

No escape from the No.10. bunker? UK government news management under siege: John Major (1990–97) and Boris Johnson (2019–2022)

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Abstract

Purpose – This study draws parallels between the Major and Johnson eras to reclaim a discursive space beyond the media and political battlefields to examine long-term systemic failure of government PR.

Design/methodology/approach – As part of a wider study into government communications from 1979 to date, this paper draws on evidence from government archives from the 1990s, as well as contemporary accounts, official documents, media accounts, memoirs and biographies, to examine the PR record of two Conservative administrations divided by three decades.

Findings – News management during the Major premiership is worth serious scrutiny, not just as an interlude between two media-friendly Prime Ministers, Thatcher and Blair, but in comparison to Boris Johnson's struggle to contain the news narrative between 2019 and 2022. Both administrations experienced terminal reputational crises during their closing years but their means of managing the news were counter-productive and damaging to public trust (65).

Practical implications – Does this failure in public communication illustrate a systemic dysfunction in government-media relations and, if so, what is the role of government PR in these circumstances?

Originality/value – This article uses a comparison between fixed and moving variables associated with two very different administrations to identify the causes of ongoing systemic failure in government communication.

Keywords Government communication, Public relations, UK, John Major, Boris Johnson, Conservative party, News management, Political communication, Mediatiation

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The UK Prime Minister John Major's seven years in office (1990–1997) is often passed over as a disastrous interlude between two eras in political PR – the period of Thatcherite hegemony in the British national media between 1979 and 1990 (Wilkes-Hegg *et al.*, 2012) and the so-called age of political spin under Blair from 1997 to 2005 (Garland, 2021). This paper argues that the Major period is worth independent scrutiny, not only because archival material has recently become available but because the experiences of Major's Number 10 [1] echo more recent Conservative governments' struggles under Boris Johnson during his three-year premiership (2019–2022), despite the contrasting characters and governing styles of the two leaders. Johnson's leadership took place under different political and media circumstances but there are continuities that may offer a clue to more systemic dysfunction in the relationships between Prime Ministers, their staff and the media. Both leaders contended with party divisions over Britain's role in Europe, concerns over propriety and ethics in the governing party, the failure of news management to control the narrative, and vigorous but ultimately doomed attempts by both governments to undermine or bypass the agenda-setting powers of the media. It is suggested that both Prime Ministers, and the media and political actors around them, were overwhelmed by turbulence at the interface between government and the media, and lacked sufficient agency to resist the powerful dynamic operating around them.



John Major admitted to a judicial public inquiry that his failure to develop a “close relationship with any part of the media may have been a contributory factor to the hostile media the 1990–97 government often received” (Major, 2012). This differs from the relationship-building developed by his predecessor as Conservative party leader Margaret Thatcher, who told the then editor of the tabloid newspaper *The Sun*, Larry Lamb, that she considered him to be “a valued friend and ally” (Thatcher, 1979). His New Labour successor, Tony Blair, became godfather to Grace, a daughter of *The Sun* owner Rupert Murdoch. John Major consistently refused to moderate his pro-EU stance to please Murdoch and considered that *The Sun* had “lowered the tone” of discourse in public life (Major, 2012). He argued that Labour under Tony Blair deserved contempt for “flattering the egos of the proprietors,” something he was not prepared to do, even at some risk to himself (Major, 1999, p. 709). New Labour’s director of communications Alastair Campbell, a former tabloid journalist who came into government with Tony Blair in 1997, said that Major’s suffering at the hands of the daily press influenced Labour’s more aggressive and frequently controversial approach to media management while in government (Campbell, 2012).

As a former journalist and darling of the largely right-wing national press, Boris Johnson had obvious advantages over Major in his relations with the news media. He had personal experience of their propensity to attack politicians (Van Dalen *et al.*, 2012), having played such a role himself as Brussels correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* from 1989 to 1994 (Purnell, 2022). Yet he took office in 2019 determined to develop a form of news management that did not depend on the press, making greater use of social media, employing government photographers and trying to ban critical journalists from attending media briefings. The failure of this strategy is evident in Johnson’s *volte face* once Covid struck, the collapse of his popularity in the country, and his resignation on 7 July 2022 following a record 59 ministerial resignations (BBC News, 2022a; Garland and Lilleker, 2021). In May 2022, Johnson’s official spokesperson, a civil servant, apologised to journalists for misleading them about gatherings in Number 10 during lockdown, but only after the Prime Minister had been fined for breaking Covid rules and the release of a damning report on misbehaviour at No.10 (BBC News, 2022b; Rutter, 2022a).

