The Sponsorship Scandal as Communication: The Rise of Politicized and Strategic Communications in the Federal Government

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Abstract: The Canadian “sponsorship scandal” provides an opportunity to examine how communications in the federal government has become an increasingly strategic function that has shifted from information provision to promotion, and from substance to image. This article traces how government communications became institutionalized and centralized, using the sponsorship program as an example of how strategic government communications has become embedded in government structures and practices. It finds that the sponsorship program, like other government strategic communications efforts, is a product of politicized government communications practices and activities. The article suggests that strategic communications has led public policymaking and, as demonstrated in the sponsorship program, may have additional impacts on what has been called the “democratic deficit.”

Résumé: Le scandale des commandites au Canada offre l’occasion d’examiner le rôle stratégique joué aujourd’hui par les communications du gouvernement fédéral, un rôle qui passe de plus en plus de l’information vers la promotion et du contenu vers l’image. Cet article prend appui sur l’exemple du programme des commandites afin d’examiner la manière dont la communication stratégique s’est intégrée dans les structures et les pratiques du gouvernement et décrit comment les communications gouvernementales sont devenues institutionnalisés et centralisés. L’article conclut que le programme de commandites, comme d’autres efforts de communication stratégique de la part du gouvernement, est le produit de pratiques et d’activités de communication gouvernementale qui sont politisées. Il suggère, en outre, que les communications stratégiques ont influencées la formulation de politiques publiques et qu’elles peuvent avoir un impact additionnel sur ce qui a été appelé le « déficit démocratique » dans le programme des commandites.

Keywords: Corporate communication; Democratic deficit; Government communication; Politicization; Strategic communication

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Throughout 2005, the interest of Parliament, the media, and the nation was held by the Gomery Inquiry into what became known as the “sponsorship scandal.” By May, the impact of the scandal nearly brought down the minority Liberal government on a non-confidence vote held on the budget. In November, when the first Gomery Report was released, the parliamentary opposition coalesced to force the minority Liberal government into a general election. On January 23, 2006, the election results provided evidence of how voters may have viewed the scandal when the Liberal Party lost the election.

Until the issue hit the front pages in early 2004, the federal government sponsorship program had been in operation quietly, but not altogether anonymously, since 1994. Under intensifying media coverage and in tandem with two critical reports from the Auditor General, the program slowly evolved into one of the most prominent and extensive political scandals Canada has known, on a level with the Profumo-Munsinger affair of the early 1960s and the more recent tainted-tuna scandal of the 1990s. The program’s tentacles reached as high as the Prime Minister’s Office and included the Liberal Party, two former prime ministers, ministers of the Crown, Québec advertising agencies, and Justice Gomery himself. While under investigation by the Gomery Commission, the program was the subject of an RCMP inquiry and criminal prosecutions for fraud.

Public and media focus has concentrated on the partisan political side of the scandal. This masks a more ominous dimension: the increasingly strategic role of communications in government and its negative impact on democratic citizen-government communication. The sponsorship program began as a communications activity, one of many promotional activities that developed in government throughout the 1980s and 1990s. This article returns focus to communication by examining the significance of the sponsorship program to a shift in communications activities in government. The sponsorship program is emblematic of the kind of excessive self-promotional activities that have entered into the communications operations of the federal public service. The program is part of a development in government communications that has politicized public employees and public policymaking as an extension of partisan interests—in this case, in the interest of a particular conception of national unity. Government communications has become state communications by equating its work with the perspectives of the governing political party.

Shifts in the policymaking environment, media systems and practice, and political culture have fostered the conditions under which the sponsorship program operated. These shifts emphasize and contribute to an intensification of a strategic role for government communications in structuring public understanding and approval for the government. The hyperapplication of strategic communications has shifted focus from substance to image, from information to promotion, and from policy to communications. While it is legitimate for governments to communicate with citizens and it is not unusual for them to want to persuade those citizens, the question becomes when and where to draw the line. In the case of the sponsorship program, the changing organization of communications activities
within government contributed to an erosion that fostered a more politicized and strategic use of communications that was not in the public interest and has led to a democratic deficit.

Politizing government communications

Palonen (2003) defines “politicization” as “the act of naming something as political, including the controversies surrounding the acceptance of this naming” (p. 182). Referring to Weber’s concept of politics, Palonen says politicization “searches for new power shares” (p. 184), or new ways to act politically, which demands specific effort to construct opportunities where none were previously thought to exist by opening up new dimensions and perspectives. Since the act of naming something as political is subjective, politicization is a constructed concept that reinvents what is perceived to be true or real for the purposes of influencing an issue politically (much as George W. Bush is seen to be politicizing science by playing with creationism). In recent Canadian politics, the rise of the “contract state” provided opportunities for private-sector and external partisan interests to enter more formally into the public service and public domain and to find new areas of influence and new ways to act politically.

The concern about politicization in the public service often takes the form of discourse on the roles of ministers and deputy ministers in a parliamentary democracy (Canada, 2004b). In the case of the sponsorship scandal, the issue of accountability highlights this concern about the demarcation of roles and responsibilities, but also calls into question the appropriateness of some communications activities themselves (such as sponsorships) when they are carried out by the public service. Although often mentioned in media reports and in political science literature, “politicization” as an object of scholarly inquiry has yet to fully emerge or to be linked to communications processes. Politicization is central to understanding the evolution of the sponsorship program in government, as it was designed and implemented as a political response by a national government to the believed threat of Québec separation in the wake of that province’s referendum on sovereignty in 1995. As the program grew and time passed, the program was used not only to promote national unity, but for the partisan interest of the governing Liberal Party.

Practically, it is difficult to identify what can be considered partisan political communication in government. In the case of government advertising, Rose (2000) distinguishes between political communication that solicits citizen views or will change a government’s policy position based on their views or new information, and communication that is meant solely to persuade citizens of the government’s position. If citizen dialogue or information exchange is not the intention, then government communication with citizens has the potential to be inappropriately persuasive and, a step further, potentially partisan.

