Describe what kinds of ways you see that government attempts to manage the news that comes from the parliamentary press gallery (If necessary, examples provided such as news releases, leaks, off-the-record chats, withdrawal of access, etc.)

Describe the level of access to government information that you experience on a day-to-day basis as a Parliament Hill reporter.

Describe the quality of information that you receive from departmental media relations professionals (public servants).

How long does it take typically to get a response from a departmental media relations professional?

Describe the quality of information that you receive from political staff in ministerial offices/prime minister's office.

How long does it take typically to get a response from political staff?

Have you altered the way you work in order to address the way the government manages the flow of information? If yes, please describe how.

How would you characterize the relationship between reporters and the government?

Do you have any anecdotes about your efforts to obtain government information?

Has your experience with trying to obtain government information had any effect on your degree of job satisfaction?

Has your experience with trying to obtain government information made you a better journalist, a poorer journalist, or about the same?

Many scholars argue that journalists are easily manipulated by government news management techniques, because they rely so heavily on official sources to begin with and are under extreme time pressures. What do you think?

How would you describe the changes that you perceived to government news management/How are things different?

What would you like a future reader to know about how reporters have been affected by government news management practices in this era?

Appendix B: List of Interview Subjects

Note: Positions accurate on date of interview

David Akin

Bureau Chief/Sun Media

Aug. 27, 2013

Anonymous

Reporter / national media outlet

July 18, 2013

David Battistelli

Bureau Chief / OMNI

Oct. 11, 2013

Jöel-Denis Bellavance

Bureau Chief / *La Presse*

Sept. 17, 2013

Jacques Bourbeau

Bureau Chief / Global TV

Sept. 6, 2013

Hélène Buzzetti

Reporter / *Le Devoir*

Sept. 26, 2013

Mike De Souza

Reporter / Postmedia News

July 17, 2013

Susan Delacourt

Reporter / *The Toronto Star*

July 4, 2013

Robert Fife

Bureau chief / CTV News

Oct. 10, 2013

Gloria Galloway

Reporter / *The Globe and Mail*

July 9, 2013

Mark Kennedy

Bureau Chief / Postmedia News

Sept. 12, 2013

Susan Lunn

Reporter / CBC Radio

Aug. 30, 2013

Elizabeth Thompson

Reporter/*iPolitics*

Sept. 21, 2013

Barry Wilson

National Correspondent/*Western Producer*

Jan. 9, 2014

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