This paper examines the contrasting experiences of John Major and Boris Johnson to highlight ongoing systemic dysfunction in No.10 media management by illustrating what they had in common. Both detested media scrutiny but devoted huge efforts to ultimately ineffective news management conducted under siege conditions. Both sidelined the government communication service (GCS), the civil servants appointed to conduct government strategic communication on their behalf. This raises questions about the role of government PR professionals in maintaining public-facing objectives and upholding transparency and accountability, especially at a time of crisis. As part of a wider study into government communications from 1979 to date, this paper draws on evidence from government archives from the 1990s, as well as contemporary accounts, official documents, media commentary and recent memoirs and biographies, to compare the media relations record of two Conservative administrations separated by nearly 30 years. There are limits to this approach, since the political and media realities were transformed in the intervening years, the type of evidence available differs and the characters involved are so different. However, the almost visceral and ultimately counter-productive responses of these two political leaders under sustained media attack are strikingly similar, suggesting an underlying dynamic that is worthy of examination.

Earlier studies have suggested that, throughout the post-war period, government public relations as a discipline, a form of practice, a field of power and an institution have been consistently marginalised in what appears to be a takeover by political appointees who manage the media on behalf of ministers and the Prime Minister (Garland, 2017, 2021). What are the dynamics behind this marginalisation, and is this related to the ongoing siege

mentality in government-media relations? The post-war creators of the UK government information service (GIS) – later renamed the GCS – gave government PR specialists the job of representing and upholding democratic public values such as impartiality (Grant, 1999; Moore, 2006) but to what extent was this ideal achieved? The time periods examined here consist of the five years of the second Major administration following his surprise election victory (1992–97) and the 30-months following the unexpected landslide victory achieved by Boris Johnson (2019–22).

Government PR: caught in the “cross-field” – between forces beyond its control?

The two governing periods under examination were buffeted by forces beyond the government’s control: a media pack hungry for political scalps, the in-built “degenerative tendencies” of long-serving governments (Roe-Crines, 2022), and the ongoing mediatisation of government (Figenshou and Thorbjørnsrud, 2015; Garland *et al.*, 2018). The approach taken here is a field-based mediatisation approach that seeks to examine a changing process over time as it applies to *all* actors within a particular domain, defined here as the “cross-field” – that is, the interface between media, politics and the governing bureaucracy. This unstable field is characterised by interference and unpredictability and involves a range of actors who accumulate, lose and use new forms of power and agency (Rawolle, 2005). Mediatisation is the historical process whereby “more and more media emerge and are institutionalised” so that previously autonomous domains such as politics and political institutions become drawn into a media-dominated dynamic that challenges and even overwhelms established practices and ethical boundaries (Krotz, 2009, p. 24). Hyperactive decision-making and self-serving public communication foreclose deliberation and undermine public trust (Moss and O’ Loughlin, 2008). This paper argues that, as both governments faced a combination of declining public trust, successive media threats and intense political divisions within the ruling party, a “bunker mentality” ensued, and media briefing was increasingly delegated to factional political operatives. This challenged standards set by the government’s own crisis communication guidance, derived from good practice during the Covid-19 pandemic, which calls for the provision of “accurate, relevant and timely information” as part of a “well-thought-out, strategic plan” delivered in “a consistent, clear, and continual way” (GCS, 2022a). This ideal is far from the reality that gripped Downing Street during the final years of both administrations.

Such a cleavage in public communication practices at the heart of government facilitates “politicisation”, whereby a networked group of ministerial political aides encroaches into the territory formerly occupied by the civil service press machine, as has been observed by many scholars (Eichbaum and Shaw, 2010; Figenshou and Thorbjørnsrud, 2015; Fredriksson *et al.*, 2015; Garland, 2017; Sanders and Canel, 2013). Like other liberal democracies, since the development of 24/7 news media in the 1990s, the UK now has a *dual* government communication service financed by the taxpayer and run jointly by political appointees clustered around ministers, and a much larger government-wide machinery of permanent civil service communication professionals, the GCS (Figenshou *et al.*, 2022). This evolved from a post-war information model of communication dominated and internally regulated by civil servants (Ogilvy-Webb, 1965), to a focus on media relations as a lever of government and a form of political action. Following a series of reforms in 2012, the GCS became recognised as a world-leading service. Anne Gregory, a Professor of Corporate Communications and a GCS adviser for Labour and Conservative Governments, acknowledges this but questions the move towards a more politically led GCS’ and a “coercive,” top-down approach to PR (Gregory, 2019, 2012). This paper argues, with Gregory, that the GCS’ capacity to protect governments and Prime Ministers from self-serving, counterproductive and even unethical public communications practices has been progressively compromised as their agency within the “cross-field” diminishes in response to political and media pressures.

