It seems to be increasingly fashionable to complain about the governing party’s use of state communications resources for what appears to be its own political gain. That governments do this is a longstanding problem. In recent years in Canada, the criminal acts perpetrated during the Liberal sponsorship scandal drew attention to the seriousness of the matter, while the legal but nevertheless questionable practice of communications cohesion by the ensuing Conservative government has triggered further concern. Canada operates one of the most vibrant democratic systems of government in the world, and yet time and time again we are told that the intersection between political communication and the Canadian state is nothing to be proud of.

Given her scholarship in this area, Kirsten Kozolanka (Carleton University) is a good choice of editor for a new book about government communications in Canada. In *Publicity and the Canadian State: Critical Communications Perspectives*, Kozolanka assembles an interdisciplinary group of established and emerging scholars whose interests converge on the study of communication. Some of the contributions offer fresh perspectives about well covered ground such as journalism, corporatism, public accountability, public opinion, political fundraising, and social movements. Some of the many welcome additions to emerging subfields include political branding, online permanent campaigning, public disclosure issues, alternative media, and the regulation of government advertising. Generally speaking, the book is a descriptive account of what is happening, which is in turn subjected to a critical lens of what ought to be happening. In this way, *Publicity and the Canadian State* complements *How Canadians Communicate, IV: Media and Politics* (Taras & Waddell, 2012) since both document current events in Canadian political communication and convey a general state of alarm.

Let us be clear: anxiety is part and parcel of the study of government publicity. Studying public sector communications will frustrate anyone who holds dear the fallacy of democracy as utopia. This is because publicity encompasses overt and hidden methods of media management that are designed to influence public opinion. In this context, the concept of publicity crosses into the questionable practices of political marketing and propaganda, though the potential for marketing to produce good government is not well understood, whereas propaganda is devious. Criticism of government publicity is inevitable. After all, its effectiveness is dependent on strategies and practices that contravene idealists’ views of democratic government as being transparent and accountable. So it is important that academics weigh in to express what they see as unacceptable behaviour by political elites and public relations personnel. On that basis alone, *Publicity and the Canadian State* is worth its salt.

A formidable challenge of any edited collection is to bring independent contributions together under the rubric of central questions. Chapters in *Publicity and the Canadian State* are largely standalone submissions, meaning that each offers useful in-
sights. Collectively, it can be difficult to locate what binds them together, other than a
common objective of demystification and criticism. Somewhat unusual for an edited
collection, few questions are raised in the introductory chapter, and the final chapter
depresents us of what Kozolanka feels can be learned from the corpus. Instead, readers
are offered short preface summaries to each of the book’s three sections. This might
reflect an editorial decision to make the book more amenable as a course text and/or
appealing to a non-academic audience. If so, the absence of an index is noticeable, and
a glossary of terms would have been appropriate.

Many studies of political communication are limited by the challenge of obtaining
and reporting empirical data. This need not be a critical flaw: good theory often flows
from case studies. Some chapters in this book, particularly, but not exclusively found
in section two, stand out as offering a contribution to knowledge. But positivists who
value primary data will have cause to question a work that at times draws heavily on
secondary sources, including sensationalist news media reports and punditry, in the
place of primary data. They will also observe that some contributions delve into bul-
leted lists of snippets of information and self-references, and a general paucity of new
data in tables and figures. Where critical communications discourse becomes troubling
is in its potential for the subjective selection of information to collectively support a
normative argument, leading to a slanted research outcome that is presented as truth.
One minor illustration of this is the common technique of pointing to the increasing
number of staff in the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) and Privy Council Office (PCO)
as evidence of more centralized power and partisan manipulation, as happens on page 55.
Such figures are thought provoking, but it is incumbent upon academics to explore
the variety of possible explanations and to rise above the trappings of deductive rea-
soning. Positivists will need reminding that the value of philosophical discourse is not
in its ability to establish facts and truths so much as in its ability to encourage new
perspectives and to incite empirical testing.

Judging from the initial buzz in the Canadian communications studies commu-
nity, Publicity and the Canadian State has been well received and will benefit from the
positive word of mouth that is so important to good publicity. Scholars and students
interested in the study of public sector communications in Canada should find it to
be a useful resource.

Reference
Edmonton, AB: Athabasca University Press.

Alex Marland, Memorial University of Newfoundland