Government Communication in Australia

Communication between citizens and their governments is a key measure of the health of any democracy. Written by authors from a range of backgrounds – political science, law, media, public policy and government, as well as those who have worked as journalists, press secretaries, PR consultants and speech writers – this book assesses the state of government communication in Australia today. It considers the political, legal and economic contexts of government communication, including the institutions and actors involved and the relationships between them. This includes analysing the media–government relationship and how governments use 'spin', new media and expensive advertising to influence media reporting and public opinion. The authors shine a spotlight on the work of government spin doctors, speechwriters and PR consultants but they also analyse the social framework of communications today and the ways in which citizens, NGOs and governments communicate in a mediated world.

Government Communication in Australia is invaluable for students in media and communications as well as politics. It is also especially relevant for academics and researchers, government employees (local, state and federal), political and media advisers, media practitioners, journalists, advertisers seeking government contracts, IT people and contractors of all kinds who work on government projects.

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Government Communication in Australia

Edited by Sally Young

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'Freedom is when the people can speak, democracy is when
the government listens.'

Alastair Farrugia

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Preface

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

AANA	Association of Australian National Advertisers
ABA	Australian Broadcasting Authority
ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ACCI	Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry
ACTU	Australian Council of Trade Unions
ADF	Australian Defence Force
AEC	Australian Electoral Commission
AGAS	Australian Government Advertising Service
AGPS	Australian Government Publishing Service
AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
AIG	Australian Industry Group
AIGN	Australian Industry Greenhouse Network
ANAO	Australian National Audit Office
ALP	Australian Labor Party
ANSTO	Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation
ATC	Australian Tourism Commission
ATO	Australian Taxation Office
AWB	Australian Wheat Board
BCA	Business Council of Australia
BPWA	Business and Professional Women's Association
CEIP	Community Education and Information Programme
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CPD	*Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*
Cth	Commonwealth of Australia
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DGR	deductible gift recipient
EARC	Electoral and Administrative Review Commission
FAQ	frequently asked questions
GCU	Government Communications Unit

GMS	Government Members Secretariat
GST	goods and services tax
HIV/AIDS	Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
HORSCCA	House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs
ICB	Information Coordination Branch
ICTs	Information communication technologies
IPA	Institute for Public Affairs
IR	Industrial relations
MCGC	Ministerial Committee on Government Communications (formerly the Ministerial Committee on Government Information and Advertising)
MMG	Ministerial Media Group
MP	Member of Parliament
NACAIDS	National Advisory Committee on AIDS
NATSEM	National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling
NCWA	National Council of Women Australia
NGO	Non government organisation
NMLS	National Media Liaison Service (known informally as 'aNiMaLS')
NOIE	National Office of the Information Economy
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OGIA	Office of Government Information and Advertising
PBL	Publishing and Broadcasting Ltd
PM	Prime Minister
PMG	Postmaster-General
PR	public relations
PRIA	Public Relations Institute of Australia
PSAs	Public Service Announcements
RSPCA	Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
SARS	severe acute respiratory syndrome
SMH	*Sydney Morning Herald*
TAC	Transport Accident Commission
UN	United Nations
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association

Introduction: The theory and practice of government communication

Sally Young

In theory, communication is a basic prerequisite for democracy. Talk, debate and discussion have characterised ideals about democratic governance ever since the days of the ancient Greek *agora* (place of assembly, marketplace). In practice, communication is also inseparable from how governments operate. It is a dimension of every action or decision a government takes, from the way in which policies are made, promoted and enacted, to how government is organised and the relationships it builds with citizens, the media and other groups such as business and community organisations. In a representative democracy such as Australia, where the people do not rule directly but through elected members of parliament, communication is particularly important as representatives need to know their citizens' needs and preferences in order to represent their interests.

