Chapter 13
Communicating Information about Government Programs and Services in a Non-Partisan Way

1.0 MAIN POINTS

The public expects communications of government agencies to inform them about government programs and decisions in a politically neutral way.

Based on 11 government agencies we studied, these agencies rely primarily on the expertise of their communications staff to understand what constitutes non-partisan communications, and keep communications non-partisan.

As of March 2019, the Government does not have centralized guidance to help more than 200 different agencies make sure their communications are non-partisan. We think it should.

Making criteria for non-partisan communications public could increase transparency. It could also build public confidence in government agencies' ability to communicate about programs and services in a neutral manner. Furthermore, this criteria could be useful in efficiently educating government officials involved with external communications.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Focus of Study

This chapter sets out the results of our study of processes that selected government agencies used to make sure communications to the public about government programs and services are non-partisan.

For the purpose of this study, non-partisan communications are objective and not directed at promoting a political party or its interests. Generally, it adheres to facts, avoids political bias, and focuses on informing and educating the public about government programs and services.[1] See **Section 4.0** Study Objective, Questions, and Approach for further details.

To select ministries, Crown corporations, and other agencies for this study, we considered the following factors: level of communications expenses, volume of communications, and nature of communications. **Figure 1** lists the 11 agencies we selected.

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[1] Auditor General of British Columbia, *Distinguishing Between Government Program & Partisan Political Advertising: An Update to our 1996 Report*, (2014).

Figure 1—Selected Agencies

➢ Executive Council	➢ SaskGaming
➢ Ministry of Environment	➢ SGI
➢ Ministry of Health	➢ SaskPower
➢ Ministry of Highways and Infrastructure	➢ SaskTel
➢ Ministry of Trade and Export Development	➢ Tourism Saskatchewan
➢ Saskatchewan Crop Insurance Corporation	

2.2   Background

The drafting and issuance of communications to the public is largely decentralized. The Government of Saskatchewan is made up of more than 200 different agencies that deliver government programs and services, and communicate directly to the public about them.[2]

Government agencies use various forms of communication to inform people about programs, policies, public rights and responsibilities, public safety, and other topics. These communications media include print, news releases, social media, radio, and television.

Government agencies use internal resources to prepare communications, such as labour and office equipment. They also contract with third parties for communications services, such as television and radio advertisements. For example, as shown in **Figure 2**, government agencies spent between $18.8 million and $31.0 million on advertising services from 2013-14 to 2017-18.

Figure 2—Third-party Advertising Expenses

	2017-18	2016-17	2015-16	2014-15	2013-14
Total Government-wide advertising expenses (millions of dollars)	$18.8	$22.7	$24.0	$28.5	$31.0

Source: Executive Council's records.

2.3   Public Expectations about Government Communications

The public expects communications from government agencies to be politically neutral, and that these agencies only use public money to inform the public about government programs and not for political advertising. The line between these two areas can be blurry.

Having processes to help make sure Government communications do not support, in whole or in part, partisan activities increases the public's trust and confidence in the ability of government agencies to deliver programs and services in a neutral manner.

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[2] The Government includes ministries like Health, crown corporations like SaskPower, and other agencies like Tourism Saskatchewan.

3.0 STUDY FINDINGS BY QUESTION

This section summarizes our findings based on responses (from our interviews conducted by March 2019) to each of the seven Study Questions (set out in italics) along with review of related documentation (e.g., guidelines). See **Section 4.0** for a list of our study questions.

3.1 Criteria for Non-Partisan Communications Not Documented and Made Public

How does your agency define what constitutes non-partisan or partisan communications?

Generally communications staff from each of the agencies held a common (albeit undocumented) definition as to what constitutes non-partisan communications.

As set out in **Figure 3**, common descriptors included emphasis that government communications are fact-based, and must align with the mandate and strategic direction of the agency. Each of the selected agencies also explained that government communications should not promote a political party.

Figure 3—Common Descriptors as to What Constitutes Non-Partisan Communications

Communications that:

➢ Provide factual information about agency or government programs and services

➢ Do not promote, support, or criticize a political party or the decisions of a political party

➢ Are rational

➢ Are informative

➢ Provide tangible benefits to (educates) the people of Saskatchewan related to the agency's purpose (e.g., public safety, protection of the environment, etc.)

