

Examples of ministry experts speaking with media

Specific to Daybreak South:

1. Ministry of Environment BC Conservation Service representative Barb Leslie discussed bobcat sightings in the Okanagan on Jan. 20, 2015.
2. Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations biologist Mat Neufeld gave interview about Kootenay Lake fish stocks on Nov. 26, 2014.
3. Ministry of Transportation regional director Mike Lorimer discussed snow tires on Oct. 6, 2014
4. Ministry of Transportation senior project director Murray Tekano discussed the Highway 97 expansion on Sept. 22, 2014
5. Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations hydrologist Dave Campbell gave interview about snowpack levels on May 8, 2014.
6. Ministry of Agriculture Business Risk Management Director Gary Falk discussed hail insurance on April 9, 2014.
7. Ministry of Agriculture Fish Pathologies Gary Marty discussed IHN virus on Jan 28, 2014

Ministry of Health experts:

B.C. Provincial Health Officer, Dr. Perry Kendall, and his deputy, Dr. Bonnie Henry, regularly speak to media outlets on a variety of public health related topics.

For example, in recent weeks they have spoken to dozens of outlets on the topics of vaccination and influenza. In addition, Dr. Bonnie Henry held a media availability on testing of a patient for Ebola virus disease, and has spoken to several media outlets on the subject.

Ministry of Finance:

On Budget Day, Feb. 17, 2015, more than 40 deputies and other public servants from across government provided interviews, information to reporters including nine separate CBC outlets. As an illustrative example, Ministry of Finance communications staff fielded requests for interviews from nine separate English CBC entities on budget day and as well as follow up to budget day.

CBC interviews included four afternoon talk radio shows (Victoria, Vancouver, Prince George and Kelowna), four morning radio shows, and English TV. Finance didn't manage to fit them all in, but at 15 minutes per segment, that would be more two hours talking only to CBC hosts.

Ministry of Agriculture experts:

Dr. Jane Pritchard – Chief veterinarian - Avian flu
Dr. Gary Marty – Fish Pathologist - fish science
Paul van Westendorp – Apiculture Specialist - bees

Ministry of Environment experts:

Jennifer McGuire – Executive Director Environmental Protection - Mt Polley
Ted White - Manager Water Strategies - Water Sustainability Act
Nathalie Duchaine - BC Parks
Ralph Adams – Meteorologist - air quality
Conservation Officers – wide range of wildlife or land base issues.
Emergency Environmental Response Officers – spills and clean up

Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations experts:

A variety of Fire Information Officers talk to the media each day during fire season.
Assistant Deputy Minister Tom Ethier was the ministry spokesperson about the Wolf Management Plan.

ADVICE TO MINISTER

CONFIDENTIAL ISSUES NOTE	GCPE Media Relations
Ministry: Advanced Education	
Date: Feb. 25, 2015	
Minister Responsible: Hon. Andrew Wilkinson	

ADVICE AND RECOMMENDED RESPONSE:

- Point to own recent examples of media availability, comments and interviews.
- There has been no change in how GCPE manages media requests and to what extent GCPE utilizes or relies on public service staff in addressing or providing comment on an issue.
- GCPE communication shops address thousands of media inquiries each year through a mix of approaches, including having program staff, field staff or those in a service delivery agency provide comment or context – this is done extensively, on a daily basis.
- It is the job of communications staff to do media relations – this allows program staff to focus on their jobs.
- GCPE utilizes program staff for media comment when it is appropriate to do so – such as ministries that have a regional presence (ENV, FLNRO, Transportation as examples) and where staff who work on the ground are in the best position to offer local or regional context/information or data on an issue.

REGARDING MINISTER AVAILABILITY TO COMMENT ON AN ISSUE:

- Every media query is different. For example:
 - A specific request to speak with the minister - and to that end, communications staff try to accommodate within a very busy schedule involving each respective minister
 - Where that is not possible, or where that may conflict with a media deadline, staff may provide a comment or statement for attribution from the minister, ministry or on behalf of the communications director.
 - Numerous requests for data, policy or background information - and where those are concerned, communications staff will direct reporters accordingly to information they are seeking or facilitate information or an interview with a content expert such as a ministry expert or other ministry personnel.