All of these reasons help to explain why the health of any self-proclaimed democracy is so often judged by criteria relating to communication. Do citizens have access to their governments? Can they speak freely, express their views and be heard? Does the government make information readily available? Are citizens kept informed about what their government is doing? Is there adequate public debate and deliberation about political issues? Does the media help citizens to weigh up the merits of rival policies and political alternatives? Finally, come election time, can citizens make an informed assessment of their government's performance?

Yet studies of political communication (both overseas and in Australia), often focus only on elections and the campaigns that precede them rather than what governments actually do in office. While elections are certainly crucial, even in Australia where election campaigns are quite frequent, they

are still atypical events in the political cycle. At the federal level, for example, elections usually last between three to six weeks and are held, on average, every 2.3 years. By contrast, if you judge that the 'reign' of a particular government dates from when a political party comes into office and ends when it is voted out, we have seen periods of federal government in Australia of up to twenty-three years (for the Coalition parties between 1949 and 1972) and thirteen years (for the Australian Labor Party (ALP) between 1983 and 1996). The current Howard government has governed for over ten years and several state governments for more than five years.

While the act of voting is the ultimate democratic act, citizens are far more likely on an everyday basis to connect with formal politics by contacting government departments to access information or benefits, or their local council to arrange permits, planning advice or local government services. When they switch on the television news at night, the politics story of the day will very likely be about what a particular government is doing (or not doing) and this is also the topic that looms large in newspaper reports, talkback radio and internet blog pages. Studies have shown that governments are a (if not, the) major source of news. In the USA, government officials 'serve as the primary sources for a third of the news articles on the front pages of America's leading newspapers'.[1] In Australia, even a cursory glance at media content suggests that Australian government officials are highly prominent.

A focus on elections only obscures the real nature of political communication and the way in which it is practised day in and day out, outside the sound and fury of periodic elections. This, along with democratic theory which emphasises communication between the governed and the governing, explains why it is so important to study government communication. But there are a number of features of Australian government communication that make it particularly interesting.

WHY AUSTRALIA?

By international standards, Australia is unusual because it uses compulsory voting and regularly achieves over 94 per cent registered voter turnout at federal elections.[2] Compulsory voting was introduced in 1924 on the basis that it was important that all citizens have a say in how they are governed.[3] The adoption of such a system suggests that Australians have traditionally placed a high value on the concept of citizen participation in governance, making it a good testing-ground for analysing such concepts. The compulsory voting system has also meant, in practice, that the vast majority of

Australians of voting age make regular assessments of their governments based on the information they receive. The quality of this information is therefore important.

Australia has a federal system with three tiers of government (federal, state and local) which has led to a need for efficient communication *between* the levels of government to counter the propensity for dispute, duplication and buck-passing of responsibility that can characterise a federal system. Australia's historical and physical isolation as an island continent and the long-running, and often virulent, debate about how it should understand its cultural identity and where it ought to situate itself, is often pitched as a cultural identity crisis regarding its British antecedents versus its Asian regional location. But this is also a communication matter as it underlies how particular governments view themselves and Australia's place within the international community. This, in turn, influences how they communicate their actions and try to shape understandings of Australian culture and identity.

There are also a number of other communication challenges for governments in Australia. As a federal government summary of Australia's demography points out: 'Today, Australia is a culturally diverse society with a population of over twenty million. English is Australia's official language but more than four million residents speak a second language'.[4] More than two hundred languages are spoken in Australia and 2.5 million people speak a language other than English at home.[5]

A unique physical landscape and vast geographical distances have always been defining challenges for both governance and communication in Australia. While most of Australia's population is concentrated in coastal areas with the majority living in state and territory capital cities, some areas still face unique conditions. For example, the state of Western Australia covers a landmass area of over 2.5 million kilometres. The Northern Territory has 91 per cent of its inhabitants living in rural areas and the lowest proportion of internet and computer users in Australia. Twenty-four per cent of its population speaks a language other than English at home and 27 per cent are Indigenous Australians.[6] Census findings show that Indigenous Australians experience poorer educational outcomes than the non-Indigenous population and that levels of 'literacy among the Indigenous population remain well below those of other Australians'.[7]

