

TOWARDS A STAKEHOLDER MODEL OF GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION: A CASE STUDY OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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ABSTRACT:

The study focuses on organisation and perception of government communication by government agents and stakeholder representatives in the Czech Republic. At the same time, it presents an original methodological approach to researching government communication. The research evidence suggests that government communication process in the Czech Republic conceals tensions on internal, interdepartmental and external levels of governance. Performing in-depth semi-structured interviews with former Czech government officials and top executives from the corporate and non-commercial sector, it was observed that phenomena such as democratic disenchantment and low confidence in executive bodies can be associated with the state-of-things and modus operandi of the government communication process. Finally, the aim of the study is to encourage government communication research in emerging or recently institutionalised democracies including post-communist countries in the region of Central and Eastern Europe, since it is necessary to understand the complexity of political and communication systems long associated with asymmetric power relations and democratic deficit.

KEY WORDS:

Central and Eastern Europe, the Czech Republic, governance, government communication, stakeholder analysis, stakeholder model, strategic communication

Introduction and Rationale

This study presents the findings of an exploratory research on government communication in the Czech Republic.¹ The primary intention of the text is to provide the academic community interested in media and communication studies with the results of in-depth, critically selected interviews conducted in 2014.² These interviews consisted of former C-level government representatives and former or then present third-



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¹ The most important parts of this text combine unpublished parts of the author's Master's thesis from the University of Leeds and new findings of the author's currently running PhD research at Charles University in Prague which began in 2015. Remark by the author.

² For more information, see: SOUKENÍK, Š.: *Government Communication in the Czech Republic: Strategies, Perception, and Tensions*. [Dissertation Thesis]. Leeds: School of Media and Communication, University of Leeds, 2014.

party stakeholders such as local government representatives, NGO leaders and corporate sector managers in the Czech Republic. Equally important aim lies in putting these findings into a context with (primarily) the Central European state of research on government communication amid 2010s and proposing an alternative perspective on how government communication can be researched in the form of an original stakeholder model of government communication. Concurrently, the study shows why studying government communication is important for contemporary media and communication research.

The first thing to consider is the existence of numerous actors such as individual citizens, communities, government organisations, non-governmental organisations, private companies and, notwithstanding, media, in the public space. All these specific – and we could say ‘niche’ – stakeholders intrinsically need to have precise and comprehensive image of what the authorities decide on. At the same time, we can observe that citizens living in democracies steadily lose their interest in public participation and show lower confidence in politics. In such a ubiquitous information overload, delivering messages to stakeholders has become tougher than ever before for politicians and governments.

In social sciences and more particularly in media and communication studies, we have observed that the research field of political communication has yet examined phenomena such as electoral campaigns, mediatization, political image-making, voting behaviour and digital politics including eGovernment. At the same time, there are certain areas that show immaturity in terms of the books and research papers saturation. Despite its undeniable presence in practice, government communication as an interdisciplinary sub-discipline of political communication that explores the relationship between the government or state sector authorities and stakeholders, either citizens, private sector, NGOs, or media, is still at the very beginning of systematic scholarly investigation. Although mutual relationships and dependencies of diverse actors in the public sphere have considerably drawn the attention of numerous social scientists until present, the distinct nature of systematically planned and complex relationships between elected government authorities and specific audiences remains unexplored.³

If we want to understand the contemporary character of interpersonal, group and institutional communication related to government actors, we also need to analyse motivation, interests, target groups, aims, strategy and tactics of those involved in the social communication process. Private companies aim to succeed within one or more markets, increase revenue and strengthen brand equity. Non-governmental organisations want to keep their agenda in the public discourse and change or develop behaviour, a process or a state of things. News media play the role of negotiators, connectors, watch-dogs, and agenda-setters; however, the aim of most of the publishing houses is still more financial revenue-oriented.⁴ Citizens’ aims are as diverse as their number, but some general tendencies can be watched today. Not only people want to be informed, but also increasingly entertained, pampered and reinforced in their attitudes.

Generally argued, multiple actors strive for fulfilling different objectives which make their life easier and comfortable. Short-term aims depend on a plethora of external forces such as political, social, security and economic situation. Nevertheless, if one assumes that all actors act rationally in the long-term, in other words, they follow the desire to win, to succeed, to fulfil own dreams or aims of a community or a group, then the common denominator is, depending on the character of an actor, maximising individual or group profits within the system. Governments communicate with a variety of stakeholders and they can follow different aims in doing so. Essentially, governments inform citizens, media, corporations, NGOs and other ‘niche’ groups about their operations; they can react to received queries, run campaigns around a certain topic, reinforce an attitude in the society or prevent certain behaviour or trend. We can by no means observe these government activities in all democratic countries, the Czech Republic being no exception.

Having survived centuries of external power influences, the Czech Republic has aspired to emerge as a self-confident democratic state since 1989 when the Soviet political dominance ended.⁵ The Central and Eastern Europe region (CEE), including the Czech Republic, is specific in terms of research within political

3 See: SANDERS, K., CANEL, M.: *Government Communication*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013.

4 For more information, see: MCCHESENEY, R. W.: *The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas*. New York, NY: Monthly Review Foundation, 2008; MURDOCK, G., WASKO, J.: *Media in the Age of Marketization*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2007.

5 VODIČKA, K., CABADA, L.: *Politický systém České republiky: Historie a současnost*. Praha: Portál, 2007, p. 114.

and communication sciences. During the era of centralised control over mass media and public opinion before 1989 the possibilities for getting unbiased data and conducting valid research were limited. Neither political science, nor communication science were institutionalised as an academic discipline from today’s point of view. In contrast, mass media were tools of power holders; divergent political ideologies were monitored and criminally prosecuted.⁶ Therefore, most of the CEE researchers in social sciences could only have begun conducting valid research after the establishment of core elements of democratic governance.

Perhaps this fact is one of the reasons why only one comprehensive case study describing the state of government communication within a country in the CEE region currently exists, and it is the case of Poland.⁷ Concerning the Czech Republic, only several exploratory texts have focused on the development of political and media systems since 1989.⁸ Czech media system development was a part of research project called *Media and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe (MDCEE)* at the University of Oxford between 2009 and 2013.⁹ Political Public Relations studies are scarce¹⁰ and the same applies to the government communication field which lacks thorough research.