REGARDING GCPE MANAGING PROGRAM STAFF AND THEIR ABILITY TO COMMENT:

- Certainly, where there is a need to communicate data/statistics or provide local context to an issue – ministries largely ask program staff to do so.
- As ministers are the final line of accountability, it is appropriate that any comment or announcement related to funding or policy decisions are the responsibility of a minister.

REGARDING REQUEST TO INTERVIEW BEN STEWART:

- **Minister Teresa Wat is the Minister responsible for International Trade and the Asia Pacific Strategy.**
- **Minister Wat is ultimately accountable for questions relating to the portfolio that focus on government policy, decision-making and progress.**
- **Communications staff for the ministry offered to make the minister – the elected official – available to comment.**
- **The Ministry of International Trade has a team working in B.C. and in Asia to promote trade and investment, and a special representative from B.C. in China supports that work.**

BACKGROUND REGARDING THE ISSUE:

A CBC Daybreak South item on Feb. 24, 2015 focused on government communications policy – suggesting government communications staff block media from speaking to public servants.

The story suggested that communications staff at the Ministry of International Trade should have facilitated a request to interview Asia Trade Commissioner, Ben Stewart. Communications staff suggested, if there were questions or comment required on the overarching issue of trade success and the government agenda on the issue, that the minister accountable – Minister Wat – was available to discuss the issue.

Communications Contact:
Program Area Contact:
File Created:
File Updated
File Location:

Program Area	ADM / Deputy Minister	Communications Director

CBTK (CBC Kelowna)
CBC Daybreak South
24-Feb-2015 07:41

Chris Walker: Government spin doctors are helping to kill Canada's democracy. That is the argument of investigative journalist and journalism professor Sean Holman. He made it in a story posted yesterday on the Tye. Sean is the founder of the BC news service Public Eye Online, and we have reached him this morning in Calgary, where he's now assistant professor of journalism at Mount Royal University.

Good morning, Sean.

Sean Holman: Good morning. How are you?

Walker: I'm very well, thank you. Lay out the essence of your argument for us.

Holman: Well, essentially it works this way. As you know and as every journalist who works in this country knows, it's increasingly difficult to get answers from any government, and that's largely as a result of a communications culture that has built up within those institutions. We can't talk to ordinary civil servants, ordinary public servants. That's not something that we're really able to do anymore. Instead, we're blocked from that by communications officers, media relations advisers, public relations professionals, who field our questions.

Oftentimes they don't really give responses to those questions. Instead, they simply give non-answers that make their organization look good, because that's essentially their job. Their job is to spin on the part of government. But what that means for the public is that they're not getting

ADVICE TO MINISTER

information about what government is actually doing, things that the government doesn't want the public to know, and that doesn't seem to be very good for democracy. How can you have a democracy if the public is not adequately informed about things the government is doing and, by extension, not adequately informed about things that the public might not want their governments to be doing?

This is a real problem in this country. We need to address it. Political parties need to address it. It should be on campaign platforms, but we're not talking about it as much as we should right now.

Walker: Unless you kind of work in this business, you might not sort of understand how this happens day to day. I have a couple of phone messages on my answering machine from the last couple of days. I had requested to talk to former local MLA Ben Stewart. He was appointed BC's special representative in Asia after he gave up his seat to Christy Clark last year. Sean, I'll just play you these messages, and then we can talk about it.

Here is the first message from the communications office of the BC government.

Kirsten Youngs: Hi, Chris. This Kirsten Youngs phoning back from International Trade. I just want to let you know that unfortunately Ben Stewart isn't available. As he's no longer an elected official, he's technically a public servant, and so he doesn't speak to media, unfortunately. But if you guys do want someone to speak to the issue of Chinese investments in BC, then just give me a call back.

Thanks so much. Have a good night.