Aside from challenges, there are also idiosyncracies. To outside observers in particular, there are some aspects of political communication which appear quite characteristically Australian. The Australian political vernacular – as epitomised in parliamentary language – is one area that often draws

attention. While former Prime Minister Paul Keating's colourful language was particularly infamous, Ken Inglis found more generally that Australian parliamentary language (especially in the House of Representatives) is quite personal and abusive.[8] Patrick Weller has argued that 'Australian politics is played like Australian sport, up front, down to earth and with a blatant desire to win at any cost'.[9]

Specific factors of political culture aside, Australia is also facing many of the broader issues which have been identified in other liberal democratic states. The 'crisis of democracy' thesis suggests that there is declining public interest in politics, heightened cynicism about politicians and governments, and decreasing social capital as citizens retreat from political activities and other forms of active participation such as voluntary work and joining community groups.[10] The poor quality of government communication has been identified as one of many possible causes of this 'crisis' amid concerns that government 'spin' or communication that is evasive, glib or false is undermining trust between citizens and their representatives.

There has been much debate about the role of the media in these processes, including whether the media is a victim or a willing conduit of government 'spin'. Some commentators argue that media reporting is overly cynical about politics and that media outlets are placing intense pressure on governments by being more focused on scandals and more hungry for news content in a 24-hour news cycle. Yet others argue that media outlets are acting more like 'lapdogs' than 'watchdogs' of government because, faced with fragmenting media audiences, economic and staffing pressures, they are overwhelmed by the resources of government (including the armies of media advisers that governments now employ) and may therefore resort to merely regurgitating government spin because this is cheap and convenient.[11]

A large proportion of this book is dedicated to exploring issues of media–government relations, and Australia is a particularly interesting case study in this respect as it has one of the most concentrated media ownership structures of any liberal democracy in the world. There are only a handful of major media companies in Australia; for example, two companies control 98 per cent of newspaper circulation and one company – Rupert Murdoch's News Ltd – has 68 per cent of the daily newspaper market and over three-quarters of the Sunday newspaper market.[12]

Aside from the media, there is, of course, also a keen interest in what governments themselves are doing. Various Australian governments have been criticised for being inaccessible and secretive, for suppressing information, for refusing to allow staffers to give evidence at parliamentary inquiries or

for ruthlessly plugging 'leaks'. For example, there have been reports that, because Cabinet documents are exempt from freedom of information (FOI) laws, government officials have been wheeling trolleys of documents into Cabinet to make sure they are kept from public access.

Governments and their leaders have also been criticised for being too focused on mediated communication to the detriment of direct communication with citizens. There are too few opportunities now, it is often argued, for citizens to see or hear their leaders in person. As several chapters in this book explain, a media focus has had a major impact upon the organisation of government. This has led to concerns that governments may be misusing the resources of office, such as media advisers and government advertising, to fight a 'permanent campaign' at taxpayer expense.

While formal election campaigns are episodic, it has long been observed that, informally, political campaigns in Australia, as elsewhere, have become 'permanent', with parties perpetually campaigning and planning for the next election campaign as soon as the last one is concluded.[13] This 'permanent campaign' mindset means that, once in government, government MPs are still relentlessly campaigning. Dan Nimmo notes that officeholders now turn 'office itself into a full-time campaign platform'.[14]

There is a need for an historical perspective to consider when, and how, such shifts occurred. Many of the authors in this book separately highlight what they view as the key moments in the expansion, professionalisation and centralisation of government communication functions in Australia. The timeline below plots these events together and chronologically against changing media and communications technologies to provide an historical overview. This reminds us that communication options have changed dramatically over the past century and, indeed, over the past few decades.