This study is one of the first research outputs that aim for reversing the status quo. Focusing on the central government level, the case study we offer mainly covers the period from 2010 to 2013 in the Czech Republic when the centre-right coalition of *ODS* (the right-wing *Civic Democratic Party*, *TOP 09* (a right-wing conservative party) and *VV* (the centrist *Public Affairs* party), led by the Prime Minister Petr Nečas, constituted and oversaw the government.¹¹ The research that forms a core of this study specifically concentrated on two central government agencies and their sub-affiliated units within the Health Policy and Labour and Social Policy fields – The Ministry of Health and The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Czech Republic. These policy fields were denoted as the most important ones for citizens in the research focused on public perception of the government communication process by Kollmannová and Matušková.¹² The Office of the Government was included in the analysis due to its assumed role of a coordinator or rather an intermediary of the government communication process in the Czech Republic.

Literature Review

‘Governments should better communicate with citizens.’ Recently, this sentence has become a popular cliché, often claimed by politicians across diverse parties in the Czech media sphere. What does the word ‘better’ really mean? Ubiquitous budget pressures, rising citizen expectations, lack of interest in the public affairs and rapid technological changes signify that governments, which have always been arguably more rigid and slower in creating innovations than private companies, need to make an extra effort to maintain their power and become influencers in the system.

6 See: VODIČKA, K., CABADA, L.: *Politický systém České republiky: Historie a současnost*. Praha: Portál, 2007, p. 114; ŠTĚTKA, V.: Back to the Local? Transnational Media Flows and Audience Consumption Patterns in Central and Eastern Europe. In DOWNEY, J., MIHELJ, S. (eds.): *Central and Eastern European Media in Comparative Perspective*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2012, p. 164.

7 For more information, see: ANASZEWICZ, M., DOBEK-OSTROWSKA, B.: Government Communication in Democratic Poland: 20 Years after the Collapse of Communism. In SANDERS, K., CANEL, M. (eds.): *Government Communication*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013.

8 See also: KETTLE, S.: The Development of the Czech Media since the Fall of Communism. In *The Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 1996, Vol. 12, No. 4, p. 43; TOEPFL, F.: Why do Pluralistic Media Systems Emerge? Comparing Media Change in the Czech Republic and in Russia after the Collapse of Communism. In *Global Media and Communication*, 2013, Vol. 9, No. 3, p. 256.

9 ŠTĚTKA, V.: Back to the Local? Transnational Media Flows and Audience Consumption Patterns in Central and Eastern Europe. In DOWNEY, J., MIHELJ, S. (eds.): *Central and Eastern European Media in Comparative Perspective*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2012, p. 164.

10 For more information, see: KOLLMANNOVÁ, D. K.: *Zveřejněné soukromí*. Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2012.

11 See: HANLEY, S. *Miloš Zeman’s Attempt to Impose a Caretaker Government in the Czech Republic Is a Fundamental Challenge to Czech Parliamentary Democracy*. Released on the 4th of July 2013. [online]. [2017-04-26]. Available at: <<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/07/04/milos-zemans-attempt-to-impose-a-caretaker-government-in-the-czech-republic-is-a-fundamental-challenge-to-czech-parliamentary-democracy/>>; CAMERON, R.: *Czech Mate? PM Petr Nečas Faces Lurid Claims after Raids*. Released on the 14th of June 2013. [online]. [2017-04-26]. Available at: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-22913261>>.

12 KOLLMANNOVÁ, D. K., MATUŠKOVÁ, A.: *Výzkum vládní komunikace v České republice 2010 – 2013*. So far unpublished research report.

It is remarkable that government communication as a field of media and communication research has only attracted genuine scholarly attention since the first decade of the 21st century. One may argue that governance types, actors and structures were at least studied within political science in the 20th century and had been reflected in literature, arts and historical analyses even much earlier – since the humanity began to institutionalise power ownership. Likewise, numerous publications on propaganda have been published.¹³ Nevertheless, media and communication scholarship has only seen one book focused on an in-depth and comparative study of government communication so far: *Government Communication: Cases and Challenges* by Maria José Canel and Karin Sanders.¹⁴

Late noughties of the 21st century brought several journal articles in the English language which specifically addressed government communication in their title, abstract or key words.¹⁵ They were heralds of the upcoming years that finally moved government communication into wider scholarly interest which, regionally, mainly comprises case studies from the USA,¹⁶ Australia,¹⁷ Benelux¹⁸ and the United Kingdom.¹⁹ In the Czech academic environment, government and institutional communication have been studied at few research centres, namely at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University, the University of Economics and the Faculty of Social Sciences at Masaryk University in Brno so far, but without any consistent and long-term research projects and results.²⁰

Thematic specification of key research topics that have recurred in the journals and studies in the period before 2010 was related to communication strategies and relationship building. In contrast, after 2010 and especially after 2014, major topic areas were e-Government and e-Democracy, public-private partnerships and stakeholder engagement.²¹ Canel and Sanders's book on government communication forms a bright exception because they bring all the topics together, presenting government communication in both theoretical and methodological views, not omitting digital development, but still ultimately focusing on communication strategies, not neglecting the perspective of message recipients, i.e. stakeholders, to analyse government communication from both sides of the communication flow. Most contributions within the government communication research have had a base within communication science, particularly in Public Relations. Fair amount of the articles also stems from management studies, political science and government and public policy. Key journals that have given space to contributions on government communication in recent few years are *Journal of Public Affairs* and *Government Information Quarterly*.

In their seminal book, Sanders and Canel provided one of the first comprehensive definitions of government communication which, according to them, can be understood in terms of “*the role, practice, aims*

and achievements of communication as it takes place in and on behalf of public institutions whose primary end is executive in the service of a political rationale, and that are constituted based on the people's indirect or direct consent and charged to enact their will”.²² In other words, government communication in practice means managing internal and external communication flows within and between government agencies that indirectly represent people's consent based on election results and directly respond to public opinion.