Both Prime Ministers took power following the downfall of their predecessors, Margaret Thatcher and Theresa May respectively, and then won their own electoral mandates in 1992 and 2019. Their periods in government began 11 and nine years after the party came into power, with Major as the second Conservative PM in 11 years, and Johnson the third in nine years. Having won power unexpectedly, both faced the challenge of winning an unprecedented fifth successive general election for the governing party [2]. Following Norton (1996) and Heppell (2008), Roe-Crines (2022) has argued that long-running administrations such as these, display “degenerative tendencies,” in the later governing years, as governments contort themselves ideologically and factionally to renew themselves while in office – often relying on narrative effects such as secretive media briefing. These tendencies include lack of party cohesion, poor leadership credibility, perceived incompetence and evidence of abuses of power and a disconnection from the electorate. Could a siege mentality in relation to political and media pressures be another such tendency?

As part of the process of mediatisation, it has been observed that governing politicians have over time increasingly prioritised their relations with journalists. Curran has argued that UK politicians’ feel especially vulnerable to the reputational risk presented by print journalists, despite their reliance on them, since “when in attack mode, national papers can be bullying, witty and unconstrained. It is this concentration of firepower that can be turned on and off that partly accounts for politicians’ desire to court the press” (Curran, 2012, pp. 5–6). These feelings of exposure and powerlessness in the face of a seemingly uncontrollable force, explain the drive on the part of ministers to deploy personal aides to manage the media. A protective, loyal and proactive (even hyperactive) media relations team that answers directly to them is seen as essential to political survival. This paper argues that although understandable in the short term, this approach is counter-intuitive from a PR point of view and damaging to public trust and hence democracy. It also appears impervious to intervention by the GCS.

Political and journalistic memoirs from the 1990s are testament to the increasing prominence of news management in political life (Blair, 2010; Fowler, 1991; Major, 2003; Mattinson, 2010; Price, 2010). Evidence from senior politicians to the Leveson (2012) Inquiry reveals the existential fears of a political class grappling with media intrusion. Politicians from all parties, including successive Prime Ministers, express their fears about the destructive capacity of the news media, especially the national press, as a form of unaccountable power that they must appease, however distasteful. They seek personal protection, not only from the mass media and political opposition, but from factions within their own party who brief against them. What may have started as a crafted narrative developed in opposition and delivered as a party manifesto and programme for government, degenerates into a panic-stricken search for the latest story that keeps a given minister or Prime Minister in power for another week, or another day. John Major made it to a General Election where his party was decimated. Johnson was ousted by his own MPs 30 months after a landslide victory.

As politics and the process of governing become more mediatised, and as governments age and decay, governing politicians become more sensitive to the news agenda, and increasingly turn towards political aides as government-media intermediaries. This puts more pressure on the longstanding machinery of government communications (especially the GCS) to respond to rather than resist political and media pressures. It is a paradox that at the very moment when the risk of reputational damage becomes greatest, the process of corporate, strategic communication becomes further sidelined, even silenced. The methodology section will explain how this study examined the fixed and moving variables as they operated over time during the final years of these two governments. It seeks to understand how PR as a professional discipline fits into these moving parts and how its role, status and agency have changed in the intervening period. The question of what PR can and could add to public communication by governments is considered in the concluding section.

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Methodology

This study draws on archival, interview and biographical evidence relating to the 1992–97 Major government's experience of media relations. These include 25 interviews with journalists, special advisers and former and serving civil service communicators spanning the period from the 1960s to 2013. These were conducted as part of a wider longitudinal research project into UK government communications after 1979 (Garland, 2021). Much of the archival material relates to 241 fortnightly, weekly, then daily meetings of the Ministerial Committee on the Coordination and Presentation of Government Policy (EDCP), a committee set up by John Major in 1995 and chaired by the deputy prime minister, Michael Heseltine, to manage presentational issues that were already undermining Major's authority (National Archives, 1995/1996). The stated aim of EDCP was to "establish a strategic statement of policy priorities for the remainder of this parliament" and "ensure central coordination" by presenting the government as "united and with clear purpose." Perhaps reflecting its defensiveness and the sense of being outgunned by the Blair media team, the committee also wanted to examine "the full consequences of Opposition policies."