Timeline of key moments in the history of Australian government communication, 1821–2005

Date	Event
1821	**Regular postal service operates in NSW.**
1853	**Morse code brought to Australia.**
1859	**Telegraph cables link Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney.**
1882	**First public telephone exchange created in Sydney.**
1901	First Postmaster-General (PMG) appointed to oversee communications in Australia.
1901	**21 daily newspapers owned by 17 different owners.**
1914–18	World War I recruitment advertising.
1923	**Radio broadcasting commences.**

1930s	Established practice for prime ministers to recruit a press secretary.
1932	**PM Joseph Lyons inaugurates the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC).**
1940s	Creation of the Commonwealth Department of Information (DOI).
1939–45	World War II recruitment advertising.
1941	Commonwealth Advertising Division (CAD) coordinates government advertising. Australian Government Advertising Service (AGAS) created.
1950s	Three departmental affairs sections in operation.
1956	**First television broadcast.**
1950s	Advertising of the British assisted passage scheme.
1968	Australian Government Publishing Service (AGPS) established.
1968	National Library of Australia opened.
1972	Whitlam Government supplies all ministers with a press secretary.
1972	Seventeen departmental affairs sections in operation.
1972	Department of the Media created. (Disbanded by the Fraser government in 1975).
1975	Coombs Royal Commission finds more than 800 public servants engaged in PR.
1980	Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet Task Force on Departmental Information.
1982	Information Coordination Branch (ICB) created.
1983	Hawke government creates the National Media Liaison Service (NMLS).
1983	A Ministerial Committee established to oversee coordination of government information.
1984	AGAS amalgamated with the ICB.
1989	ICB replaced by a new Office of Government Information and Advertising (OGIA).
1993	**Internet addresses become widely available to the Australian public.**
1995	**Pay television begins.**
1996	Howard government disbands the NMLS and establishes a system of 'hidden' media units (see Ward, this volume).
1996	Government Members Secretariat (GMS) created.
1998	OGIA restructured, renamed the Government Communications Unit (GCU) and moved to the Prime Minister's Department.
2001	**Australian television stations begin digital broadcasting.**
2002	Estimates that 4000 journalists work for state or Commonwealth governments in a PR capacity.
2003	Federal government introduces new branding for government departments and agencies.
2004	**First full datacasting service on free-to-air digital television goes on trial in Sydney.**

Australian governments have adapted from a world where direct face-to-face contact was supplemented by post and printed media, to being able to access other communication channels via telephony, radio, satellite telecommunications, television, the internet, pay TV and broadband. This has had a profound impact on the nature of government communication. Two media which have been extremely significant – and receive particular attention in this book – are television and the internet.

As we shall see in the following chapters, there are many theories and debates about about how governments communicate and how media outlets report government activities. Ultimately, however, at the heart of such debates is usually an interest in citizens: the extent to which citizens are included or excluded, listened to or ignored, informed or misinformed. While this underlying concern is apparent in all of the chapters, several focus specifically on how citizens and governments interact. Some consider the argument that governments are failing to provide citizens with structured opportunities to participate. Others note that even without being invited, citizens are demanding government attention using a variety of methods such as protest and dissent and through community groups and non-government organisations (NGOs). Whether, and how, governments facilitate communication in this social context is an important test of *accessibility* and *representation* and these are twin concerns which run throughout this book.

WHO OR WHAT IS 'THE GOVERNMENT'?

In an American study of language and political key words, researchers found that, during election campaigns, challengers use the word 'government' far more frequently than the incumbent government candidates. This is because, they argued, in the challenger's rhetoric, 'Government becomes a convenient punching bag because it is everything that voters are not – removed, large, rich, smart, powerful . . . Government, alas, cannot respond. It is gray; it is mute; it is government.'[15]

This tendency to see government in simplistic terms is reflected by the use of the generic term '*the* government', which suggests that there is some straightforward sole entity and tends to mask the reality of governments as large, complex organisations. When we talk of '*the* government' at the federal level in Australia, for example, we are actually referring to an organisational structure which includes not only the Prime Minister and Cabinet

but also seventeen major portfolio departments and ministers and several hundred agencies including statutory authorities, boards, committees and government business enterprises.