One part of government communication research that is key for our proposed perspectives on this field focuses on interactions between governments and their stakeholders. Despite existing principles of widely recommended government-to-citizen modes of interaction, i.e. “*information, consultation and participation*”,²³ there is an observable gap in connecting such general propositions with the “*theory of stakeholder identification and salience*” in politics and more rigorous and granulated communication science models.²⁴ Therefore, a key paradigm change that needs to be implemented by governments around the world must take place. To assess government communication and to propose functional government communication *modus operandi*, it is necessary to focus on identifying stakeholder salience and power influences and, ultimately, on mutual experience, expectations and necessities of governments and their stakeholders.

The hypothesised importance of government and stakeholder relations and their exploration was the major intention behind the research activity which is presented in this research study. After presenting the core of the methodology and selected testimonies of the research participants, the chapter aimed at discussion shall analyse detected outcomes and issues and propose the way forward in research and practice.

Methodology

To answer the RQ: *How is the government communication process in the Czech Republic organised by the executive branch and perceived by niche stakeholder groups?* and associated sub-questions, semi-structured elite interviews were carried out. Due to an exploratory nature of the RQ, the research method was based on qualitative research design, anti-foundationalist ontology and interpretivist epistemology paradigm.²⁵ The preliminary intention behind the research design planning was to conduct complementary research to the citizen-based quantitative study focused on perception of government communication in the Czech Republic.²⁶ Hence the aim was to be as specific as possible to construct a case study which would compare Health Policy and Labour and Social Policy, i.e. the policy areas marked as the most important for citizens in the aforementioned research study by Kollmannová and Matušková.

The sample was critically selected focusing on, firstly, government officials and communication officers, and secondly, representatives of niche stakeholder groups within the two policy areas, i.e. specific policy field corporations, NGOs and local administration authorities.²⁷ Acquired data was not intended to be representative in terms of the number of respondents. By contrast, in-depth exploration of selected actors, fields and issues was meant to infer specific characteristics, tensions and cleavages of government communication. The first part of the research consisted of mapping the two relevant policy fields and identifying main actors on

13 For more information, see: BERNAYS, E.: *Propaganda*. New York, NY: Horace Liveright, 1928; FRASER, L.: *Propaganda*. London: Oxford University Press, 1957; BENTELE, G.: Propaganda als Typ Systematisch Verzerter Öffentlicher Kommunikation. In LIEBERT, T. (ed.): *Persuasion und Propaganda in der öffentlichen Kommunikation. Beiträge zur Tagung der DG/PuK-Fachgruppe Public Relations/Organisationskommunikation vom 14. bis 16. Leipzig*: Universität Leipzig, 1999.

14 See: SANDERS, K., CANEL, M.: *Government Communication*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013.

15 See also: FAIRBANKS, J., PLOWMAN, K. D., RAWLINS, B. L.: Transparency in Government Communication. In *Journal of Public Affairs*, 2007, Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 36; GELDERS, D., BOUCKAERT, G., VAN RULER, B.: Communication Management in the Public Sector: Consequences for Public Communication about Policy Intentions. In *Government Information Quarterly*, 2007, Vol. 24, No. 2, p. 335; LIU, B. F., HORSLEY, J. S.: The Government Communication Decision Wheel: Toward a Public Relations Model for the Public Sector. In *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 2007, Vol. 19, No. 4, p. 390; HOWLETT, M.: Government Communication as a Policy Tool: A Framework for Analysis. In *Canadian Political Science Review*, 2009, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 35.

16 LIU, B. F., HORSLEY, J. S., LEVENSHUS, A. B.: Government and Corporate Communication Practices: Do the Differences Matter? In *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 2010, Vol. 38, No. 2, p. 210.

17 For more information, see: CROZIER, M.: Recursive Governance: Contemporary Political Communication and Public Policy. In *Political Communication*, 2007, Vol. 24, No. 1, p. 8; DEBUSSY, N. M., KELLY, L.: Stakeholders, Politics and Power: Towards an Understanding of Stakeholder Identification and Salience in Government. In *Journal of Communication Management*, 2010, Vol. 14, No. 4, p. 302.

18 GELDERS, D., IHLEN, Ø.: Government Communication about Potential Policies: Public Relations, Propaganda or Both? In *Public Relations Review*, 2010, Vol. 36, No. 1, p. 61.

19 GREGORY, A.: UK Government Communications: Full Circle in the 21st Century? In *Public Relations Review*, 2012, Vol. 38, No. 3, p. 373.

20 For more information, see: SOUKENÍK, Š.: *Government Communication in the Czech Republic: Strategies, Perception, and Tensions*. [Dissertation Thesis]. Leeds: School of Media and Communication, University of Leeds, 2014.

21 See: DEVERELL, E. et al.: Understanding Public Agency Communication: The Case of the Swedish Armed Forces. In *Journal of Public Affairs*, 2014, Vol. 15, No. 4, p. 387; RAMSEY, P.: The Engage Programme and the Government Communication Network in the UK, 2006-2010. In *Journal of Public Affairs*, 2014, Vol. 15, No. 4, p. 377; KIM, Y.: Toward an Effective Government–Public Relationship: Organization–Public Relationship Based on a Synthetic Approach to Public Segmentation. In *Public Relations Review*, 2015, Vol. 41, No. 4, p. 457.

22 For more information, see: SANDERS, K., CANEL, M.: *Government Communication*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013, p. 4; SOUKENÍK, Š.: *Government Communication in the Czech Republic: Strategies, Perception, and Tensions*. [Dissertation Thesis]. Leeds: School of Media and Communication, University of Leeds, 2014, p. 12.

23 OECD: *Citizens as Partners: Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy-making*. [online]. [2017-04-15]. Available at: <http://www.ecnl.org/dindocuments/214_OECD_Engaging%20Citizens%20in%20Policy-Making.pdf>.

24 See: MITCHELL, R. et al.: Toward a Theory of Stakeholder Identification and Salience: Defining the Principle of Who and What Really Counts. In *Academy of Management Review*, 1997, Vol. 22, No. 4, p. 854; DEBUSSY, N. M., KELLY, L.: Stakeholders, Politics and Power: Towards an Understanding of Stakeholder Identification and Salience in Government. In *Journal of Communication Management*, 2010, Vol. 14, No. 4, p. 301; THOMPSON, J.: *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995, p. 85.