Walker: There's message number one. Now, there is no such policy about public servants not talking to media, so I called her back, and I said as much, and she left this message on my machine.

Youngs: Hi, Chris. This is Kirsten Youngs phoning you back. I just wanted to let you know.... I'm probably going to sound like a broken record here, but unfortunately, Ben Stewart isn't available, but if you do want to speak with Minister Wat, I think we could probably work that out, so if you'd like to speak with her, you can give me a call back. Thanks so much.

Walker: What's going on here?

Holman: You know, unfortunately, there actually is a policy that public servants aren't allowed to talk to the media, and in fact, that's something that's become increasingly the case over time. I actually used to work as a communications officer for government before I became a journalist, so I went from the dark side to the light side, Chris, and I remember there actually was a time where we actually used to arrange for interviews between journalists and senior public servants, between journalists and ordinary public officials, so that journalists could actually get real information about what was actually happening in government. Of course, there was always some element of spin involved with that, but it was more about providing that information. There has been an increased lockdown when it comes to actually speaking to line civil servants, and if it's actually not in policy, it's generally understood that public servants don't actually talk to the media. Instead, this is something that communications officers handle.

But what we see and what you recorded -- and it's brilliant that you did -- is exactly what journalists face every single day, communications officers refusing to let journalists actually get real answers to questions and instead looking at it as an opportunity to essentially advertise what they're doing, to serve the client's interest -- government -- as opposed to the public interest. I think that's where they've gone wrong. Communications officers shouldn't be serving the government. They should be serving the public interest.

There's a cultural change that needs to take place here that this is not about short-term political management; this is not about short-term reputation management; this is actually about providing the public with information that they need, which is becoming an increasing problem in this country, not just in terms of communications officers but in terms of our right-to-know legislation, in terms of the availability of public records. I could go on. We're essentially living now in a very unknowable country, and it's something Canadians should be extraordinarily concerned about.

I love the fact that you managed to capture that on tape. It sums up perfectly what journalists go through every single day in their attempt to serve the public.

Walker: Ah, but it doesn't solve the problem and the problem for our audience, which is we're not getting the information. What should reporters do about this?

Holman: I think reporters should do exactly what you just did. We need to be much more open with our audiences about just how difficult it is to get ahold of the information that the public really does want so that they can make informed decisions as an electorate and between elections. We should be letting our audiences know when communications officers are giving us non-answers. We should not be including their non-answers in our stories. That is something that often happens because we're looking for a clip, any clip. And the other thing that we should be doing is we should be totally upfront when communications officers are blocking us from getting ahold of public officials like Ben Stewart, who should be able to talk to the media. After all, we employ people like Ben Stewart. They are public servants. They're not servants of whoever is in government at any given point in time. We pay for them. Therefore, they should be accountable to the public too.

Walker: There's a reluctance, though, on the part of media to do that, because you fear you might be blacklisted and never talk to anybody ever again.

Holman: Yeah, and that's a realistic possibility, but the thing is, if everyone started doing that, if all reporters started doing that, it would be much more difficult for communications and for governments to single out journalists in that particular way. If everyone started to push back against this and sometimes getting journalists to do that.... Well, as you know, it's like herding cats. That's very difficult. But I think in order for the survivability of our profession, in order for the survivability of journalism and in order for the survivability of essentially what our function is, which is being real-time truth finders and truth tellers to the public, we really need to do that. It's time for us to step up. It's also time for the public to be more involved in this issue, be more educated about this issue and start making it a voting issue.

Walker: Sean, good to talk to you this morning. We appreciate it. Thanks very much.

Holman: Thank you so much. Bye, bye.

Walker: Now, we have in our studio right now Adrian Nieoczym, who produced this story for us. Of course, to get the other side of the story, we wanted to talk to government communications officials about their strategies, and so Adrian is in our studio to tell us what happened about that.

