In the spirit of full disclosure, I should emphasize at the outset that my views reflect a particular set of experiences—sixteen years in television news, as a parliamentary bureau chief and national political editor, thirty years as a journalism educator, and now eighteen years as a communications strategist who is informed by public opinion research specifically designed to aid communications and media management. Over that time, my views have become less certain, less fixed, and more pessimistic. What follows is an amalgam of experience-based impressions, supplemented to some degree by the more rigorous analysis available in current literature in the field.

Any discussion like this probably needs to begin by considering the role, performance, and impact of the media with respect to government in Canada, particularly the media that report on the conduct of government. There is an obvious conundrum about chickens and eggs—but it is clear that media coverage has a profound impact on the design of government communications.

People involved in governance—whether directly or indirectly, in an effort to influence it—tend to think that the media have a responsibility to inform and educate and to act as fair witness to the process. Actually, the media have no interest in becoming a more effective link in the process of governance, nor do they currently have the ability to do so. Although journalists tend to
accept their responsibility in fostering democracy and generally tilt toward support of Western political systems, they feel no real attachment to or support for current institutions themselves, and certainly not for many of the traditions and conventions of those institutions.

Media organizations are increasingly large, integrated business organizations whose objectives are far removed from the idealized professional ethic that they have traditionally romanticized in order to claim special status. In a world of brutal survival strategies, the media are rapidly stratifying and differentiating. The commoditization of journalism drives it to meet both consumer demand and consumer prejudice. Market forces are turning what was once a business with a sense of corporate responsibility, one that was providing a public good, into organizations driven by the bottom line that are providing a commodity within the context of an increasingly frail business model.

As media analysts have long noted, the editorial touchstone is no longer whether something is intrinsically important. Rather, it is whether something is sufficiently relevant and interesting to readers and viewers to attract them away from other topics and other media. The operative decision-making rules have editors deciding not what people need to know but what they want to know. There is no longer a concept of an overarching civic mandate. There are no “must-carry” stories.

MEDIA AND THE COVERAGE OF POWER

The coverage of government and power has become a crucial tool for corporate positioning and marketing. The Meech Lake process and the free trade debate taught the media that a dispassionate assessment of power, an emphasis on issues of intrinsic importance, could put them on the “wrong” side of the gulf between elites and ordinary voters and consumers. That gulf was most evident in the final rejection of the Charlottetown Accord, which had been endorsed by the broadest consensus among elites seen in Canada in decades and yet failed in a national referendum.

Journalists who work for mass media have moved from reporting and evaluating to trying to represent and empower their audience. They have understood that people are alienated and suspicious of most institutions and have begun to pander to those feelings both by reinforcing the reasons for alienation and suspicion and by acting as a voice for the alienated and
suspicious. Media have found it commercially rewarding to attack the effectiveness and then the legitimacy of government and its processes. This has made members of the media a priori adversarial, proceeding from a presumption of manipulative practice and venal motive. Unfortunately, that presumption has too often been proven correct, thereby reinforcing current media practice and behaviour.

In government, this combination of factors usually leads to risk avoidance, careful communications planning, secrecy, and a hesitancy about discussing or even disclosing options. It also leads to a determination to avoid having the spotlight focus on divisive issues. Put a bit more generously, government has far more room to manoeuvre when it can sort out competing demands relatively quietly—because when the media seize on an issue, the rules change. The media tend to approach contentious issues with reactive suspicion, and an impatience with process, and to continually redefine the issues to fit media narrative or consumer models. That approach prizes conflict, short-term horizons for resolution, and clear, sympathetic “winners.” It is dismissive of incremental movement and half-a-loaf compromises.

Reporters try to fit virtually everything into an ongoing evaluative context—the current level of success and viability of the government in power, particularly if it happens to be a minority government. Every issue has the potential of advancing a government’s interests or setting them back, of testing a minister’s competence and popularity. Sometimes, the importance of issue resolution lies not with the actual substance of the resolution but with the way in which it was accomplished and its immediate political consequences. For instance, the government’s compromise in dealing with secret documents relating to the treatment of Afghan detainees is now being portrayed as a triumph of political tactics, which has served to bury the issue. Incredibly, whether there was substance to the original allegations (once the object of much reporting and analysis) now seems beside the point. In many ways, political coverage has come to resemble sports reporting. Coverage of a game is much more interesting than coverage of incremental process and arcane policy deliberations.

All of this would just be interesting anthropology if the media did not play a highly significant role in “priming” public opinion and government and public policy. As a great deal of research has shown, media emphasis—tonnage and display—establishes an issue’s relative importance, creating a
hierarchy for readers and viewers. In their work of priming, the media also set the agenda and the permissible limits for public discourse. They create an awareness of issues and determine the degree of urgency. There is clear evidence that having established their agenda-setting purpose, the media then influence the views of media consumers about governance and leadership by assigning responsibility to leadership for resolving the problems that the media have identified. The popularity of government and leadership, in turn, varies with the amount of attention they award to those issues and their efficacy in resolving them, even if those issues are intrinsically less important than others or less susceptible to solution. Media coverage of crime has been a classic example of this dynamic. There is little doubt that media emphasis on crime and on public fears about crime is far from congruent with the overall incidence of crime. Most experts agree that the impact of this emphasis extends to political policy, as parties jockey to avoid being tarred as “soft on crime.”