25 See: CRESWELL, J.: *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*. London: Sage, 2009, p. 17; CRUICKSHANK, J.: *Realism and Sociology: Anti-Foundationalism, Ontology and Social Research*. London: Routledge, 2003, p. 3.

26 KOLLMANNOVÁ, D. K., MATUŠKOVÁ, A.: *Výzkum vládní komunikace v České republice 2010–2013*. So far unpublished research report.

27 ONWUEGBUZIE, A., LEECH, N.: Sampling Designs in Qualitative Research: Making the Sampling Process More Public. In *Qualitative Report*, 2007, Vol. 12, No. 2, p. 245.

the government and stakeholder side. The sample was meant to be represented by institutions, organisations and their representatives believed to have specifically participated in the government communication process. The primary aim was to interview such people as spokespersons, communication directors and heads of units or similar top positions.

The process of targeting respondents for the semi-structured interview began in February 2014 when twenty highly selected people from the two policy areas and associated stakeholder groups were reached by e-mail with an invitation to participate in the research. All of them were C-level positioned, including former Ministers, 1st level government officers and directors of corporations, NGOs and local authorities. They were also initially given an enclosed information sheet. The final response rate was 65% with eleven persons having agreed to an interview and two persons that rejected it. In all cases of the government sample, the people were no longer in office. Between the 3rd and the 16th of April 2014, ten face-to-face guided interviews were carried out in three Czech cities, i.e. Prague, Brno and Hradec Králové, with an equal distribution of government officials and stakeholder agents. The language of the interviews was Czech, so all the quotations used in this study were translated into English afterwards.

Because of the specific nature of participants, high level of confidentiality and anonymity had to be offered and secured. Therefore, the names of the respondents were then transformed into the following set of codes – A1-A5 for government officials and B1-B5 for stakeholder representatives. The analytical approach focused on characteristic experience of the participants and thematic cross tabulation with the aim of revealing common issues, ideas and interpretations. During interpreting the speeches, one must proceed with caution, and thus the coding process sought hidden metaphors, linking themes, controversial cases and mutual relationships.²⁸ Primary research findings shall be put into context with theories of government communication and related disciplines in the following sections.

Findings

After careful reading of the interview material, data analysis was organised into six specific categories in which answers proved to be significant for further discussion on government communication in the Czech Republic and which corresponded with initial assumptions of tipping points and the RQ. These areas are:

- Perception of government communication purpose
- Influence of political interests on government communication
- Influence of internal communication mechanisms within central executive units on government communication
- Coordination of government communication and the associated role of the Office of the Government
- Stakeholder experience with government communication within Health Policy and Labour and Social Policy areas
- Reasons of low confidence in political and public institutions

Perception of Government Communication Purpose

While collecting the participant views on their understanding of government communication, similar actors and processes were identified in most of the cases, though several interesting variations could be observed.

“There is always what the Government proposes, how the opposition criticises it and how citizens perceive it. In addition, it consists of standpoints of trade unions and professional associations, so it is thus different” (A1).

²⁸ For more information, see: BERGER, A. A.: *Media and Communication Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000, p. 125; FAIRBANKS, J., PLOWMAN, K. D., RAWLINS, B. L.: Transparency in Government Communication. In *Journal of Public Affairs*, 2007, Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 27.

“Imagine two things – communication inside the Government and external communication of ministers to the public, in other words, to other entities than the central executive branch” (A4).

“Primarily, the actors communicate during the preparation of government agenda, namely in particular departments” (A2).

“The Government ought not to stay out of touch with its stakeholders and local politicians, they should be interconnected. Those from below should deliver feedback” (B3).

“It is when the Government communicates with somebody. Furthermore, I think of the Office of the Government that issues statements. And there are some other institutions which take part in the process” (B4).

The responses of the interviewees quoted above indicate that government communication in the Czech Republic comprises two levels – internal and external. It represents negotiations between political, public and private actors on public policy process during specific policy stages. The process is influenced by standpoints of coalition, opposition and stakeholder groups including trade unions and professional associations mentioned by A1. According to A1, this is also an outcome of consensus-based agreements among the actors subsequently communicated to external audiences.

While concentrating on differences between government actors (Ax) and stakeholder representatives (Bx), it seems that the perception of relational symmetry differed among these groups. Government officials tended to view government communication predominantly as a one-way process. Four out of five respondents of the government group did not mention external communication with stakeholder groups while asked what they imagined while hearing the phrase ‘government communication’. By contrast, stakeholder groups seemed to perceive the process more interactively or at least they called for the necessity of the two-way process.

“For me, government communication is the communication of the Government, ministries and political parties which they represent. It is all together” (A3).

“Public administration has recently been scattered and erratic in the Czech Republic. Communicating with central executive often depends on immediate trends and political party being in power” (B5).

“Personally, I am not satisfied with it. Government communication is profoundly inconsistent if it even exists in the Czech Republic” (B2).

“Government marketing is ineffective and dismal” (B2).

“Especially I recall mediated communication and it is hard for me to distinguish government campaigns from the other ones” (B4).

Government communication was characterised by inconsistency and vicissitude by the actors outside the government and it was viewed as significantly politically determined by both participant groups. Immediacy, *ad hoc* and associated reactive nature of the communication distinctively intermingled among the testimonies, as well as dissatisfaction with its quality. Political rhetoric as well as policy standpoints and changes were being included in the term of government communication. Moreover, it was usually considered as primarily related to central executive and not so much to subsidiary levels of governance. Interestingly, while having asked for spontaneous connotations with government communication, some stakeholders particularly mentioned terms such as “government marketing” and “government campaigns”. This might suggest that the Czech Government has indeed been using marketing communication tools, though perhaps not strategically and professionally driven.