The conceptual approach taken here combines a field approach to mediatisation with historical institutionalism (Bannerman and Haggart, 2015) to examine the response of the civil service, or central governing bureaucracy, to the process of mediatisation, through the experiences of key actors based at No. 10, in parliament and through the media. This approach seeks to identify mechanisms that strengthen or weaken the institutions, agents and ideas in play, and establish who gains and loses during a period of change. This evidence is used to offer a comparison with the chaotic media operation at Johnson's No.10 between December 2019 and July 2022, as recalled by journalists and their (often) anonymous sources. Contemporary media reportage, insider reports and now books by journalists and other participants, are starting to appear, most notably the account by Financial Times' Whitehall editor Sebastian Payne (2022), based on 40 h of insider interviews.

These two case studies act as a natural experiment with fixed and moving variables. The fixed variables include (1) a Conservative PM seeking a fifth consecutive election victory, (2) a divided party, (3) a government that is seen as incompetent and "sleaze ridden", (4) poor performance at by-elections (20% average swings against government), (5) an adversarial media and (6) siege or "bunker" mentality at No. 10. The four moving variables include a transformed media ecology with an active commentariat facilitated by social media, a politicised approach to media relations in government, two very different Prime Ministerial characters and backgrounds, and steadily declining relationships between ministers and civil servants (Rutter, 2022b). John Major's reputation was quickly undermined by Black Wednesday on 16 September 1992 when Britain was forced to leave the ERM (European Exchange Rate Mechanism) to prevent a further slide of the pound. Boris Johnson failed to contain damaging revelations about illegal partying that took place in and around No.10 during Covid-19 lockdowns.

The analysis will be conducted according to three main themes, all taking place in the context of a transformed media environment and especially the role of social media and the new commentariat. These are:

- (1) The government's attitudes towards the media and civil service
- (2) Truth telling norms and the observance (or avoidance) of rules
- (3) The "bunker" mentality and the "permanent campaign"

The purpose of the analysis is to examine in granular detail the internal workings of the dual government communications service based at the centre of government at two crucial crisis points, and to critically evaluate the role of the permanent civil service PR specialists over time.

Findings

John Major and Boris Johnson both approached their administrations with a desire to shift what they considered to be dependent relationships with the mass media on the part of their predecessors. Both initially tried to bypass the “spin cycle” by downplaying the role of news management at No. 10 but were eventually drawn into the media maelstrom in defence of their positions. The findings are presented chronologically under the three thematic headings.

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Attitudes towards the media and civil servants

Major demonstrated respect for the civil service and obedience to proprietary rules – and indeed set up new machinery to protect them. He appointed a familiar face and trusted civil servant, the Treasury economist Gus O’Donnell (1990–1994), as the first of his three chief press secretaries, only one of whom was a PR specialist. He did not approve of political aides (known as special advisers, or SpAds) as media intermediaries, instead selecting career civil servants to run his press office. His attempted “withdrawal” from proactive media management and his failure to prioritise media relations have been examined by scholars and deemed to have been unsuccessful in that they were reversed under pressure later in the administration (Bale and Sanders, 2001; Hogg and Hill, 1995). His second press secretary, Christopher Meyer (1994–1997), a diplomat, described “the pressure of events (that) almost suffocates in its intensity. . . you are cut off from the outside world. You function inside a combination of hothouse and bunker”, (Meyer, 2006, p. 13). His third chief press secretary, a career civil servant Jonathan Haslam, had a positive relationship and regard for John Major, but was critical of No. 10’s failure to invest in modern forms of news management just as 24/7 media took off (Garland, 2021, p. 41). A junior press officer at No.10 described Major as “anti-spin” yet also “thin skinned, very easily wounded”. During a constituency school visit, Major faced 45 journalists following up an oppositional briefing by the Eurosceptic Home Secretary. The press officer recalled how Major “went absolutely crazy . . . snatched the phone and gave (the Home Secretary) an almighty bollocking. John Major calmed down . . . once he’d found out what he’d actually said rather than what was being reported” (Anon, cited in Garland, 2021, p. 42).