In terms of demarcation of the roles and responsibilities of public employees, the stated expectation in the public-service code of ethics and values is that they must “maintain the tradition of the political neutrality of the Public Service,” “ensure the proper, effective and efficient use of public money,” and perform their
duties “so that public confidence and trust in the integrity, objectivity and impartiality of government are conserved and enhanced” (Canada, 2003e, p. 8). No such explicit and written guidelines can be found for the political arm of government vis-à-vis its relations with public employees.

Policymaking in government, as Pal (2001) has written, is taking place in turbulent times. The challenges to successful and meaningful public-policy development and implementation have perhaps never been greater than in the last 25 years. Government has been caught in important shifts: spatial, as government relocates itself outside its former parameters (Savoie, 1994), and temporal, as the so-called “fast policy” of New Right governments (Jessop, 2005), an accelerated media cycle (Strobel, 1999), and technology change the pace and focus of state governance. These shifts have had profound effects on the state-public-media relationship, both in policymaking and—although this is often forgotten—in the role that communications plays in government. Policymaking has become led by strategic communications, to the point that, in a recent issue of the public-affairs journal Policy Options, Savoie (2005) all but accused the federal government of a “policymaking deficit.”

Traditional public policymaking was steeped in the postwar politics of consensus in which, ideally but not always successfully, different parties or interests from a broad spectrum of Canadian society came together in a process that was initiated either by government or by interested organizations in order to develop policy in the public interest. Key to the formal public policymaking process was a “ménage à deux” (Savoie, 2005, p. 52) collaboration between ministers and senior bureaucrats within a distinct accountability space that was “formal and visible” (Savoie, 2003, p. 251) and a not-always-warranted faith in the ability and capacity of the public service to administer and manage the process in a disinterested and independent manner.

The policymaking process began to change in the early 1980s when Brian Mulroney became prime minister. A trademark of the Mulroney government was to bypass the public service, which the prime minister found excessively Liberal and thus presumably inept or biased, and seek advice from outside experts. Increasingly, the players at the table represented external specialized interests concentrated in roles related to political communication: political aides, consultants, pollsters, political-party donors, appointed CEOs, lawyers, lobbyists, advertising firms, think tanks, and research institutes—all together a more professionalized, partisan, and politicized group and all ready to do the job of public employees (Dobbin, 1998; Stewart, 2004). Savoie (2005) even considers the media, with their ability to obtain information, including through access to information legislation, as one of these policy actors. This helped create a new policy environment that was more porous and fragmented, as new social actors emerged with divergent interests that did not necessarily act in the accepted public interest (Cohn, 2003).

The “outing” of the public service during the Mulroney years as bloated and inefficient was a political strategy that was part of the larger ideological political project of neo-liberalism that transformed Canada’s way of organizing society and
reinvented government (Pal, 2001). In the public service, this meant downsizing staff and operations and turning functions over either to the private sector or to half-public, half-private government agencies. The specific set of policies that redesigned the public service was called New Public Management or NPM: results-based, private-sector management techniques that replaced mere administration with a service and client orientation (Savoie, 2003) and was part of reorganization through “the hegemony of the market (rather than the state) as an organizing structure and dynamic” (Havemann, 1998, p. 141). NPM practices conflated public service and private enterprise and provided the apparatus and process both inside and outside the state to enable external contracting, or “contracting out.” This shift in ideology from non-profit public service to for-profit private sector had repercussions for how the public service in Canada operated, as it moved toward a market orientation in communications policies and practices.

As subsequent governments discovered, there were risks in this leaner government-as-business environment. One risk was the loss of expertise in government to the private sector through contracting out. This was a cost-effective short-term solution to high public spending, but in the long term, it robbed the public service of the expertise and mentoring it needed for self-renewal. Another risk was the loss of clear lines of accountability that contributed to the rise of politicized public-policy decisions and financial abuse. Yet another implication was the growth and influence of the political arm of government—the Prime Minister’s Office—in an attempt to control the large bureaucracy.

An independent public service can accommodate modern publicity techniques if it has the checks and balances that the Gomery Inquiry found lacking in the sponsorship program. Health Canada, for instance, maintains a well-functioning social marketing directorate for public health promotion campaigns (see http://hc-sc.gc.ca). But extensive public-service cutbacks in the mid-1990s gave rise to “do more with less” and risk management strategies, in which authority was pushed down to the managerial level in the public service (Savoie, 2003).³

In addition, when professors Patrick Boyer and C.E.S. Franks gave testimony before the parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Accounts in 2004,⁴ they emphasized the steady erosion of public-service independence that had been occurring since the Trudeau era. Boyer said that the public service had been drawn into selling and being responsible for electoral success and that political staff were getting into the operations of government, threatening their traditional arm’s-length relationship (Canada, 2004b; Stewart, 2004). Franks cited the lack of leadership and commitment to a neutral public service, specifically by the highest levels of the Privy Council Office and deputy ministers. Pal also has noted a growing intolerance at the political level of government for dissenting news from within the public service and an erosion of the tenet of “speaking truth to power” (Stewart, 2004, p. 3). The division in Canadian politics between politicians and the public service was narrowing and blurring, and the “distinct spaces” of policy and administration, as Savoie contends, was a bargain that was breaking (2003, p. 11).
The newly rolled-back contract state was facing another significant external pressure, one that would have direct impact on how it communicated its policies and initiatives. Media systems and practice had changed radically over the period of time in which the public service and state operations had been transformed. Canada’s mass media are now among the most highly concentrated in Western industrialized nations and comprise very large media conglomerates. The media trend of convergence—the merging of technologies, corporations, and cultures for more profit and control over the full range of communications processes (Hackett, Pinet, & Ruggles, 1996)—emphasizes the privately owned, profit-oriented business nature of contemporary media structures (McChesney, 1997). The mass media thus constitute a corporate elite that provides media content as a business cost, rather than as “cultural and political expression in the public interest” (Hackett, Pinet, & Ruggles, 1996, p. 260).