Source: Interviews with selected agencies' communications staff.

How does your agency require that all external communications be non-partisan?

None of the 11 selected agencies documented its expectation that external communications be non-partisan.

Each of the selected agencies described a culture that supports non-partisan communications. Communications staff from each of the selected agencies referred to an implicit requirement that external communications from their agency be non-partisan. The number of communications staff in the agencies ranged from 3 to 13. Each noted they relied on the judgment and integrity of professional communications staff to prevent partisan communications.

Each of the selected agencies described experiencing little to no expectation or motivation for their agency to issue partisan communications. They credited this to a general government-wide understanding that external communications should be non-partisan.

Three of the selected agencies cited legislation and/or related policies that restricted employees' involvement in politics in their work. For example, *The Public Service Act, 1998* does not allow ministry staff to engage in political activities during work hours, or that could impair their usefulness in their jobs.[3,4] One agency's policy did not allow staff to take part in any political or public activity that might be seen to compromise their impartial service to their employer. These selected agencies viewed these restrictions as supporting a culture where partisan external communications from government agencies are inappropriate.

We found that while these documents did not explicitly require non-partisan communications, they separated the business of government from political activities.

As of March 2019, in contrast to some other Canadian governments, the Government does not have a centralized policy or guidance to help its agencies make sure their communications are non-partisan. Other governments that provide such criteria or guidance about non-partisan communications include Canada, Alberta, and Ontario.[5]

Although the selected agencies did not identify any concerns raised about their agencies' communications being viewed as partisan, documenting criteria for what constitutes non-partisan communications could help strengthen government communications processes.

Documented criteria for what constitutes non-partisan communications could provide a ready way to train communications staff or other government officials involved in making decisions about external communications, especially during staff turnover.

Clear criteria would include expectations and a definition of non-partisan communications, as well as application guidance. Clear criteria would take into account differing communication risks resulting from varying types and mandates of agencies. For example, Executive Council, whose public communications focus on explaining the Government's direction and policy decisions, may need different criteria than an agency directly delivering services or programs.

In addition, making criteria for non-partisan communications public would increase transparency and build public confidence in the ability of government agencies to deliver programs and services in a neutral manner.

1. **We recommend the Government of Saskatchewan make public its criteria for what constitutes non-partisan communications about government programs and services.**

3.2 Responsibility for External Communications Clearly Assigned

How does your agency assign responsibility for making sure external communications are appropriate? What written guidance or other supports does your agency give staff to help

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[3] *The Public Service Act, 1998*, Section 33(2)(b).
[4] Ibid*.,* Section 33(2)(c).
[5] For Canada, see tbs-sct.gc.ca/pol/doc-eng.aspx?id=30683; for Alberta, see open.alberta.ca/dataset/6c3579d7-b44a-4cc9-bdaa-a00f38c06aad/resource/cef159d1-520e-4f4b-a4b0-40e1e90cd0b0/download/communications-policy.pdf; for Ontario, see ontario.ca/laws/statute/04g20. (4 April 2019).

prevent external communications that may be viewed as partisan? Who is responsible in your agency for actively monitoring that communications are non-political? How do they carry out that monitoring role?

Each of the selected agencies had well-established processes to review, approve, and monitor its agency's external communications.

In general, each of the selected agencies took a centralized approach to confirming external communications were appropriate prior to their issuance. Each of these assigned the responsibility for overseeing the quality and appropriateness of external communications to a member of senior management. In addition, staff within communications and operations branches had responsibilities for preparing and reviewing these communications.

While none of the selected agencies formally documented expectations about making sure external communications are non-partisan, each stated that employees understood this expectation. We found our discussions with them showed this understanding.

Three of the eleven selected agencies assign media enquiries to a spokesperson based on the subject matter, such as referring political enquiries to the Minister. Three other agencies focus on information useful to the public (or customer) by using communications plans, communications approval policies, or communications strategy templates.