Adrian Nieoczym: Well, I decided to go with the BC government, since that's our local provincial government. First of all, I had to figure out who to call, because it wasn't obvious who to call to talk about communications policy. It turns out the Government Communications and Public Engagement, as it's called, falls under the responsibility of the Ministry of Advanced Education, so I looked up on the media contact list, and the primary contact for the Ministry of Advanced Education is Stacey McGaghey Jones.

So I called her. I explained the story, sent a link to Sean's story so there would be no surprises. She called back about a half-hour later just to get some more information on what kinds of questions. I explained what we were looking for is an explanation of the government policy on the media talking to both elected officials and unelected officials and civil servants. She said she'd take it on advisement, and then I got a voicemail at 5:30 last night. Our request had been declined. No explanation.

Walker: There you go. That's how it goes. [xrz]

Hayes, Dana GCPE:EX

From: McGaghey Jones, Stacey GCPE:EX
Sent: Monday, February 23, 2015 12:41 PM
To: Chalmers, Jennifer AVED:EX; Dolan, Chelsea AVED:EX
Cc: GCPE Communications - Advanced Education, Innovation and Technology; Fraser, John Paul GCPE:EX; Gleeson, Kelly T GCPE:EX; Gordon, Matt GCPE:EX
Subject: media request - gov't communications policy - CBC Radio Daybreak South

Deadline: end of day today

Topic: Government communications policy – this request is related to a recent opinion piece in The Tyee (copied below). CBC would like a five-six minute interview to explain government communication policy and respond to concerns raised in the opinion piece in the Tyee.

Format: Radio interview. Two options:

1. Live at 7:40 am on Wednesday
2. Pretape between 9 am – 1 pm on Tuesday

Outlet: CBC Radio Daybreak South - Kelowna

Reporter: Adrian Nieoczym, associate producer

Phone/email: 250-861-3781 x236 / adrian.nieoczym@cbc.ca

Request date: Feb. 23 at 12:20 pm

Response: In progress

Dear government spin doctor,

I am working on a story about how your job is helping to kill Canada's democracy.

I know that your role, as a so-called communications professional, is to put the best spin on what the government is or isn't doing.

That means you often don't respond to the questions I ask; you help elected officials do the same thing; and you won't let me talk to those who have the answers.

While this may work out very well for you, it doesn't work out so well for my audience who, by the way, are taxpayers, voters and citizens.

So your refusal to provide me information is truly a refusal to provide the public with information.

And if the public doesn't know what their government is doing, it can continue doing things the public wouldn't want it to do.

That doesn't seem very democratic to me. Does it seem democratic to you?

I understand you're just doing your job.

I did that job myself before I became a journalist, working as a communications officer for the B.C. government.

So I don't think you're a bad person.

But you should know a few things about me.

My job isn't to help you put the best spin on what the government is or isn't doing.

My job is to tell the truth.

And because that's my job, you should know a few other things about how I'm going to report this story.

First, if you don't respond to my questions, I'm going to let my audience know that.

Second, if you respond to my questions with non-answers, I'm going to let my audience know that, too.

Third, I'm not going to put those non-answers in my story for the sake of false balance.

That's because me asking questions about what the government is doing wrong is *not* an opportunity for you to tell the public about what the government is doing right.

You have a big advertising budget for that.

Instead, it's an opportunity to explain to the public why the government is or isn't doing that thing I asked you about.

And finally, if you refuse, ignore or interfere with my requests to interview public officials, my audience will find out about that, too.

This may sound like hardball at best and blackmail at worst. But it's actually the last and only defence I have against you and your colleagues.

Public relations professionals outnumber journalists more than four to one in this country -- and for good reason.

It pays to promote and protect the powerful, but it doesn't pay to hold them to account.

My hope is that more journalists will start routinely telling their audiences about the strategies and tactics you use to frustrate the public's right to know.

If that happens, then the public might start caring about the damage done to our democracy.

And maybe, just maybe, you might start rethinking your actions.

After all, there was a time when journalists could talk to public officials without having someone like you always watching over their shoulder and telling them exactly what to say.

I know it's a long shot.

But it's the only shot I can take against the tyranny of your talking points.

Sincerely,

Sean Holman, Journalist