An accelerated media cycle wrought by technology and the economies of scale required by media conglomerates have created an endless need for media content. Content has become more homogenized through the use of the same sources and stories that are repackaged, reused, and rendered inoffensive, generic, and depoliticized in order to attract advertisers (Hackett, Pinet, & Ruggles, 1996; Picard, 1998). The same conditions also increase the importance of and reliance on the institutional accommodation and information subsidies that governments as routinized authoritative sources provide to the media (Bennett, 1988; Gandy, 1987). On the government side, neo-liberal government downsizing means the usual ways to secure public consent, such as corporatist structures, party, and Parliament, are no longer effective, so the government needs to rely on communications and the media to structure understanding and win consent for government policies and activities (Knight, 1998). It is now a clearer, less encumbered route from government as primary source to media product.

The media, however, do not accept these publicity-seeking efforts uncritically. Indeed, their own quests for saleable media content, coupled with their role as government watchdogs for the purpose of accountability, have intensified the struggle and negotiation in the media-politics relationship for the right to define issues. As a result, it became essential for the government to have at its own disposal significant capacity to “do” communications. In effect, the government needed to look at its communications operations in a new, more strategic way in order to manage them more effectively and win the contest over meaning.

Another influence on how government relates to the media has been the shift, starting with the Mulroney government, in the kind of politics being undertaken. The brokerage politics usually practised in Canada shifted in the 1980s under governments more interested in strategic alignments than consensus (Clarke, Jenson, LeDuc, & Pammett, 1996). The ability and capacity for government to frame issues in a competitive media environment, maintain political alliances, and gain sufficient public approval became a significant, ongoing preoccupation. The traditional role of government communications as providing information to citizens, although still the focus of much government communications, shifted to man-
aging information and then to public relations. Within a more politicized, less neutral, and less accountable public service, under conditions in which government communications officers played a more direct decision-making role; this, in effect, meant marketing politics, in which “politicians’ determination to set the news agenda and to use media to inform, shape and manage public discourse about policy and politics, has become a crucial component in a modern statecraft” (Franklin, 2003, p. 45).

**Making government communications strategic**

This “politicization” of government communications was supported by another development that emerged in federal government administration that was related to public-sector cutbacks in the 1990s and the need to use scarce resources more carefully: the need to be strategic.

Communications in government has always borrowed and sometimes benefited from private-sector practices and developments, such as public relations, advertising, public opinion research, and lately sponsorships (McAllister, 1996; McNair, 2003; Rose, 2000). The supremacy of the contract state in recent years has intensified the borrowing not only of general public-relations practices, but of its strategies and tactics (Bagdikian, 2000; Davis, 2002). In the leaner state brought about by New Right politics, government has also borrowed management ideologies that make do with less in the way of resources, creating the imperative to act “strategically,” once a word unheard in government communications. Ferguson (1993) noted the introduction of a strategic activity called “public environmental analysis,” formerly used in the formation of public policy, into communications practices in the late 1980s and 1990s. Because of the reliance on media coverage in such analysis and the new importance of strategic communications planning borrowed from the private sector, this analysis was now thought of as a strategic communications function. “Strategic planning is the buzzword of the 1990s” (p. 1), Ferguson noted, although in the federal government it was a job function at the management and advisory levels only. Still, 73% of government communicators agreed that environmental-issues monitoring fed into a formal strategic planning framework. In government, strategic plans for policy initiatives and memoranda to cabinet now required strategic communications plans, strengthening the role of communications as an important contributor to policymaking and policy success. This new direction took place concurrent with a new external gaze by government and the influx of private-sector and partisan influences. Strategic communications was a private-sector activity offered by public-relations consultancy firms to their public-sector clients. It used “corporate or institutional communications to create, strengthen or preserve, among key audiences, opinion favourable to the attainment of institutional/corporate gain” (O’Malley Communications, 2005, p. 1). The goal of corporate strategic communications—“bottom line’ favourable public policy outcome” (p. 1) by manipulation of audience or public opinion—is incompatible with the ideal of an ethical public service providing neutral information to citizens.
The relatively short history of strategic communications in government relies on two interlocking sets of practices centred on its institutionalization and its centralization. It was only a short time ago that communications was an afterthought of public-policy implementation. Despite wartime propaganda efforts, which established the rudiments of a communications infrastructure within government (Rose, 2000), communications branches in government were small, compared with policy groups. A first signal of the growing strategic importance of communications was its quick institutional growth. The communications community in government increased by 30% between 1987 and 1999 and by 7% between 1991 and 1999; either way of calculating demonstrates a significant increase, given that 1996 was the height of public-service cutbacks and most other government occupational groups declined in size (Public Service Commission of Canada, 2000).

In another institutional development, the government created the internal infrastructure to support ongoing national surveys. It had dabbled in polling for years, especially in the Trudeau and Mulroney governments, and was spending $4 million per year by the beginning of the 1990s. By 2004, the budget was $25.4 million (McGregor, 2005). In a further development, beginning in 1998, the government initiated its own national survey, administered on contract by private-sector public-opinion research companies. Called “Listening to Canadians,” the quarterly surveys focused narrowly on two important areas: what Canadians thought the priorities for government should be from a list of given issues and what they thought of the government’s performance on those issues. The resulting grid from cross-matching these results was the centrepiece of the government’s public-opinion research. Health issues, for instance, were targeted for action after they tested high on priorities, but low on performance; on the other side of the grid, immigration issues saw little action, since they consistently tested low in priority and low on performance (Canada, 2002b).

