

CIVIL CIRCLES

If you can no longer manage your 'intermediaries,' honesty works

'There are millions and millions of people out there prepared to challenge any misstatement,' says Christopher Waddell

By SIMON DOYLE



OTTAWA—In an age when anyone with a home computer can be a journalist, organizations are much less likely to get away with spinning the truth, leaving some experts to wonder whether the most effective

communications strategy may now be a little more honesty and transparency.

The Conference Board of Canada is in the midst of preparing a report on "building stakeholder trust," and last week held a closed-door roundtable on the subject in Ottawa. It's no secret that public trust in institutions, from corporations to political parties to the church, is on the decline. The question is how low levels of trust can be improved—if at all.

There's a traditional school of thought that says a key strategy toward the management of trust is to focus on the "intermediaries" that affect your organization's reputation. These include hostile (and friendly) lobby groups, think tanks, the news media and political parties. Collect intelligence on these intermediaries, deconstruct them, meet with them, form understandings and alliances with them, and you can significantly improve public trust in your organization.

But it's getting more difficult to manage intermediaries because, in the internet age, there are too many of them. Blogs, YouTube, and independent web media pose a new challenge to organizations.

Christopher Waddell, a professor of journalism at Carleton University who attended last week's roundtable (as did *The Hill Times*), says the new environment makes it more difficult for organizations to spin their way out of a dishonest message.

"There are millions and millions of people out there prepared to challenge any misstatement. Sometimes they're wrong, sometimes they're right," Prof. Waddell said in an interview last week. "Another thing they have that they never had before is the ability to disseminate information, to demonstrate why the corporation or the entity might be wrong. You can put documents up on a website for the public really easily."

He pointed to last month's controversy over the presence of undercover Quebec

Provincial Police agents at the Security and Prosperity Partnership protests in Montebello, Que. An amateur video posted to YouTube exposed the agents and forced the police force, the Sureté du Québec, to first change its story, and then admit the agents' presence.

"When they talk about managing the intermediaries, or dealing with the intermediaries, now anybody's an intermediary," Prof. Waddell said. "The best defence against all of that is to make sure that what you're saying is true. And as someone else said, it's easier to remember the truth. So you don't get caught up [in what you say]."

It was also bloggers who caught a fraudulent document reported on by CBS, which wrongly alleged that U.S. President **George W. Bush** avoided military service in Vietnam by seeking a placement in the Texas Air National Guard. After CBS made the document available on the internet, bloggers discovered that its font was particular to an IBM electric typewriter that was not old enough to be written at the time of the letter's date. "Somebody out there was a fan of IBM's electric typewriters," Prof. Waddell said.

Nik Nanos, president of SES Research, who has conducted research on trust and who also attended last week's roundtable, said organizations are now faced with conducting PR in the "Wild West" of the internet. "Practitioners have to accept that there's going to be negative noise out there on any given issue. In the past, if there was a minority opinion, it would really not have a platform," said Mr. Nanos.

Now it does, however. "Anyone can be an investigator and they can find out who has worked for who and who funds who and what they've done throughout their whole career. In a way it's hard for an organization that might have a trust problem to manage. It goes back to the adage that the best preventative action is probably to be transparent, forthright and honest," Mr. Nanos said.

Paul Thomas, the Duff Roblin professor of government at the University of Manitoba, agreed, saying that that governments should adopt a more proactive approach toward the release of information to avoid allegations of cover-ups and non-disclosure. He said the U.S., for instance, has laws that facilitate public, online documentation, and the creation of online libraries.

"The idea is that you pre-empt the embarrassment of somebody disclosing this juicy document from Finance that I've got my

hands on," Prof. Thomas said. "If you put it up there and you prepare the story to interpret it, then you're ready for the media or whatever advocacy groups when they come."

However governments appear reluctant to take such an approach. Prof. Thomas said he took part in a government task force on government communications policy, conducted by the Canada School of the Public Service at the height of the sponsorship scandal, which was "torpedoed" because the report would have criticized the government's communications approach in a volatile political environment. The task force was close to recommending better guidelines to distinguish between political spin and professional, objective communications, he said.

"I guess the centre of government got wind of it," Prof. Thomas said. "The whole thing just got shot down. It just never came out."

Canada-Australia public policy initiative

In Australia last week, Prime Minister **Stephen Harper** (Calgary Southwest, Alta.) announced a new Canada-Australia Public Policy Initiative after a meeting with Australian Prime Minister **John Howard**.

The new initiative is an interchange program for public servant exchanges, the sharing of best practices, and career development opportunities, according to a release from the Prime Minister's Office.

The initiative will involve joint pub-

lic policy retreats alternating annually between Australia and Canada to "provide a forum for sharing ideas and expertise on public policy challenges of relevance and importance to both countries," the release said. The program is under development and it is too soon to say when it will start or how many public servants will take part.

The initiative will also involve an expert public lecture series, alternating annually between Canada and Australia, to complement the policy retreats. "With the knowledge and expertise of innovative thinkers and leaders from business, industry or academia, the lecture series will draw upon a diversity of ideas to enrich public policy dialogue in the two countries," the release said.

David Zussman, the Jarislowsky chair in public sector management at the University of Ottawa, wrote in an op-ed in the *Ottawa Citizen* on Oct. 3 that Canada and Australia could benefit from such a program, especially on the issues of government-wide services, public service retirements and recruitment.

"[T]he two prime ministers might evaluate a proposition that was made at a roundtable discussion during my most recent trip to Australia," Prof. Zussman wrote. "In discussions about the cultural characteristics of both countries, there seemed to be a consensus among participants that they shared many common interests but fundamentally they had two very different value systems. The first difference is that Australians, in the last 20 years, have developed a passion for gold while Canadians, in the words of the *Economist* magazine, have a passion for bronze. And second, possibly as a result of the first, Australians have become 'thinkers' while Canadians have chosen to be 'thinker analyzers.'"

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