WHO IS PAYING ATTENTION?

The media, surprisingly, have less to do with actually shaping opinion. They only create the precondition for shaping by putting issues on the public agenda. Other sources, including family and friends, have a more important role in shaping opinion. That’s in part because most Canadians expose themselves to the news only in the most cursory of ways. Most people presume, incorrectly, that journalism reaches a wide audience of readers and viewers. What is correct is that opinion leaders watch and read the news regularly. Communications strategists usually work to create fairly focused messages aimed at influencing opinion leaders in order that their retransmission to others of both content and the hierarchy of importance is relatively consistent.

For more than a decade and a half now, to aid our communications efforts for both the public and private sectors, we at the Earnscliffe Strategy Group have been conducting research into the levels of engagement among the Canadian public. It appears that about 30 percent of the population is active in social, political, and community affairs. These people, who are by far those most interested in public affairs issues, are the opinion leaders, the people who seek out others to inform and sway. They consume media in highly
disproportionate numbers and generate the bulk of the letters to the editor and calls to open-line shows. They occupy virtually all voluntary agency executive positions and are the ones who speak in public and attend public meetings. And they come from all partisan tendencies.

The other 70 percent is relatively disconnected from the public affairs of the nation except at election time (and increasingly less so even then) or when some massive policy issue surfaces that has a direct impact on them. Reaching them is extraordinarily difficult. Informing them directly, let alone educating them, is even more so. Most of these people have chosen to disconnect because they have decided that most public affairs are of no practical relevance to them.

There is another point to make here. It has become increasingly hard to reach Canadians as a whole, across all the regions of the country. Because of the centrifugal forces operating in Canada, and because most journalistic operations are local and hence define their issues of interest and relevance more locally, it has become ever more difficult to assemble a daily national agenda or a daily national audience. There are few national news organizations, and, combined, they serve between three and four million people, many of whom overlap. Everything else is regionally based and, these days, is by definition idiosyncratic.

We have growing pools of people with different information bases, different sets of agendas, expectations, standards for government performance, and policy demands, and different levels of attachment to traditionally shared institutions and values. This is an immense problem for governments, particularly in their communications planning.

On the whole, on those issues of generalized interest, the various publics have a pretty good idea of what they want, but they don’t know much about how to get it, and they tend not to understand and accept real-world constraints. Impediments like jurisdiction meet with angry impatience. An intellectual understanding of the difficulty in providing comprehensive quick medical care doesn’t reduce the emotional angst of being on a waiting list or the tendency to blame the national government for failing to fix the problem. Nor does the inability of leaders to admit error or uncertainty inspire confidence.

The years of acrimonious public debates on a variety of critical issues involving stakeholders, interest groups, activists, and leaders have exhausted
the public patience for the kinds of resolutions that are the product of loud and angry partisan and ideological debate. The public tends to withhold its consent or to become actively hostile unless it believes that government gets the basic idea—in other words, that the government includes common-sense propositions in its quest to understand and solve a particular problem. Sometimes, the common-sense solution runs against the preferred policy outcome. An example of that sort of profound gap is the expert policy consensus on the need for systemic restructuring of health care versus the public demand for funding of acute and emergency care services. The public wants evidence that government is properly motivated—that the outcome being sought is appropriate, principled, and in the greater public interest. Compromise solutions often seem to fall short. The media’s insistence on absolutes tends to paint compromise, incremental initiative, and evolving positions as weakness. And finally, in a complex world of thousands of difficult issues, the public, before it engages, needs to be convinced that an issue is both truly important and truly urgent. Often those conditions are not immediately obvious.

Although members of the media understand that there actually is a public demand for solutions and quiet collaborative partnerships and that the public has lost confidence in the media because of negative tone and content, they also understand that the public likes its media to act out its generalized sense of grievance. Those involved in the media believe that those conflicting impulses may be irreconcilable, and so they opt for what they believe will entertain and sell.

Communicating Differentially

As a result, and at the risk of oversimplifying far too much, there are basically two legislative systems in Canada. The first is the system that has evolved over time and functions reasonably well: the process of elite brokerage and resource allocation described in classic political science texts. The other is the system that kicks in once mass media enter the process, a system that often becomes dysfunctional and spins out of control.

These days in Ottawa, competent communications advisors try to stay away from the mass media whenever they can. Government does not have the tools, the leverage, or even the podiums to fight effectively in the mass media arena. They have learned that there is seldom a win to be had, that playing for
ties is about as good as it gets. The constant and usually well-motivated quest to “educate” the public has often turned out to be counterproductive.