Government advertising and promotion were also on a sharp upward curve, with $111 million spent annually on advertising campaigns by 2003 (Canada, 2003b). The government also expanded its promotional activities into a fairs and exhibits program, which promoted federal-government services at public events across the country. It was an open exercise in “branding” Canada through the flag logo and “Canada” wordmark. The government also began to distribute a series of booklets, called “householders,” to as many as 12 million Canadians at a time, with costs as high as $1 million per issue. Traditionally, householders were informational updates that federal MPs and provincial MLAs sent by bulk mail to their own constituents. First taken up in Ontario and then by the federal government, the new breed of householders was sent to all citizens. The government called them “service guides,” but the intent, like that of the fairs and exhibits program, was to promote the federal government while providing the barest of service information to assuage critics. In this way, the government’s informational activities leaked uncomfortably into promotion. After the sponsorship program came under scrutiny, federal-government householders underwent a transformation from thicker, full-colour booklets to single-sheet, black-and-white folded pamphlets.
One such householder, “Harper turning back progress,” criticized the position of the Conservatives on the Gomery Inquiry and concluded that “Stephen Harper should quit playing partisan politics with the best interests of Canadians.” The householder was captioned “A Message from Prime Minister Paul Martin” and was marked with the official website address of the Office of the Prime Minister (Office of the Prime Minister, 2005). Even though the format had changed, it was clearly still a political and promotional Liberal Party message to the public.

A product might legitimately be informational, like the content of the service guides, but presentation, timing, and frequency can blur the difference between information that promotes substance and communication that promotes image. A recent example is the previous Ontario government’s householder program, the frequency of which in spring 2003 took on the aura of pre-election advertising even though householder content was strictly informational. Three householders, two health- and one budget-related, were distributed across Ontario in a one-month period leading up to what was expected to be a spring election call in April of that year. Several other householders, all of which would have arrived in households during a pre-election period if the government had gone ahead with the expected election, followed them. Clearly, householders were used politically as part of partisan pre-election campaigning. In addition to mere visibility, householders have an added feature as a communications tool that is attractive to governments: they bypass the media and deliver unmediated messages directly to targeted groups of citizens.

These new promotional activities required an institutional infrastructure, but they also relied on increasing levels of private-sector public-relations expertise to provide the design and content of the products and to analyze the results. Increasing numbers of government communications officers found themselves working in “strategic communications” or, more commonly, “corporate communications” units, which served the communications needs of the department itself. By 2003, there were 2,102 employees in government communications branches, an increase of 28% from two years earlier (Canada, 2001; Canada, 2003a). Up to 427 (24.8%) of all officers were engaged in corporate communications or marketing activities in 2001. This number includes marketing, corporate communications, outreach functions, and internal communications, which makes it difficult to assess the continued strength of the marketing and corporate functions (Canada, 2001). By 2003, 202 of the 427 had been “repatriated” back into general communications operations (Canada, 2003a). These officers focused less on supplying information to media and the public than on managing issues or damage control on sensitive issues for their department, minister, or central agencies. If the Auditor General released a critical report, for example, communications officers in these areas would handle responses. They would, however, make use of private consultants who provided the actual expertise—what government contracting services calls “strategic advice.” In the department with which I am most familiar, Indian and Northern Affairs, strategic communications was taken seriously once it was determined that Aboriginal issues were to be a government
priority. The departmental communications budget rose from $4 to $12 million in 2000 and to $16 million by 2003 (Canada, 2003a), a Strategic Communications Directorate—responsible for strategic planning, public-opinion research, and outreach—was added, and a Ministerial Services Unit (MSU) was formed. The latter was composed of public employees and focused entirely on the communications needs of the minister. Advice and analysis on vision, direction, and specific issues in these areas were contracted out to consultants. The directorate and the MSU were disbanded in 2005.

By 2001, the government signalled the need for more strategic thinkers in managing government communications in its first benchmarking survey of the communication function (Canada, 2001). One of the reasons given for this was the increase in resources dedicated to strategic communications practices: public environmental analysis, marketing and public-opinion research, and issue identification and tracking. Looking ahead to foster a “model communication function” overall, the report charged the communications management team with the demand that they “manage the function strategically” (p. 36).

Another manifestation of the rising importance of strategic communications was the government revision of its internal policy on communications, which had been in use since 1988. Whereas the 1988 policy had identified four major communications functions (Ferguson, 1993), the 2002 policy spoke to the much-expanded role for communications officers. Many new functions were characterized not only by a response to technological growth, but by a different way of conceptualizing the work of government. The policy took a business orientation and spoke of modern management functions beyond those related to the traditional role of informing and exchanging information with Canadians (Canada, 1988). Some of these new functions to be handled by communications officers had not even been on the radar in 1988. They included citizen engagement, risk communications, crisis communications, regional operations, internal communications, fairs and exhibits, advertising, partnering, marketing—and sponsorships (Canada, 2002a).

A key but separate component of institutionalizing strategic communications was its centralization. Here it is important to understand that changing the role of government has not limited and may even have increased state power by centralizing information and decision-making into what Golding has called the “centripetal state” (1992, p. 513). This allowed the co-existence of both a free economy and a strong state, as Gamble (1994) has put it. In Canada, Savoie (1999) has argued that in response to increasing centralization of power and opposition, media and interest groups have placed the government in perpetual crisis management (acknowledged as a new feature of communications work in the 2002 government policy). Communications operations in government have echoed this overall pattern, centralizing and strengthening communications while relying on private-sector public-relations and other consultants to provide expertise in marketing government policies. Centralization was also a reaction to the more con-
tested public-policy environment and was part of the attempt to regain control of the public service by making more strategic use of communications.