While the shorthand term 'the government' may be inadequate, it is commonly used as a descriptive term referring to executive government, and it is interesting to note that many governments are actively reinforcing this perception of government as a sole entity. This is because government is not always mute or grey. When a government is providing benefits such as pensions, family benefits or tax cuts, or performing benevolent work such as reminding citizens not to drink and drive or to bin their litter, the concept of a unitary government as a single brand has very real promotional and political value. For example, in a major branding exercise in 2003, the federal government adopted a corporate-style logo which included the descriptor 'Australian Government' and then required all government departments and agencies to scrap their individual logos and use the new generic one. In government advertisements and written material, there is also prominent use of the tag 'Authorised by the Australian Government, Canberra' rather than using the name of individual departments or ministers (see Chapter 2).

'The government' is usually taken to refer specifically to the executive government. As already alluded to, executive government consists of several actors and institutions including not only the leader – the prime minister (at the federal level), premiers (at the state level) and chief ministers (for the territories) – but also ministers who have been allocated a portfolio of responsibility (such as health, defence or education). The more senior of these ministers are in Cabinet, which is the key decision-making body of the government. There are also many more government MPs without a portfolio (backbenchers). Aside from all of these elected representatives, executive government also includes government departments and the public servants who work in them.

The public service is a major aspect of government and a very large (though decreasing) proportion of Australia's workforce. In 1987, 30 per cent of the Australian workforce were public sector employees. By 1997, this was down to 22 per cent but this still includes over a million workers.[16] It is important to consider how government communication is occurring both in and through this environment where, over time, there have been shifting ideas about the role of government including different conceptions of a 'welfare state', an 'enabling state' and a 'contractual state'.[17] There has also been extensive managerial reform of the public service in Australia, decreasing job security for senior public servants, and claims of an increased

blurring between public service and political functions. These contexts influence the practice of government communication (and are discussed in Chapter 3).

Of the three branches of government – the executive, legislature and judiciary – this book focuses particularly on the executive, but it also discusses the legislature (also known more simply as parliament), particularly in Chapters 7, 11 and 14. The judiciary is discussed mainly in Chapter 2 on government communication and the law but it is, admittedly, a quite deliberate gap in the book because the judiciary is independent from government and is not 'government' in the sense in which we explore it here in terms of responsible governments and their actions in communicating (or not communicating, as the case may be) with citizens.

A second gap in the book relates to one of the three levels of government in Australia: local, state and federal (also know as the 'Commonwealth government' or, as we have seen, as the 'Australian government'). Of these, this book focuses on the more powerful federal and state governments but particularly on the federal level. Local governments (also known as local councils) have no constitutional authority and are created by legislation. While local government is not insignificant, there are over 700 local governments in Australia and these are so varied that they are difficult to analyse in a holistic manner or to deduce any general trends from their actions. Nevertheless, some specific examples of local government communication are mentioned in several chapters including Chapters 2, 14 and 16.

As the federal government receives most of the attention in this book, it is worth noting that it faces some particular challenges in the area of communication. Of all the spheres of government in Australia, the federal government is the most distant from citizens. Australians are closer, in terms of personal contact and service delivery, to their state and territory governments since these are responsible for services such as schools, hospitals, police and roads or, in the case of local governments, very direct community needs such as waste collection, public recreation facilities and town planning. By contrast, the federal government is responsible for policy areas which have a national focus such as defence and foreign policy (it does also deal with areas such as health and education but these services are mostly delivered by the states). Taxation is one policy area where Australians regularly come into contact with the federal government but this may not necessarily endear them to it.

Geographically, for most Australians, the federal government is also a significant distance away as it is situated in Canberra when the majority of Australia's population lives in state capital cities (particularly Sydney,

Melbourne and Brisbane). Finally, a major challenge for any federal government is that it must govern for all Australian citizens – over 20 million people – while, in comparison, the state and local governments have much smaller jurisdictions and far fewer citizens to communicate with.