Major feared and disliked the press, referring to himself as the fox and the media as the hounds (Hennessy, 2014), and bemoaning the “blood lust of the press” as a threat to his premiership (Fowler, 2008, p. 167). A senior civil servant recalled that “he can’t walk past a (news) paper without picking it up” (Hennessy, 2001, p. 437). One No.10 press secretary, Lance Price, considered Major to be “obsessed” with what journalists were saying about him and frequently going against the advice of his press team by briefing them off-the-record (Price, 2010). On the day of Black Wednesday, Major made what he later called “a very bad mistake” (Hennessy, 2014), by calling the editor of *The Sun*, Kelvin Mackenzie, to ask how he would be covering the story (Major, 2012). Mackenzie replied that he would be pouring “a bucket of ‘something unpleasant’ over him” (Mackenzie, 2012). Turning fire on the PM he accused Major of being rude to his political editor Trevor Kavanagh by turning his back on him at a No.10 event. The message was clear: politicians were beneath contempt and should take their punishment quietly without answering back or upsetting journalists.

Johnson began his administration by downgrading and belittling the role of the media and using government digital feeds to speak directly to the public. The Prime Minister and his aides were accused of excluding journalists who were considered unduly critical from political briefings that had previously been open to all accredited reporters (Mayhew, 2020). Johnson appointed several taxpayer-funded official photographers as SpAds and was condemned by the UK Pictures Guild and News Media Association for excluding the usual rota photographers and journalists from covering No.10 events (Tapper, 2020). Where possible, government speeches and announcements were delivered by video or as social media posts and a failed attempt was made to introduce White House style video press conferences. Ministers were no longer permitted to appear on certain BBC news programmes, and there were threats to “hack” the BBC by threatening to end its financial model, the universal licence fee (Shipman, 2020).

Unlike Major, and in common with Tony Blair and David Cameron, Johnson created a media team led by politically appointed special advisers under the command of his chief SpAd, Dominic Cummings, who stated that civil servants “were for the history books” (Johnstone, 2019). Civil servants were publicly treated with contempt, exposed to naming and shaming, and threatened with draconian cuts. At least three civil service Heads of Department left abruptly, one finding out about his own “resignation” in a daily newspaper and another accusing the Secretary of State of bullying and later receiving a six-figure sum for constructive dismissal. This anti-establishment stance was swiftly reversed during the brief hiatus in politicised media management during the first pandemic emergency between March and June 2020, when accountability and transparency by the Prime Minister and Cabinet, a working alliance with health experts, and a partnership between political appointees and civil servants enabled an initially effective public communication campaign urging people to *Stay at Home, Protect the NHS and Save Lives* (Garland and Lilleker, 2021). However, overall, the Johnson government signalled a decline in the relationships between ministers and civil servants.

Truth-telling norms and the observance (or avoidance) of rules

John Major was referred to as “honest” John, winning the respect of the public on the 1992 campaign trail by ripping up pre-existing general election plans and touring the country with his wooden “soapbox”. Following lobbying scandals involving his own MPs, he established the Committee of Standards in Public Life (CSPL) in 1994 that still operates today. He put ministerial guidance on a firmer footing in 1992 by publishing the *Questions of Procedure for Ministers* (QPM, later the *Ministerial Code*) and aligning its recommendations with suggestions from the CSPL. Today, the Code still requires that ministers uphold the highest standards of probity, treat all staff with respect, give accurate and truthful information to parliament and ensure that no conflict arises between public duties and private interests (Ministerial Code, 2022). However, the Code is policed by the Prime Minister. Major’s media operation may have been poorly resourced, but it was never accused of lying. The Government Information Service (originally GIS, and now GCS) propriety code, then as now, required civil service communicators to “to remain objective and impartial, especially when dealing with politically controversial issues”. Like all civil servants, press officers “must uphold integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality” (GCS, 2022b).

In contrast, even before becoming PM, Johnson was known for mendacity and failing to adhere to protocols and rules. As the Eurosceptic Brussels correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph*, he was known among the UK press corps for inventing negative stories about the EU (Purnell, 2022). As leader of *Vote Leave*, he promoted the false claim that “We send the EU £350 million a week – let’s fund our NHS instead” by displaying it in large letters on the side of his campaign bus. For this, he was accused by the UK’s chief statistician of “a clear misuse of official statistics” (Norgrove, 2017). The terminal loss of trust and credibility in Boris Johnson’s leadership began in October 2021 when he insisted that his own MPs vote to block the suspension of a colleague who had been found guilty by the Independent Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards of repeatedly misusing his parliamentary position for personal financial gain (Payne, 2022). John Major criticised Johnson’s actions frequently, but his most stinging accusation came when he told a BBC interviewer that Johnson’s government was probably “politically corrupt” in its actions to block the MP’s suspension (Jackson, 2021).