Together, institutionalizing and centralizing communications deepened and embedded communications processes into government. At the highest level of government, the Privy Council Office (PCO) manages and administers the public service, provides non-partisan advice, and liaises with the Prime Minister’s Office to ensure the government’s policy agenda is implemented (Canada, 2004a). The PCO created a position called “Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet, Communications and Consultations” to oversee all communications in government. Traditionally, this embedded position is held by a senior public employee, but now has overtly political overtones. The last public employee in that position crossed over to political staff, becoming Prime Minister Martin’s Director of Communications, and later became Canada’s ambassador to Costa Rica, a political appointment. For the first time, the current holder of the position comes from outside the public service. A former journalist, his expertise is in a sphere that is crucial to the success of modern statecraft.

A further centralization of communications took place at the cabinet committee level. In 1998, a Committee of Cabinet on Communications was formed. It oversaw and co-ordinated all government communications, from advertising campaigns to speeches, announcements, and public-opinion research (Winsor, 1998). If the parallel lines of accountability and centralization of communications had been working as one might expect, this body should have approved activities under the sponsorship program. Even if the sponsorship program acted separately from it, the cabinet minister who headed the committee was Alfonso Gagliano, who was also responsible for the sponsorship program and has been implicated in that program’s accountability problems (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2005b).

Perhaps the most significant development in the embedding of centralized strategic communications can be found in the forging of an entire federal government department called Communication Canada (CC) in 2001. The new department had a dubious history, one that is important to the institutional beginnings of the sponsorship program. It started as the Canada Unity Information Office, formed after the separatist Parti Québécois first came to power in 1976. At the time of the second Québec referendum, a group of public employees working out of the PCO on the federal strategy on the referendum continued its unity activities at a renamed Canada Information Office (CIO), under the auspices of the Department of Canadian Heritage (Curry, 2001). CIO was known as a “propaganda machine” (p. 1) due to its widespread use of the Canada logo and the flag giveaway when Sheila Copps was heritage minister. Finally, in 2001, CIO became Communication Canada, taking on most Public Works and Government Services Canada communications functions. In its own promotional material, CC described itself as the “primary planning, production and delivery agent for the Government of Canada’s corporate communications activities” (Canada, 2003c, p.3). In fact, CC indicated in its 2002-03 report to parliament that it “ha[d] one
business line—Corporate Communications” (Canada, 2003d, p.1). The new department was a centralized vehicle for government promotion, the central point of strategic promotional activity for all government communications, from public-opinion research to advertising, marketing, and exhibits, with the selection of outside businesses for the various product contracts also being handled centrally within that department. Communication Canada shared a minister with Public Works Canada, who, until he became ambassador to Denmark, was Alfonso Gagliano. As the sponsorship scandal developed, Prime Minister Martin re-called Alfonso Gagliano from Denmark. Gagliano subsequently testified before the Gomery Inquiry and was implicated in the first of its two final reports for being “directly involved in decisions to provide funding to events and projects for partisan purposes, having little to do with considerations of national unity” (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2005b, p. 2).

It needs to be said that this institutionalizing of communications was not new to government. There has been a secretariat providing guidance and direction on communications at the PCO since the early 1970s and there have been cabinet committees with communications responsibilities off and on since the mid-1970s (Public Policy Forum & D’Ombrain Inc., 2000). Rose (2000) has also written about wartime bureaus of information that could be said to be antecedents of later promotion and persuasion efforts in government. It also needs to be emphasized that it is legitimate for a government to inform citizens about the programs and services that it undertakes on their behalf. The experience of the United Kingdom, however, offers its own warning on creeping politicization and strategic communications in public service. Its Select Committee on Public Accounts, struck to investigate politicization of government communications and information operations, noted that “there is a very fine line between the promotion and defence of government policy and the promotion and defence of the ruling party’s policies”—a line that many believe is too frequently crossed (Franklin, 2003, p. 52).

This short overview of communications in government demonstrates how communications has become embedded in the structure of government; that the communications work environment has become more politicized by centralized operations and direction; and that government communications has become professionalized through a business orientation and the use of outside private-sector public-relations expertise. Under conditions in which the roles of a neutral public service and the partisan political arm of government are blurred and media are the main conduits of communication with citizens, these trends contribute to the intensification of a strategic role for government communications in structuring public understanding and approval for the government. The hyperapplication of politicized strategic communications has shifted focus from substance to image, from information to promotion, and from policy to communications. In so doing, communications strategies involving the sponsorship program and other publicity-seeking activities of government have the potential to hinder or replace democratic political communication.
The considerable public and media attention on revelations of corruption under the sponsorship program has not focused, however, on the complicated set of factors that contributed to the growth of these “problematic kinds of programs,” as Pal has called them (Stewart, 2004, p. 4). He sees them as the result of a lack of expenditure controls in government in the wake of New Public Management. Such programs lead to troubling questions about the point at which they surpass legitimate and innocuous information-sharing and instead become politicized as a component of partisan political campaigns.

McAllister (1996) describes sponsorship as an activity that lies on a continuum between anonymous charitable acts undertaken for the public good and advertising that is clearly intended for promotion in a buyer-seller relationship. Sponsorship is a corporate activity that stresses both giving and promotion, so sponsorships are acts that also bring a return on investment. The charitable funder—in this case, the government—gets to influence the public agenda with public money by selecting some events to sponsor over others that may have less positive spin-off or symbolic profit.

In the government’s sponsorship program, the stated investment or spin-off was in national unity. The goal of the program explicitly stated this: “The Sponsorship Program is part of the Government of Canada’s communications strategy to better inform Canadians about programs and services, heighten federal awareness and build a strong and united Canada” (Canada, n.d.; emphasis added). Other than that, the program’s objectives were unclear, as the first Gomery Report found (Canada, 2005f). Many strategic-communications tactics and tools were used in the program to achieve these goals, but the favoured one was improving the government’s brand recognition, another concept inherited from public relations. Branding Canada primarily involved paying event organizers to display the flag logo and Canada wordmark at sporting, cultural, and community events.