However, while these features of governance provide inherent challenges, the federal government also has some major advantages including the ability to make choices about its communication priorities and to control its resources. Among these resources the federal government has a large budget with over $200 billion in revenue.[18] It also controls the federal public service, has the ability to devote significant resources to media management and advertising, is a major news source, and is responsible for media and broadcasting policy as well as funding for the ABC. In considering how government communication works, all of these factors – challenges, advantages and choices – need to be considered and are examined throughout the following chapters.

KEY THEMES

The major premise of this book is that communication between citizens and governments is a key measure of democracy. Taking this concept as a starting point, in the chapters that follow, the authors assess the state of government communication in Australia by analysing it from a range of theories and perspectives, focusing on elements such as *history* and change, the *institutions* and *actors* involved and the *relationships* between them, as well as by communication *method* and even by *medium*. Underlying all of this is a central concern with interaction between government and citizens, government and media, and media and citizens.

While the book is focused on Australia, even in single-country studies it is important to avoid parochialism, and especially in an age of globalisation. A comparative perspective is employed in some chapters to consider similarities and differences between Australia and other countries, but particularly the UK and the USA. For example, Dennis Glover dissects political speech in a range of countries over two millennia, while John Sinclair and Stephanie Younane compare government advertising in the USA, UK and Australia. However, given Australia's history and political system, it is not surprising that there are strong links with British studies of political and government communication.

As Graeme Orr notes, British law has had a major influence on Australian law and practice. Australian governments have also consistently borrowed and imitated aspects of British government communication: for example,

swapping both personnel and traditions in PR in the 18th century (discussed by Noel Turnbull). In the 1940s, Australia created a Commonwealth Department of Information (DOI) modelled on the British Ministry of Information.

Australian governments have also long tried to find an audience for government communication in Britain including advertising for assisted passage immigrants in the 1950s (discussed in Chapter 12) and, more recently, asking the British in tourism advertisements 'Where the bloody hell are you?' (Chapter 13).

In terms of concepts, traditions and trends, there are also other important links. Julianne Schultz explains the 17th- and 18th-century British antecedents of the notion of the 'fourth estate', while Ian Ward maps the far more recent development of PR states in both the UK and Australia. Brian McNair provides us with an up-to-date look at political journalism and media–government relations in the UK which, given the strong history of borrowing and adaptation, allows readers to consider whether such changes may also occur in the future in Australia. This is a topic we also return to in the conclusion.

In conjunction with these attempts to contextualise Australian trends, there is also, throughout the book, an emphasis on grounding theory in practice. The authors use a range of different research methods including surveys, content analysis, rhetorical analysis and discourse analysis. Some draw on their own participant observation. All of the authors are experts in their fields, but they come from various backgrounds. Many are academics but bring a range of disciplinary perspectives that include political science, law, media, communications, journalism and public policy. Several of the authors have direct experience of the topics they discuss, having worked in media, politics and government. Included among the authors are several who have worked as journalists, press secretaries, PR consultants or speechwriters, as well as senior government officials.

To harness all of the various perspectives and methods of analysis, the book is organised into five parts, each with its own introduction. Part I considers the political, legal and economic context of government communication including government institutions and the legal framework within which government communication occurs. The next three parts focus on the media but from quite different angles. Part II examines the government–media relationship by focusing on media reporting of government and government attempts to influence this. Part III then shines a spotlight on the work of government communication workers whose job it is to try to influence media reporting and public opinion: the spin doctors,

speechwriters and PR consultants. Part IV then analyses how governments use media when, unlike news media reporting, they have complete control over the content. It examines two major formats: government websites and government advertising. The final part of the book considers the social framework and how citizens, NGOs and governments communicate before the Conclusion draws these strands together.

One of the more ironic features of studying government communication is the extent to which it is riddled with abbreviations and acronyms (especially with regard to the names of government departments and agencies), so a list of these is provided in the preface. Because several of the chapters mention various different federal and state governments and their leaders, Appendix A provides details of current governments as at January 2007.