The most salient and egregious challenge to the trustworthiness of the Johnson government rests with the unprecedented record of misrepresenting the truth or even lying on the part of the No.10 press office – a record that it eventually owned up to and apologised for. This began with the *Daily Mirror* front-page story on 1 December 2021 that Downing Street had broken Covid lockdown rules by hosting at least two gatherings the previous Christmas. No.10 responded that “Covid rules have been followed at all times”. This claim

was repeated in parliament the next day and frequently thereafter. A week later, when asked by Catherine West MP whether another party had been held at No.10 on 13 November 2020, Johnson told MPs: “No, but I am sure that whatever happened the guidance was followed and the rules were followed at all times” (Payne, 2022, p. 31). On April 12, 2022, Johnson was one of the first of 83 government officials to be found guilty and fined for breaking Covid rules. Johnson and his campaign team tried but failed to mobilise MPs to resist calls for the House of Commons Privileges Committee to investigate him for misleading the House but on April 21, a motion was passed unanimously to refer Johnson to the Committee. On June 6, Johnson narrowly-won a vote of no confidence in which 146, or 41% of his own MPs voted against him.

Johnson’s administration came to an end when the government was found to have misled journalists when it repeatedly insisted that the PM was not aware of allegations of sexual misconduct by the deputy chief whip Chris Pincher, following an incident at a Conservative members’ club in late June. Payne was told by a senior party adviser that, “everyone in Westminster knew about Pincher . . . so Ministers saw straightaway that No.10 was lying again” (p. 161). Finally, on 5 July, Lord (Simon) McDonald, a former head of the foreign office when Johnson was foreign secretary, published a letter to the Parliamentary Standards Commissioner stating: “The original No.10 line is not true, and the modification is still not accurate. Mr Johnson was briefed in person” (McDonald, 2022). Within hours, the first of 59 resignations by ministers and other elected officials took place, many citing dishonesty on the part of the PM and his team. This made Johnson’s resignation inevitable.

Amid unprecedented official chaos and misbehaviour on such a mass scale, it is clear that Johnson’s administration was an outlier with respect to its probity. Jill Rutter, a former Treasury spokesperson and senior fellow at the think tank, the Institute for Government, argued that repeated lying to journalists and thereby the public, was a serious matter for the civil service. Initially, she claims, “No.10 allowed the press office to lie to the press” over claims of repeated lockdown partying, and the press office “went on covering up”, until the fines were issued, and the breaches were made public. On 26 May 2022 the Prime Minister’s official spokesperson Max Blain and his deputy Jamie Davies (both civil servants) apologised to Westminster journalists for repeatedly telling them that Covid regulations were not broken during events across Whitehall. Rutter insists that a taxpayer funded press office must not lie or mislead journalists, a duty enshrined in both GCS propriety guidance and the civil service code. The Head of the Civil Service Simon Case should have “made clear that the lies had besmirched the civil service’s reputation and demanded their departure” (Rutter, 2022a, b). It would be hard for any corporate communications professional to disagree yet they stayed in their posts.

The “bunker” mentality and the “permanent campaign”

As both Prime Ministers entered their later leadership months and years, rather than seeking wide-ranging advice, conducting horizon-scanning and thinking strategically, they exhibited a siege mentality. Both over-reacted to the twists and turns of media and public commentary and turned inwards, depending on a few trusted political confidants. Major faced the erosion of his majority through by-elections and defections to the opposition, but chose to quell opposition from within his own party by calling for a vote of no confidence in his own leadership in 1995. He won the support of 71% of Conservative MPs (Whiteley, 2022). Once reinstated, Major conducted an overhaul of his administration, bringing in his one-time rival, the dynamic and media-friendly Michael Heseltine, as Deputy Prime Minister and giving him responsibility for chairing the strategic communications committee (EDCP).