Although sponsorship grants had been given out for years, the first grants under the official sponsorship program were awarded in 1997. The $17 million in seed money for the program came from the $50-million national unity reserve fund set up after the federal near-loss in the 1995 referendum (May, 2004). From that point on, the program spent $332 million in agency commissions and sponsorships for more than 2,000 events across Canada, but almost half of those funds went toward promoting Canada within Québec (Canada, 2005b).

The first media stories on contracting related to the program began in 2000, but it was not until 2002, after Auditor General Sheila Fraser released her first critical report on it, that media scrutiny became intense. In 2004, in her second critical report, Fraser said “rules were broken or ignored at every stage of the process for more than four years” (Office of the Auditor General, 2004, p.1). Calling it “scandalous,” she said the government had not only spent but also mismanaged hundreds of millions of dollars (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2005a, p. 6).

Former Prime Minister Chrétien defended the program, saying it was a “resounding success because it has reduced support for sovereignty in Quebec.” It
was “extremely good for Canada,” he said. “Look at the result today which shows that the government acted properly and now the danger of separation is much less than it was in 1996” (Thompson, 2002, p. A1). It was also extremely good for the Liberal Party, according to media reports, the Gomery Inquiry, and the first Gomery Report. More than $145 million was paid to Liberal-friendly advertising and communications firms in “inflated” commissions and for production costs (Canada, 2005f, p. 6). Many of the companies that received sponsorship contracts also made donations to the Liberal Party; the Gomery Report found that “kickbacks and illegal contributions” (p. 6) had also been made in return for sponsorship contracts, which put more than $100 million of public money into the Liberal Party. The report also found the sponsorship program was run out of then–Prime Minister Jean Chrétien’s office “under the direct supervision” of his chief of staff (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2005a, p. 1). In essence, the program went beyond legitimate federal visibility promotion and was used “for purposes other than national unity” (p. 6). The lack of accountability within the public service came under criticism as well, characterized in the report as “insufficient oversight,” “a veil of secrecy,” “an absence of transparency,” and “deliberate actions to avoid compliance with federal legislation and policies” (Canada, 2005f, pp. 5-6).

Fallout from the sponsorship scandal has delegitimated some of the more visible strategic-communications activities in government. The program itself was terminated, as was the government-run survey “Listening to Canadians.” Communication Canada, the self-standing department for strategic communications, was dismantled. The Committee of Cabinet on Communications is gone. Across government, strategic-communications operations such as corporate communications are retrenching and being re-examined.

The scandal had policy implications as well, with the government implementing a limited audit on some of the identified contracts, formulating a code of conduct for members of Parliament, requiring disclosure for lobbyists, and ordering an annual report on all advertising activity. All of this took place only after two Auditor General reports and sustained media scrutiny over several years forced the government to take action. In other words, strategic and corporate communications mandated centrally at a high level created the sponsorship program originally and, when the government was forced to account for the program, it turned to ad hoc policy led by the damage control of corporate, strategic communications to contain it.

**Politici zed strategic communications with citizens**

The federal government has spent a lot of time and money enhancing its communications with Canadians since the 1995 Québec referendum. The chosen strategic-communications strategy facilitated the politicization of the public service, eroding its independence and contributing to a policy environment in which policymaking was secondary to the ability and capacity to sell the policy to Canadians. This market orientation in government also contributed to Canadians’ loss of trust toward their government and the diminution of what Blumler (1990a) would call “communication for citizenship.”
Over the same period of time as the politicizing of the public service and government communications, Canadians have expressed less and less confidence and trust in politicians. Like citizens of other industrialized countries, they are less likely to vote in elections, less likely to be aligned with one political party, and less likely to be members of voluntary organizations (Edgell & Duke, 1991; Mishler & Clarke, 1995; Norris, 2002; Semetko, Blumler, Gurevitch, & Weaver, et al., 1991). The erosion of public trust in politics and politicians, already on a downward slide, has been exacerbated by the sponsorship scandal and has led to concerns about what has come to be known—with little explanation of what it actually means—as the “democratic deficit.” Aucoin & Turnbull (2003) have defined the democratic deficit as “the gap between what Canadians expect of their political institutions in terms of democratic governance and what they perceive as reality” (p. 436)—in short, the expectation-perception gap. Although they offer some reasons for the democratic deficit (power centrally concentrated in government; the power of special interest groups; and the Canadian “first past the post” electoral system), they point out that there is limited knowledge about its causes and thus little clear direction for politicians and social-policy analysts on how to resolve it. Putnam (2000) and Norris (2002) have led examinations of “social capital,” the “connections among individuals . . . the social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam, 2000, p. 19), as the ground on which democratic deficits shrivel or thrive. Central to strong social capital for both Putnam and Norris is trust in politicians and political processes. The importance of a better understanding of this deficit in the democratic relationship between citizens and government thus becomes significant to any analysis of the sponsorship scandal.

Implications of the sponsorship scandal for this emerging concept of a democratic deficit are not easy to decode and will not be for some time. It has taken a generation for Canadians and citizens in other, older democracies to move away from the voting and participatory behaviours that are believed to be critical to democratic political culture. The relationship of ordinary citizens to their meaningful participation in public policymaking may be an important factor in that mix. Certainly, longitudinal studies show that trust in politicians contributes to social capital, while membership and participation in organized groups, taken together with other socioeconomic indicators, also contribute (Norris, 2002; Putnam, 2000).

Public-opinion research reveals regularly that the public increasingly does not believe that it can make a difference in the political process and tells us that the sponsorship scandal has contributed to lack of public trust in politics (Ottawa Citizen, 2004). In early 2006, an annual Léger poll showed politicians continue to sit at the bottom (at 14%) of a list of most-respected professionals (Léger Marketing, 2006). Although their consistent place at the bottom of the list over several years is noteworthy, a far more interesting finding was from Léger’s 2005 survey, which showed that respect for senior public employees declined by 4% to 45%, the largest drop recorded in that year’s survey (Léger Marketing, 2005). This was an
indication that Canadians placed the initial blame for the sponsorship scandal on the public service, not politicians. The 2006 survey, however, conducted after later and more dramatic testimony at the Gomery Inquiry implicated Liberal political staff and politicians, showed a rebound (+5%) in this ranking (Léger Marketing, 2006).