Influence of Political Interests on Government Communication

There are numerous intriguing stories around the Civil Service Act in the Czech Republic which was adopted in 2015 – much later than in Hungary (1992), Poland (1996) and Slovakia (2009). This means that the Czech Republic long lacked professional civil service which significantly influenced the government communication process. Interviews conducted for this research were taken shortly before the Act came into the legislative practice. Following quotations thus show the expectations, i.e. the state of things before the Act adoption, and we aim to publish the comparative view from the post-period in an immediate future.

“Once there are political problems and the party says that this person must get out, or they leave the Government, unified government communication ends and, unfortunately, extremely undermines the credibility of the professional one. I think that every party aims to target audiences differently. Below that, there is the government communication of interesting reforms. But above that there are political standpoints” (A1).

Political interests and actions evidently determine causality of communicating government positions internally and externally. Conflicts, contentions and controversies result in disenchantment not only from the side of wide public, but also among the professionals of government communication. In other words, the criticism emanated from both groups of participants with a slighter tendency to vindicate government communication by government officials, but it was not a prevailing position.

Conversely, there was a shared call for accelerated institutionalisation and professionalization of Czech civil service (A1, A4 and B3). Moreover, there was a demand for updating the Public Procurement Act, arguing that it would help in higher stability and predictability in government-to-stakeholder communication and mutual service operation (B1).

“Permanent campaign continues, and parties exploit Ministries to present their own successes” (A1).

“I experienced that some topics at the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs were internally more demanded from the Minister, because they were in line with his/her political party” (A3).

Further testimonies suggest that government communication was purposefully being influenced at the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. This does not mean that this Ministry was an exception in such practices, but a spontaneous recall of this fact might indicate the validity of proclamation related to susceptibility to internal and external influences and malfunction of institutional processes within the Czech Government. Likewise, denoting this phenomenon as permanent campaigning appeared among participants who shared negative positions towards political exploitation of government communication (A1, A5 and B4).

“Little do I perceive the Government, Ministries and other actors being humble and say – yes, you have elected me, you pay me well and I pay you for doing this and this. Propaganda used by parties while hiring a smart advisor such as ANO [a Czech political party] and ČSSD [a Czech political party] as if did not exist after that. They have reached their goal and then – nothing” (B2).

According to B2, political parties who got elected into the Chamber of Deputies and formed a government coalition subsequently abandoned their efforts of creating and developing goodwill and strategic Public Relations with their audiences including wide and niche stakeholders. Viewing the government as immodest and not able to communicate well with its stakeholders might connote an explicit need and call for putting government communication into the mutual government and stakeholder discourse. In substance, this implies the importance of organisational and strategic perspective on government communication as presented in the following two sections.

Influence of Internal Communication Mechanisms on Government Communication

Internal structure, composition of advisory bodies, cooperation of departments, mutual confidence and internal conflict resolution represent the issues that emerged from the interviews as important determinants of government communication in the Czech Republic. Most of the government agents are profoundly critical in assessing internal communication mechanisms and evaluating the period when they were in office.

“Essentially, the structure within the Office of the Government comprised the Prime Minister. Below him, there was the Head of Cabinet Office, then represented by Jana Nagyová, and three Heads of Departments dealing with communication processes – Protocol, Press, and Analytics/Information [but there is] a lack of responsibility and buck-passing. Everyone blames it on a collective decision and this repeats all the time” (A1).

“When I came into office at the Ministry of Health, I was surprised with the hierarchical structure of branches below Deputies and Heads of Department. They are closed, as if surrounded by a wall” (A2).

“Within the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the structure was respected, though the Press Officer’s position used to be vertically across the structure. My predecessor set the processes in order not to take the Press Officer as an enemy. They had been persuaded that it was a win-win situation for both sides at the end” (A3).

Institutional structure of government units in the Czech Republic is thus characterised by fragmented competence, rigid hierarchy and tenacious resistance of civil officers against politically installed officers such as Deputies, Ministers and Press Officers. Although in some institutions, namely in the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the hierarchy is seen as more penetrable than in others such as the Ministry of Health and the Office of the Government; tensions in internal communication can be felt from almost all the interviewees. From some of the interviews it seemed that top executive positions were literally at the mercy of lower Departments and Sections in providing information both from internal and external sources (A3, B3).

“Once per week there was the meeting of Ministry Cabinet. As far as I know, today there are only the Deputies included in the sessions. I tried to gather most Heads of Department and specialist officers interested in an issue” (A2).

“Organisation of the work is formed to communicating inside the Ministry by the system of meetings. There is an effort of transmitting information to the lowest levels” (A5).

While asking more deeply on the processes of internal communication transmission and cooperation, it seemed that the system was dependent on short-term and personality-oriented governance. In other words, each Minister, eventually his or her team, could change an internal communication system significantly from the composition of advisory bodies to the level of hierarchical permeability. According to some participants (A3, A4), project-based work and structure which interconnect Departments within or across policy units did not contribute to the effectiveness of governance and internal communication. On the contrary, from the testimony given by A5 it seems that there was an awareness of necessity in securing horizontal and vertical cooperation.

“Due to an animosity of particular people, communication and cooperation, namely pulling on the same rope, malfunctioned. The Government of Petr Nečas had three Press Officers in three years and the Prime Minister had three different advisors. Therefore, communication management was extremely bad. The advisors could not get to the Prime Minister and they could not give him advice” (A1).

“Key Departments do not communicate with one another. I regarded this as a significant problem. However, lower Heads of Department are in power positions and resist quite deeply” (A2).

Sheer openness in describing internal relations at the Office of the Government and Ministries indicated that initial hypotheses of concealed problems of government communication in deeper system processes within public policy cycle proved to be valid. Even though the questions on the experience with internal communication were asked as neutrally and balanced as possible, words such as “malfunction”, “animosity”, “distrust”, “non-cooperation”, “resistance”, “closeness” and “power positions” occurred frequently in the interviews (A1, A2, A3, B2 and B3).

As stated before, legislative ambiguity, especially with the Civil Service Act, may have had a significant impact on government communication process. Nevertheless, it can be argued that other variables such as internal traditions, institutional culture and human resources were strong influencers on the process.

“I tried to cultivate the process and I pushed people to less formalised communication, fewer official documents and more discussions during the initial stages of public policy process” (A2).