My analysis of the minutes of the 241 meetings of this Committee that took place during 1995 and 1996 found no discernible input from John Major (National Archives, 1995/1996). His press secretary, initially Christopher Meyer, rarely appeared, and if he did, said little, while Meyer’s successor, Jonathan Haslam, although more proactive, was a lone voice among politicians and silent civil servants. There was no perceptible communication strategy and

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virtually no professional PR input. Huge resources were devoted to the Committee: it first met fortnightly, then weekly and finally daily, with two meetings on Wednesdays. There were rarely fewer than three ministers and four senior officials present yet the Committee reported little of significance that could change the narrative. One meeting, on 11 January 1996, was attended by a staggering six ministers and 10 officials. The highlight of the day was the decision to release a statement about the stakeholder concept, “despite evidence that media interest was declining”. Drawing on his significant media capital, Heseltine took on the role of press secretary, giving interviews and calling editors to cajole them into running favourable opinion pieces. The historian Peter Hennessy reports one Cabinet Minister as saying: “ECDP is a completely absurd thing. They don’t know what’s happening when they are sitting. They sit for quite a long time. They are out of date even before they finish” (Hennessy, 2001, p. 43).

The Johnson response to the downturn in his leadership fortunes was contrasting but equally counter-productive. The lack of clarity of voice at No. 10 was complicated by the fact that in less than three years he lost three Directors of Communication, three chief press secretaries and two official press spokespeople. As it became apparent that statements from No.10 were no longer credible, he conducted two successive reorganisations: firstly, letting go of Dominic Cummings and his ally, the director of communications Lee Cain in November 2020; secondly, within months rebranding his team as the Office of the Prime Minister and appointing a minister as his third successive Chief of Staff. Johnson’s second ethics adviser, Christopher (Lord) Geidt, resigned on 15 June 22, claiming in his resignation letter that he had been “tasked to offer a view about the government’s intention to consider measures which risk a deliberate and purposeful breach of the ministerial code”. This “affront” put him in “an impossible and odious position” (Geidt, 2022).

What is more concerning in the long run is the extent of the penetration of a factional “permanent campaign” operating against the rules from within Downing Street to protect Johnson personally, especially during his final months. There were 44 SpAds employed by Boris Johnson at No.10 in July 2022 (Cabinet Office, 2022), all of whom were taxpayer funded and subject to the *Special Advisers Code* (Cabinet Office, 2016). At least five of the 24 points from the Code were challenged by behaviour observed at Johnson’s No.10. These state that SpAds should “not use official resources for party political activity”; that personal attacks have “no part to play in the job of being a special adviser”; and that briefing on “party political matters must be handled by the party machine”. Special advisers must “not take public part in political controversy” and “must observe discretion and express comment with moderation, avoiding personal attacks”.

Evidence from Payne’s 2022 interviews offers a catalogue of mismanagement and the flouting of rules among those who occupied what he refers to as “The Bunker,” the small team of close confidantes around Johnson. Official government resources, including the printer at No.10, were used for party political purposes to bolster Johnson’s position among MPs just before the vote of no confidence on 6 July (p. 134). Opponents were personally attacked in media briefings from No.10. One cabinet minister who had warned Johnson that his time was up, was then sacked and described to journalists as “a snake who is not with you on any of the big arguments” (p. 217-8). By this time, records Payne, No.10 officials were briefing against each other to the extent that Johnson himself “had almost lost confidence in . . . the press office’s ability to get a message out there” (Payne, 2022, p. 174).

As the ministerial resignations mounted, Johnson’s “bunker team” met in his Downing Street study. The team was made up of trusted ministers and SpAds and included two freelance party election strategists, Isaac Levido and Lynton Crosby (Payne, 2022, p. 203). Such procedural detail may seem trifling but under the Westminster model it is the consistent and collective respect for these boundaries that helps protect the civil service from threats to its two core doctrines: impartiality and permanence. Together with a free press and parliament, civil service Impartiality and permanence offer limits to the wide-ranging prerogatives and powers of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and can therefore be seen as

constitutional principles. If these had been operating correctly, it would not have been possible for the civil service news briefing function to be captured by the Prime Minister.