In February 2005, an Ipsos-Reid survey showed 76% of those surveyed did not believe former Prime Minister Chrétien’s testimony before the Gomery Inquiry that he “had no knowledge of the day-to-day decisions related to the program” (Curry, 2005, p. A1). Sixty-eight percent did not believe Paul Martin. Throughout 2004 and 2005, public recall of the sponsorship issue consistently sat at 78% (EKOS, 2005). As long as there are formal opportunities such as hearings or legal proceedings for the media to report on, coverage will remain high. Inevitably, interest will wane eventually, but the longer-term impact of the scandal on the democratic deficit is yet to be determined. In the meantime, in a national survey conducted as media coverage of the scandal gathered steam, only 23% of those surveyed said that politicians exhibit honesty and ethics (Centre for Research and Information on Canada, 2004; Curry, 2004). A global longitudinal study found that public trust in national governments and other institutions declined significantly between January 2004 and August 2005. The decline in trust in Canada was one of the largest drops recorded, from +28 points to –17 points (World Economic Forum, 2005). Commenting on the impact in Québec of the sponsorship scandal, Laval professor Florian Sauvageau said in a media report on the sponsorship scandal that the low level of québecois confidence in federal and provincial political leaders has serious implications for democracy (Cobb, 2005).

Government responses to the democratic deficit were not encouraging.

Although Canadians have more information from government than ever before, only part of it takes the form of two-way consultation or collaboration that enhances their role as citizens. The federal government, however, perceives their overall role in the public policymaking process and their need to be listened to differently since the retrenchment of the 1990s. The government’s 1992 Consultation Guidelines for Managers in the Federal Public Service emphasized “creating a climate” and “promoting a more favourable environment” in order to broaden the decision-making sphere so that “government and citizens can exchange views, ideas and information” (Canada, 1992, p. 1). Currently, the new government website on consulting with Canadians, which has the potential to reach far more ordinary citizens than the old form of consultations ever did, emphasizes only that it “enhance[s] public awareness” of consultations and “provides opportunities for Canadians to participate” (Canada, 2005e, p. 1). Yet access of Canadians to the Internet needed for such communication, although rising, continues to exclude large portions of the population (Middleton & Sorensen, 2006), which limits the possibilities for awareness and participation. In addition, this specific website provides only lists of upcoming consultations and contact numbers for them. The onus here clearly is on citizens to take the initiative to consult, rather than on the
government to use its authority to ensure the existence of the right climate and actively pursue consultations with its citizens. This speaks to what GlobeSpan, a company that has conducted international public-opinion research on trust in government, called a lack of moral authority that can be resolved by good leadership (Butler, 2005). On another new government website—http://democratic reform.gc.ca—the government makes assumptions about the factors that influence the democratic deficit and points out it has made changes to some parliamentary and electoral rules. Users are invited to “Have Your Say” and fill out an electronic reply card to “share your thoughts on democratic reform” (Canada, 2005c).

As of 2005, many of the government’s consultations and communications with ordinary citizens were managed through strategic-communications vehicles such as the new raft of websites, service-guide householders, feedback devices such as reply cards (which have become ubiquitous), and public-opinion research. Service guides and feedback devices are directed to citizens in their roles as clients and consumers of government goods and services, while public-opinion research is a highly managed, narrowly defined, and passive form of communication in which quantification replaces consultation with the public itself (Herbst, 1993). None of these addresses the need for democratic communication between citizens and their government. Instead of a concerted effort to create a climate for legitimate and inclusive public input into public policymaking in the public interest, actions such as setting up new websites that are empty of content and introducing electronic reply cards appear as just more promotional tactics. These are not policy responses to issues, but strategic-communications responses.  

The more visible aspects of strategic communications in government have been dismantled, but much of the apparatus still remains. Communication Canada as a department is no more, but in actuality, strategic public-opinion research advisors were relocated to the PCO, closer to the possibility of influence by the Prime Minister’s Office. In 2005, media reports revealed a development of interest regarding strategic communications. Even while the scandal was still unfolding, Scott Brison, public works minister in the last government, and several Liberal members of Parliament said there was a need for a sponsorship program and that the government should revive it (Beauchesne, 2005; Dawson, 2005). In fact, Brison referred to the government’s use of the sponsorship programs as “Canada’s war effort,” (p. A1) linking sponsorship efforts to the necessities of propaganda in times of war. Those who may have used the program for personal or financial gain, Brison said, were “war profiteers,” but “that doesn’t mean the war effort of Canadians was bad” (Beauchesne, 2005, A1). In addition, the PCO set up a “rapid-response war room” (p. A1) to monitor the Gomery Inquiry, prepare answers for question period, and keep the Prime Minister’s Office informed. This exercise in “spin” layered on “spin” cost almost $1.1 million between 2002 and 2004 (Aubry, 2005).

Given the reality of the pervasiveness of promotional activities throughout capitalist society, state-market permeation, the political need for governments to
control communications in a competitive media environment, and the response of the former government to the sponsorship scandal, it is difficult to imagine a re-direction that would fully remove government dependence on strategic communications and its attendant politicization. It is far more likely that strategic communications and even the sponsorship program itself will continue to exist in mutated forms.