Staff from the selected agencies used daily meetings of communications staff, media training, and writing presentations to foster a culture of non-partisan communications. In addition, one agency described its use of the Government of Canada's criteria for non-partisan communications as reference material to train new staff on the requirement for non-partisan communications (see **Figure 4**).

Figure 4—Advertising Standards Canada Policy Definition for Non-Partisan Communications

> ➢ Objective, factual and explanatory
>
> ➢ Free from political party slogans, images and identifiers
>
> ➢ Free from political party bias or affiliation
>
> ➢ Advertising is devoid of any name, voice or image of a minister, member of Parliament or senator
>
> ➢ The primary colour associated with the governing party is not used in a dominant way, unless an item is commonly depicted in that colour
>
> ➢ Ensuring initiatives that require parliamentary approval or trade agreements that require ratification are not advertised until such approval has been received

Source: canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/services/government-communications/advertising-oversight-mechanism/criteria-non-partisan-communications.html (4 April 2019).
Advertising Standards Canada also provides detailed criteria for each of these policy statements.

Eight agencies also monitor public response to media and social media after release of their communications. These monitoring processes included a daily media scan and monitoring social media posts.

3.3   Addressing Uncertainties and Complaints

What actions does your agency take to resolve uncertainty about whether a communication is political regardless of when the uncertainty was identified? What complaints, if any, has your agency received (either external or internal) about its communications being viewed as partisan?

Each of the selected agencies clearly described how it would identify and deal with uncertainties about whether a communication is political, if such an incident occurred.

All 11 selected agencies thought it would be very rare that its agency's communications would be viewed as partisan. Nine of them said it was unaware of any issued external communications that could be viewed as partisan. Two agencies each noted a communications request from new staff where it explained why the request was inappropriate (could be viewed as partisan), and did not fulfill it.

None of the 11 selected agencies received complaints about its agency's communications being viewed as partisan.

4.0   STUDY OBJECTIVE, QUESTIONS, AND APPROACH

The table below sets out our study objectives, key lines of enquiry (study questions), and approach.

The study did not constitute an audit and, accordingly, we did not conclude on the effectiveness of government agencies' processes to make sure communications to the public about government programs and services are non-partisan.

The study did not assess if communications released by government agencies were non-partisan. It also did not include processes to control the release of communications during an electoral writ period.

Study Objective:

To study the processes that selected government agencies used, at February 28, 2019, to make sure print, news releases, social media, radio, and television communications to the public about government programs and services are non-partisan.

Non-partisan communications are objective and not directed at promoting a political party or its interests. Generally, they adhere to facts, avoid political bias and focus on informing and educating the public about government programs and services. Selected agencies are listed in **Figure 1**.

Study Questions:

1. How does your agency define what constitutes non-partisan or partisan communications?
2. How does your agency require that all external communications be non-partisan?
3. How does your agency assign responsibility for making sure all external communications are appropriate?
4. What written guidance or other supports does your agency give staff to help prevent external communications that may be viewed as partisan?
5. Who is responsible in your agency for actively monitoring that external communications are non-political?[A] How do they carry out that monitoring role?
6. What complaints, if any, has your agency received (either external or internal) about its external communications being viewed as partisan?

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7. What actions does your agency take to resolve uncertainty about whether a external communication is political regardless of when the uncertainty was identified?[A]

Study Approach:

The study gathered information related to the above study questions. Our Office developed these questions based on review of literature including reports of other auditors, and consultations with Executive Council management.

We interviewed management responsible for communications (e.g., Director of Communications) at selected government agencies to understand their key processes for making sure communications about government programs and services are non-partisan. We also reviewed documentation (e.g., policies, guidelines) shared by the agencies to support our understanding of the processes.

[A] For the purposes of this study, non-political means the same as non-partisan; and political means the opposite of non-partisan.

5.0 SELECTED REFERENCES

Auditor General of British Columbia. (2014). *Distinguishing Between Government Program & Partisan Political Advertising: An Update to our 1996 Report*. Victoria: Author.

Australian National Audit Office. (2014). *Administering Regulation: Achieving the Right Balance: Better Practice Guide.* Canberra, Australia: Australian National Audit Office.