Governments despair of being treated fairly by the media or of being able to trust that substance will be transmitted accurately and dispassionately. From this comes a variety of tactics aimed at communicating directly to the electorate (or more accurately, segments of it), tactics honed to a high art by the current government—including grotesquely expensive and cartoonishly simple-minded advertising, cultivation of less informed regional media, and boxcar loads of publicly and party-funded direct mail. Perhaps even more disturbingly, little of this communication is about the actual substance of public policy choices. There is an obsessive fixation on message control designed to stifle policy debate and enhance partisan advantage—both of which are the antithesis of normal government communications objectives.

Nevertheless, a need for traditional information still exists among elites and issue stakeholders, and in order to serve them, the media have stratified quite significantly. Elite and specialized media organizations, many of them electronically based, tend to cover parliamentary and government processes more routinely and run into issues that other organizations do not. They operate in a manner closer to the professional model of journalism and are consumed almost entirely by the people we call the “involved Canadians.” Governments often “double track” their communications efforts: they cooperate (usually indirectly) with specialized media organizations in an effort to reach stakeholders and obtain input, while they downplay or stonewall communications on the same issues with mass media organizations.

Often, government communications advisors and public affairs strategists make a point of defining issues in ways that will seem technical or marginal to non-specialized media, even the quasi-elite ones. Properly managed, issues can be raised, debated, and disposed of within this public—but still essentially closed—loop. Stakeholders obtain information, pressure is applied, political calculations are made, and decisions are influenced—all without the issue hitting the broader public agenda. Some of the fiercest lobbying campaigns in Canadian history have been managed this way. Transportation and telecom deregulation and reform of financial institutions are some that come to mind.

The centrifugal forces at work seem to be accelerating, a process that is being aided by information technologies and their application to information gathering and distribution. Digitization and the Internet—which together
create a converging distribution point for content in the form of print, film, television, and multimedia—are having a profound impact on the way people gather, distribute, and consume information. Although these technologies have undeniably increased choice for the consumer (to the point of paralysis for some), as we now see in specialty TV networks, there is the clear prospect of closed-loop networks—information-gathering and information-distribution systems organized by special interest groups, religious groups, or market affinity groups who will employ their own information gatherers and processors and distribute their own material, and will incur very little cost in doing so. Political activists and managers clearly understand the utility of such systems. In the United States, right-wing loops like this have managed to increasingly isolate their consumers from contrary information, analysis, and opinion. In Canada, the federal government takes particular care to monitor and feed conservative bloggers, right-wing hotline radio programs (they are the highest priority for daily morning media reports), and the more conservative media organizations.

Factors like these have led to the current, and likely accelerating, decoupling of broad masses of electorates from particular classes of important information or even from traditional news information itself. If you don’t know what you don’t know and are unwilling to delegate others to tell you, you begin to narrow your universe to one driven by your preconceived interests. Governments can exacerbate the problem when they determine that it is not in their interest to devote extraordinary efforts to engage the disengaged.

When there is no civic premium paid on everyone consuming a shared information set and no practical way to encourage or enforce it—and worse still, when trying to connect demands a level of patience and commitment that people are unwilling to invest—logic says the likeliest outcome is more and more detachment from all but the most threatening or overwhelming kinds of information. That means a general fragmentation of knowledge about context, process, and even basic facts. In that context, how does a society manage decisions about the allocation of resources, determine a sense of national will, or broker resolutions? Is it any wonder that over the past decades of bewildering change, we are seeing increasing instances of the withdrawal of public consent and the refusal to delegate fundamental decision making to public and political leadership?
Lest this sound entirely pessimistic, let me acknowledge that there are countervailing influences and logics. Despite all the expressed alienation, cynicism, and suspicion of government, most Canadians still believe that government can and should be the protector of the common good and the public interest and the guarantor of personal security. Most people continue to invest in government the role of organizing and planning their economy and rules of order. And most Canadians have developed a healthy skepticism about media and its coverage of government. Part of the current growing public distaste for journalism reflects the public desire for the kind of journalism that so many practitioners have virtually abandoned: journalism that hews to the traditional professional model that people continue to believe is important.

The common-sense survival instincts of that broad middle of reasonable Canadians usually tend to prevail. For instance, local grassroots movements are operating around important local issues, as involved Canadians try to reengage the rest of us in order to build broad-based community-driven solutions. Social media have become a potentially important tool in galvanizing public interest and awareness. They had a profound impact in Québec in the 2008 election, creating a difficult problem for the Conservatives on an issue that they—and political media—had assumed was minor. Since then, social media have twice—on prorogation and the census—provided ongoing platforms for large-scale dissent. Certainly, digitized databases and information sources have empowered individual researchers to supplement and often surpass the efforts of media professionals and then to use social media as an alternative platform for publication.

An optimist, then, might say there exists the potential over time for an interesting coincidence of trends: a combination of a more restrained approach on the part of the media (and the less pressurized environment this might bring), higher levels of civic engagement; sources of information that are more transparent and more accessible, and greater public tolerance for appropriately motivated government initiative. All of these, in turn, might reduce the political cost to government of substantive re-engagement with the Canadian public.