Still, possibilities exist for more democratic communications operations in government that would reclaim a meaningful citizenship role for Canadians and eventually challenge the prevailing paradigm. Even in the United Kingdom, where direction for government communications is centralized within the Prime Minister’s Office, the government has undertaken an oxymoronic “local e-democracy national project” that seeks to re-establish a “citizen voice” in addition to its client focus (United Kingdom, 2005, p. 1). Its centralized government communications operations have come under considerable criticism for their relentless “on message” spin and “packaging” of politics (Franklin, 2003; McNair, 2003). In the U.K. system, the prime minister’s press secretary also leads the government’s press officer corps, furthering the potential for politicized and partisan communications within government. Australia, on the other hand, has resisted the move to centralized government communications (Public Policy Forum & D’Ombrain Inc., 2000), which serves to emphasize that governments can make conscious political choices in how they structure their communications efforts. In 2003, the Canadian federal government’s Policy Research Institute, a group that reports to the PCO, began an interdisciplinary project that includes exploring new approaches to social policy that enhance social capital (Policy Research Institute, 2004). As one of its first research reports indicated, however, the PRI initiative is focused on the networking aspect of social capital, rather than trust in politicians and political processes (an area existing research suggests is important), and on finding the tools to measure social capital (Policy Research Institute, 2004). A different direction would be to look to development-studies literature on the efforts of newer democracies to give voice to citizens as part of the fostering of trust and participation that lead to social capital.

Conclusion

In Canada, if we examine government communications at all, there is a tendency to regard it as benign, unless a specific activity or event draws our attention. In sharp contrast, British communications scholars (Cottle, 2003; Davis, 2002; Franklin, 2004; McNair, 2003) increasingly have placed under scrutiny the takeover of government communications operations by the political arm of government and the reliance of the Tony Blair government on promotional activities and image politics within what has been called a “modern publicity state” (Blumler, 1990b, p. 1).

In the Canadian context the sponsorship scandal demonstrates how strategic communications operates and becomes politicized within government communication5. Strategic communications relies on embedding communications activities into the structures of the public service, thus institutionalizing it, and then consolidating it within centralized functions. This dual process is helped by
shifts in the policymaking environment, media systems and practice, and political culture that fostered the conditions under which the sponsorship program operated. These shifts included loss of expertise, neutrality, and accountability within the public service; the growing power of media organizations nonetheless dependent on government for media content; the growth of the political arm of government; the erosion of independence of the public service; and the lack of separation between political and public roles. I have already noted Boyer’s comments on the crossover that is taking place between political staff and public employees at every level, at the expense of their traditional arm’s-length relationship (Stewart, 2004). The testimony in the Gomery Inquiry, picked up on by the media, attests to the intertwined and politicized relationships among members of the former prime minister’s staff, a minister of the crown, and senior members of the public service administering the sponsorship program. The existence of a whole apparatus to support strategic communications that has been structured into the flow charts of the public service received little public or media attention until the sponsorship scandal. As the sponsorship program, its administrators, and its location reveal, strategic communications is, in fact, politicized communications.

Once the public service was delegitimated by New Right politicians and was opened up to include both partisan and private-sector actors, their interests became structured into government activity. By operating outside the accountability framework of government, the sponsorship program made it easier to allow partisan interests to enter into the decision-making process and for the program to move beyond its original—and to many, justifiable—efforts to foster national unity and instead to bolster the fortunes of the Liberal Party. The perceived public interest of national unity, of keeping Québec in Canada, elided into a partisan interest in keeping Québec Liberal. In other words, it was intended that the profit gained from the sponsorship program be found in the voting booth. Instead, the program that was intended to ensure national unity now may spark a renewed separatism (Cobb, 2005), and may have a detrimental long-term impact on the state’s communication with its citizens.9

The sponsorship scandal was and continues to be a political scandal, but it is also a communications one. The government itself tacitly acknowledged this by symbolically dismantling much of its centralized and institutionalized strategic-communications apparatus after the scandal erupted. Although the demands of a public-relations state ensure the continued existence of state-citizen communications, even the legitimate democratic efforts of government to communicate with its citizens will now be imbued with suspicion and mistrust. The political and ideological challenge for the Canadian state, as for many other industrialized nations, is to peel back the layers of politicization that mark strategic-communications activities in government such as the sponsorship program or concede further ground to them.

Notes
1. The author wishes to express her gratitude to the editor of the CJC and the reviewers for their advice and comments.
2. In this paper, “government” refers to the public service or bureaucracy, and “state” or “the government” refers to the larger apparatus, including the political arm, of government. Government communications is undertaken by members of the public service employed in communications positions across government who report to their departmental managers, who themselves take direction and advice from the Privy Council Office. This paper argues that the distinction between government operations (“neutral” communications) and state operations (politicized communications), both undertaken by government communications employees, has become blurred.

3. Risk management formally became one of the new functions of government communications in 2002 (Canada, 2002a).

4. The House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts conducted its own examination of the sponsorship program prior to the striking of the Gomery Inquiry.

5. The wordmark consists of the word “Canada” in black ink in a traditional serif font with a small red and white Canadian flag over the last “a.”

6. For instance, of about 70 communications employees at the Treasury Board (Canada, 2003a), the central agency that is responsible for oversight of financial management across government, 34 work in corporate communications and a further 18 are in strategic communications. Ten of these communications employees are called “strategists,” not including their director, chief, and senior director of “strategic communications.” These numbers remained stable throughout 2004 and 2005 (Requests A 2005-00093 and 00094 made under the Access to Information and Privacy Act).

7. On the political side, the prime minister has had a press secretary since John Diefenbaker in 1957. The opposition leader (Lester Pearson) soon followed, hiring his own press secretary from an advertising company (Taras, 1988).

8. Prior to the 2004 general election, the government created a ministerial responsibility for democratic renewal, and after the election, an all-party committee was developing options for electoral reform, but this died when another election was called in November 2005.

9. This scrutiny of the “modern publicity state” is relatively new territory in the Canadian context, and its analysis demands new ways of imagining government communications that call on multiple disciplines, from communications to political science to sociology.

References


Centre for Research and Information on Canada (CRIC). (2004, November 4). Canadians more confident in political leaders; still insist campaign promises must be kept [Press release].