“I felt the effort from numerous colleagues to get forward effectively, but some of the others I perceived in terms of the saying – Ministers come and go, officials remain” (A4).

“No activities would have been possible without the cooperation with lower officials who travelled around the country and participated in creation and transmission of information materials” (A5).

As to the internal conflict resolutions, the answers are not as straightforward and equal. After querying precisely on participants’ experience with communication conflicts, some of the interviewees did not recall specific situations or even denied any of them (A4, A5). In case of A3, initial unconsciousness turned into some hints that conflicts were being solved, but without significant aftermaths. A1 and A2 were more critical in conflict resolution assessment. This might imply two things. Either conflicts appeared only in some institutions at certain periods of time or conflicts and their resolutions are latent and some of the interviewees tried to show their institution in a better light compared to the reality.

It is necessary to note that most of the participants did not exactly share the same period and same projects when having been in office. In any case, some testimonies suggest that the problems might have been related with interdepartmental cooperation, the whole system of government communication coordination and the role of the Office of the Government as being further presented in the next section.

Coordination of Government Communication

Unlike the Ministries which represent the first stage of public policy process, the Office of the Government constitutes a unit with a normative mission to *“fulfil tasks connected to the expert, organisational and technical provision of the activities of the government of the Czech Republic and its bodies”*.²⁹ In other words, it is meant to operate as both an administrative support for other government agencies and an interlinking element in the governance structure. Therefore, there had been an objective to have focused on the role and experience with the Office of the Government in the interviews. Findings suggest that views on competences and mission of the Office of the Government differed fundamentally in the government period between 2010 and 2013.

29 GOVERNMENT OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC: *Office of the Government*. [online]. [2017-04-29]. Available at: <<http://www.vlada.cz/en/urad-vlady/office-of-the-government-53367>>.

“Government Press Officer should have a coordinating role and stand above the rest of the Press Officers of particular Ministries, but not always there is a coalition agreement on that. After some time, we gave up the coordinating efforts when we saw how politicians were quarrelling” (A1).

“I did not see any particular insufficiency from the Office of the Government. Sometimes, at the beginning, there were some things which were communicated differently from the Office of the Government than from the Ministry. However, according to the Administrative Procedure Act, the Prime Minister is an independent unit, he or she is not a boss [...] but there were some tensions between the Ministry and the Office of the Government at the political level” (A2).

“The Office of the Government should be the Prime Minister’s facility [...] it could fulfil limited coordinating role, but it under no circumstances should it interfere in ministerial affairs” (A4).

Discrepancies and contradictions are clearly visible when comparing testimonies of A1-A5 and when trying to find a conjoint nexus of opinions and experience. A2 and A3 did not see significant problems with coordination from the Office of the Government, yet they contradicted one another in terms of the role which could be either merely supportive or standing above the rest and managing the process of government communication. Traces of political influence are also visible here, as well as visible tensions and conflicts.

Invoking the jurisdiction, different subjective perspectives based on individual experience across policy fields and occasional mentions of a sagging political and organisational culture clearly indicate that the system features of government communication and coordination did not function well and with the same impact on various institutional units. References to the necessity of a better “communication plan” (A1, A3 and A5) infer that organisational and strategic part of communication ought not to be neglected from the analysis.

“I do not think it is possible in the Czech conditions. God forbid that someone who is not even able to coordinate corporate identity would try to coordinate whole campaigns, content, media buying and human resources. I cannot imagine that” (B1).

“The Prime Minister should be the key business and marketing manager who organises and manages the communication flow from the Office of the Government, through public service broadcasting, to secure the correctness and quality of the communication. Moreover, he or she must evaluate whether the mass, at least the critical one, understands it” (B2).

Turning the attention to the stakeholder representatives, it is distinctly possible to trace resentment and displeasure with organisational part of government communication. Some points even indicate resignation and disbelief in terms of possible improvement (B1). As to the role of the Office of the Government, among interviewees there was a prevailing view that it should have played more pronounced part in government communication management and coordination, i.e. to stand above the rest of Ministries and institutional units.

Furthermore, the interviewees were asked to share their experience with across policy field cooperation and the role of various Government Councils. The testimonies suggest that the interaction among Press Officers was in general better than among Ministers and Heads of Department who mostly evaluated the cooperation positively only within allied political representatives. Boundaries within and across the Departments remained distinctly rigid in 2010 – 2013, though some efforts were made towards higher permeability and more inclusive cooperation (A2). Government Councils represent advisory boards consisting of specialist officers, political appointees and non-governmental stakeholder representatives such as CEOs of major companies or NGOs. According to the stakeholders (B2, B4 and B5), cooperation with the Councils operated well, which bridges this section with the next part of Findings concerned explicitly with stakeholder experience with government communication process.

Stakeholder Experience with Government Communication

Substantial part of the interviews with stakeholders consisted of detecting the perception of government communication directed towards the entities they represented. Beside face-to-face and mediated interactions on which the emphasis was placed, government campaigns were discussed, constituting the form of mediated quasi-interaction.³⁰ Moreover, the question of short-term versus long-term relations and the role of frontline workers were included into the talks.

“There has been no significant communication with the central executive branch, from both sides, it is not necessary [...] I would not mention the negative cases, but for instance, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs constitutes an institution with which I could perceive mutual communication as positive [...] but there are other Ministries where any cooperation is more of a punishment for us” (B1).

“We are satisfied, for example, with Departments at the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports” (B5).

The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Health were perceived more positively than negatively by stakeholder representatives in terms of government communication experience (B1, B4 and B5). Regarding previous findings, this may imply that either there had been a problem with the government communication system *per se*, i.e. with coordination, ambiguous competences and holistic impression, rather than with the two particularly observed Ministries. However, according to B1, there seem to be certain negative cases of experience, though not revealed to the researcher. As to B4, perception of quality seemed to have been gradually improving. Likewise, as observed on the case of B4, communication process was still rather insufficient to the stakeholders' needs.