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Conclusion

It is clear from the evidence presented here that principles of effective and ethical corporate communications at No.10 were marginalised during the Major period and in disarray during the Johnson premiership. During the leadership crisis of 2022 civil servants in the No.10 press office were drawn into repeating untruths stated by their political masters and even knowingly lying, an error for which they apologised. This, and a consistent evasion of propriety rules and norms, provided a new low for government communications that the country's most senior civil servant, the Cabinet Secretary, seemed unable to prevent or punish. In contrast, Major improved the propriety mechanisms around ministers and reverted to a civil service model of government communications. However, as is consistent with the concept of the "cross-field," that turbulent interface between politics, media and the governing bureaucracy, all actors became overwhelmed by political and media pressures. Fear of the media, and the intensification of politicised communication at No.10, dominated the promotional approach taken by these very different UK governments separated by 30 years. Major and Johnson tried and failed to combat these pressures by investing in news management by political aides that was ultimately counterproductive. By the time of Johnson's final stand, the "permanent campaign" had morphed into something more dangerous: not just political spin but symbolic-policy-by-unattributable-briefing aimed largely at same-side factions.

There is evidence that the GCS is taking advantage of this new low for government communications to make interventions. Perhaps belatedly, its new Chief Executive, Simon Baugh, announced in 2022 that training in ethics will be compulsory for all government communicators (Owen, 2022). In a speech to the CIPR, Baugh stated that: "Citizens should be able to trust what they read from official government channels. They should be confident that we have made as positive a case as the facts warrant – no more and no less" (Baugh, 2021). In his three-year GCS communications strategy, Baugh notes that, "GCS members should feel confident in being able to push back if they are asked to do something in contravention of the Civil Service Code or the GCS Propriety Guidance" (GCS, 2022c, p. 19).

There is no sign in the evidence presented here that the GCS or the wider civil service objected to improper forms of public communication taking place during Johnson's premiership. If they had it is unlikely this would have made any difference. Baugh's role does not extend to the unknown number of special advisers who anonymously brief the media across government. They are answerable solely to the Prime Minister. A powerful dynamic has emerged whereby taxpayer-funded tools and resources are increasingly devoted to the ambitions of individual ruling politicians, especially the Prime Minister. A "revolving door" of recruitment drives the recycling of partisan political editors and directors of communication at No.10, intensifying the risk of collusion, corruption and tribalism.

When considering government communication, it is not sufficient to consider one particular actor or discipline, but all. The crisis in public communication goes beyond the ethical standards of any given administration, or the failure of the civil service to uphold standards, to a systemic form of dysfunction. It could be argued that a government under siege and fighting for survival, like those of Major in 1995–97, and Johnson in 2021–22, were doomed to failure and therefore had nothing to lose by challenging PR orthodoxy. This is wrong for at least three reasons: it does nothing to ameliorate the state of constant crisis at No.10; it is not consistent with best practice in PR; and it does not serve the public interest. Tam *et al.* (2022, p. 200) argue that "an effective corporation needs a formal strategic function that scans the internal and external corporate environment to identify threats/opportunities". This is surely even more the case with a complex institution like the governing bureaucracy but is unlikely to be provided by

a political clique focused on the survival of an individual Prime Minister. A recent “insider” consultation with a range of government actors conducted at the Institute for Government think tank examined how to make government communications more effective, noting “repeated examples” of communications work “that is overly driven by political priorities and ministerial demands, rather than serving the public” (Urban, 2023, p. 11). It concluded that the GCS should be smartened and strengthened centrally, should extend its remit while also reducing headcount, and focus less on the political press corps.

An accountable and ethical public communication service should uphold the public, or publics, as an “imaginary public of a democratic society,” (Pieccka, 2019, p. 238), not just as passive recipients or assets at election time. The goal of a taxpayer-funded public communications service is not to create and disseminate a self-advantaging narrative, but to work towards an ideal whereby “all citizens are equally well informed and considered when decisions are made,” whatever the political complexion or stage of the electoral cycle (Blumler and Coleman, 2015). A “top-down” approach is not sufficient, especially at a time of interactive media, where issues and problems constantly emerge and circulate, requiring both strategic planning and agility, reflexivity and active listening (Gregory, 2019; Winkler and Etter, 2018). It has been argued elsewhere that the road to public trust is through the deliberate and visible exercise of impartiality, working in partnership with political principles (Garland, 2021), not a further pivot to unaccountable and personalised forms of publicity. However, given the powerful media and political dynamic operating here, this is unlikely to be achieved unless the system itself is reviewed and reformed.

Notes

1. The term used for the UK government.
2. There were six consecutive Tory (later renamed Conservative) governments elected between 1802 and 1830 but this was before electoral reform when less than 10% of adult males had the vote. The Third Reform Act of 1884 extended the franchise to 66% of adult males.

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