“When the Minister fires the employees to the level of Heads of Department, the only remaining people constitute the choir of silent and all-approving rocking heads. Public administration is extremely rigid and everyone only wants to survive, because he or she knows that the Minister will not be there next year. Nobody wants to propose anything, because they know that they would crash” (A1).

“It would be extremely helpful if institutions including central executive branch had long-term partners” (B1).

Most government representatives and stakeholders agreed on poor long-term mutual relationship building. The testimonies could also indicate that human resources and limits of political influence crucially determined government communication in the Czech Republic in the researched period. Looking at this issue from the 2017 perspective, the Civil Service Act, an important new piece of legislation, came into practice in 2015. There was an underlying intention in the Act to decrease the politicisation of communication functions in the government. Since 2016, we have been analysing if this event has had any impact on government communication in the Czech Republic and the results are planned to be published soon.

Reasons of Low Confidence in Political and Public Institutions

The final part of the interviews consisted of rather more abstract discussion about possible reasons why the level of confidence in various state institutions, not only during 2010 – 2013, but also in the long run, has been low – even in comparison with the CEE region. It can be noted that the participants partly got back to their previous testimonies and mentioned issues such as long-term governance and communication planning, bribery, scepticism, disenchantment and bad mood. Nevertheless, a significant linking argument was related to the role of Czech news media and reporting of government actions.

30 THOMPSON, J.: *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995, p. 85.

“I believe that individual actions transfer to the Government level. Citizens are intimidated by the fact that politicians steal and exploit their positions... and they want someone new” (A1).

“There is a bon mot claiming that if a manager wants to conceal problems, he or she has to accuse the predecessor. If someone really wants to reveal some unfair practices, it is usually possible to find something. Corruption has gone too far and open exclamations of public opinion, i.e. that all politicians are bad and corrupted, are enormous” (A2).

“Surely because there are corruption scandals and there is a common knowledge of passing deals among politicians” (B3).

Corruption and malpractices were the most usual first connotations among both government representatives and stakeholders. It is interesting to note that government officials, among whom there were either politicians or specialists working in Press Departments, were no less critical than people outside the Government.

“Too many people were being replaced in a short time period. They even could not prove their professionalism. There was no time for strategic planning in the long run” (A3).

Based on the provided answers, it could be suggested that long-term planning, not only in passing new legislation, but also in turning *ad hoc* communication into strategic process of research; message, objective and target groups specification; strategy and tools identification; realisation and evaluation can be amongst the key tipping points and reasons of comparatively worse state of government communication in the Czech Republic. B1 mentioned long-term partnerships and regular evaluations from both the Government and stakeholder sides. A1 noted fear of officials and people in the Government of proposing anything radical, new or controversial. B5 called it as a kind of post-communist syndrome and claimed that the naivety after the Velvet Revolution in 1989 had gradually evaporated.

Even though the interviews mostly ended unclosed and without suggestions for improvements, some participants such as A1 and B3 mentioned the necessity of increasing transparency of governance processes including government communication. Spontaneous connotations also revealed that media reinforcement effects are being taken seriously by several participants (A4, B1). At this point, B3 returned to internal communication mechanisms and suggested that internal information transmission should have been improved.

Finally, we could observe a commonly shared belief that the Czech news media do not help in dealing with government communication malpractices and they frame stories with a one-sided negative and critical perspective. Although this could be just an easy way to pass on one's problems to somebody else, the media environment with clashing interests may indeed influence government communication flow and perception.

Discussion and Conclusion

Reactive, inconsistent and volatile government communication as it was perceived by the research participants refer precisely to the characteristics better to avoid in well-practiced government communication management.³¹ Likewise, they represent contingent intervening variables with an impact on public policy decision making.³² Government officials' tendency not to emphasise stakeholder relations without specifically asking on them in the interviews by the researcher contrasts with stakeholders' understanding of the same issue. This indicates that better comprehension of mutual expectations and needs would be

31 SANDERS, K., CANEL, M.: *Government Communication*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013, p. 1.
32 KINGDON, J.: *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1995, p. 87.

meaningful. It could be suggested that perhaps using and applying the model of stakeholder identification and salience by Czech government representatives could help at this point and might conclude in better mutual understanding.³³

Stemming from Gelders and Ihlen who noted that “*satisfaction with the information on government policies is [...] one of the least studied variables in political communication*,”³⁴ this issue formed a significant part of the interviews. Stakeholders in this research did not show significant dissatisfaction with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, but when asked more holistically on their experience, they noted several issues such as outdated technology, lack of proactive approach and rigidity. Government campaigns were prevalently evaluated rather negatively. Most criticisms and simultaneously calls after changes referred to long-term mutual relationships between the Government and stakeholders. According to Sanders and Canel, government communication “*is a long-term tool*.”³⁵

Therefore, stakeholder involvement at various levels from the widest public to the niche actors and groups is crucial to fulfil the principles of deliberation in political communication systems.³⁶ Importantly, this does not need to be at odds with permanent, i.e. rather more time-balanced style of campaigning focused on tool efficiency and explaining complex governance and decisions.

Towards a Stakeholder Approach

Assessing government communication as a part of policy cycle³⁷ was proposed by Liu and Horsley³⁸ and further updated by Liu et al.³⁹ In practice, this existing government communication model consists of four interconnected environments, i.e. “*intergovernmental, intragovernmental, multi-level and external*.”⁴⁰ Furthermore, there is an emphasis on two variables, namely the channel of communication, i.e. “*mediated*” or “*direct*” channel, and political activity of policy actors, i.e. “*elected*” and “*non-elected*” ones.⁴¹ Although the hierarchy of different administrative levels in this model corresponds to the US constitutional system, the principle of interdependency of different communication channels, elected policy makers and non-elected stakeholders could be generally applicable with modifying specific actor and process labels and communication channel vectors in the Czech Republic.

One critique of the model described by Liu can be that it is arguably not accurate to distinguish direct and mediated communication in relation to communication channels. Direct communication such as interpersonal or group information exchange can be mediated, for instance, by using telephone or the Internet as the medium of transmission. Therefore, distinguishing direct and mediated communication refers to the equal importance of assessing government communication through traditional mass media and other forms of more direct government-to-stakeholder interaction such as face-to-face interaction and interaction mediated by the Internet. In other words, beside “*monological*” interaction characteristic for “*mediated quasi-interaction*”, it is necessary to focus on “*dialogical*” form of “*face-to-face and mediated interaction*.”⁴²

33 MITCHELL, R. et al.: Toward a Theory of Stakeholder Identification and Salience: Defining the Principle of Who and What Really Counts. In *Academy of Management Review*, 1997, Vol. 22, No. 4, p. 854.

34 GELDERS, D., IHLEN, Ø.: Minding the Gap: Applying a Service Marketing Model into Government Policy Communications. In *Government Information Quarterly*, 2010, Vol. 27, No. 1, p. 34-40.

35 SANDERS, K., CANEL, M.: *Government Communication*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013, p. 1.

36 HECLÓ, H.: Campaigning and Governing: A Conspectus. In ORNSTEIN, N. J., MANN, T. E. (eds.): *The Permanent Campaign and Its Future*. Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 2000, p. 1-37.

37 HILL, M. J.: *The Public Policy Process*. Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2009, p. 281.

38 LIU, B. F., HORSLEY, J. S.: The Government Communication Decision Wheel: Toward a Public Relations Model for the Public Sector. In *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 2007, Vol. 19, No. 4, p. 386.

39 LIU, B. F., HORSLEY, J. S.: The Government Communication Decision Wheel: Toward a Public Relations Model for the Public Sector. In *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 2007, Vol. 19, No. 4, p. 236.

40 LIU, B. F., HORSLEY, J. S.: The Government Communication Decision Wheel: Toward a Public Relations Model for the Public Sector. In *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 2007, Vol. 19, No. 4, p. 223.

41 LIU, B. F., LEVENSHUS, A. B., HORSLEY, J. S.: Communication Practices of US Elected and Non-elected Officials: Toward a New Model of Government Communication. In *Journal of Communication Management*, 2012, Vol. 16, No. 3, p. 236.

42 THOMPSON, J.: *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995, p. 85.

Moreover, principles of dialogue and mutual interaction also closely resemble the two-way symmetrical model of Public Relations theory.⁴³ In comparison with the core political communication triangle comprising political authorities, media and audiences, the Stakeholder Model of Government Communication arguably consists of (1) government and (2) citizens which use face-to-face interaction, mediated interaction and mediated quasi-interaction to enhance the quality of governance and embedded communication process. In other words, although media are still crucial in political communication analysis, “*key questions are less about media/politics and more about politics/citizen relations within the overall structure of competition*.”⁴⁴

As visualised by Figure 1 below, government communication needs to be theorised and practiced from both sender’s and receiver’s position in the communication flow. Governments interact with the wide public and with the niche audiences. Both policy makers (e.g. ministry officers, government representatives, parliament officials) and communicators (press directors, communication directors, online directors and other staff members of these departments) are in the position of senders and receivers of information that is created by them and transmitted from and to their stakeholder groups. Citizens can be viewed as a general stakeholder group which, however, can be divided into subparts of, first, stakeholder groups directly affected by a policy change, second, the wider public that consumes mediated quasi-interaction through traditional and online media and, third, niche audiences which can be segmented by many parameters and which add a dialogical level to the government communication process.

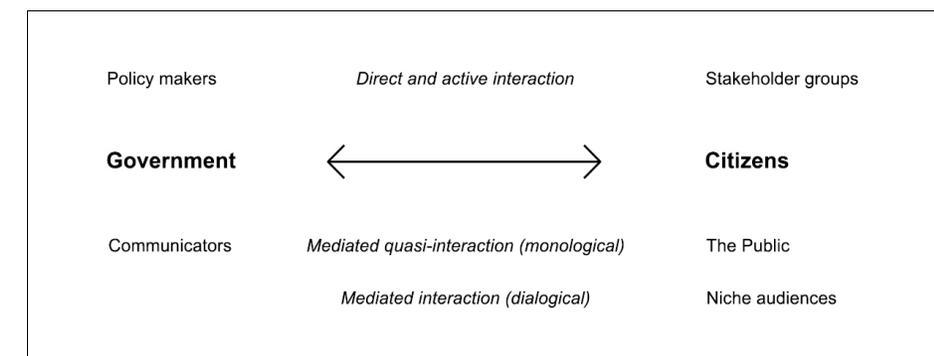


Figure 1: Towards the Stakeholder Model of Government Communication

Source: own processing

When researching government communication, we mostly concentrate on the monological level of mediated quasi-interaction that, simply put, can be called government (or information) campaigns. Traditionally, they have been executed through non-targeted mass media such as print newspapers (both PR work and paid ads) and OOH (billboards, city lights, posters). Since the evolution of the Internet, online communication including websites, paid search engine marketing, social media sites and 360° hybrid formats that link the traditional and the online sphere have been used, too. Nevertheless, the recent uptake of new technology in government communication⁴⁵ is not directly linked to the question of message adoption and understanding. Rather we ought to analyse all levels of government communication as visualised in Figure 1, especially the level of interaction between policy (decision) makers and stakeholders (lobby groups).

It seems too superficial to conclude with the common ending of many 2010s communication studies that there undeniably are numerous challenges rising from new and unexplored technology. Mutual and comparative analysis of both sides of government communication process, is, as we believe, the next big thing that could help answer key issues linked to decreasing trust in governments, democratic disenchantment or

43 GRUNIC, J., GRUNIC, L.: Toward a Theory of the Public Relations Behaviour of Organizations: Review of a Program of Research. In *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 1989, Vol. 1, No. 1-4, p. 27.

44 SCAMMELL, M.: *Consumer Democracy: The Marketing of Politics*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 180.

45 SANDERS, K., CANEL, M.: *Government Communication*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013, p. 310.

negative image of lobbying. Excitement from new technology should not cover the core issue of information processing and understanding in the 21st century. The public sector needs such inputs and inspiration.

We propose that looking at government communication through the lens of the Stakeholder Model can bring a fresh research perspective into this emerging and fascinating field and we shall continue in the research to further improve and update the Model so that it could become the theoretical and practical base for government communicators and researchers.

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