In the interests of full disclosure, I should emphasize that my views come from a particular set of experiences — sixteen years as a television news parliamentary bureau chief and national political editor, twenty years as a journalism educator and now almost eight years as a communications strategist or one step removed “spin doctor” who is informed by public opinion research specifically designed to aid communications and media management. And I’m afraid as I assumed different vantage points my views became less certain and less fixed.

I think I need to begin with a bit of a background discussion about government, public attitudes and the media to make sense of my views about the media and public policy. It starts with the virtually unassailable and experimentally verified proposition that, in the world of public affairs, though media don’t convince people of what opinion they should hold on an issue, media consumption is critical to what they should think about. As I will explain later, there is one important caveat to this and it involves the overall receptivity among Canadians to information about public affairs.

In the public policy context, media is important because it “primes” public opinion. Media, in priming, establishes
permissible limits to discourse and agenda. It creates awareness of issues and conveys its assessment of the degree of urgency. Media frequency and emphasis — tonnage and display — create a hierarchy of importance for public issues.

In doing so, media is critical to public and civic agenda setting. Most people accept that agenda and then tend to invest responsibility in their leadership to resolve the issues they have come to believe are both important and urgent. Leadership is then evaluated on the basis of the efficiency it displays in dealing with important issues. Curiously perhaps, that media influenced public agenda is not necessarily synchronous with an agenda voters would set independently. But research has shown that approval ratings conferred on politicians have more to do with their resolution of the media public agenda than their resolution of issues people might personally hold to be more important.

As we all know, if we think about it for a moment, much of the work in Ottawa by media, politicians and officials has been essentially a struggle to influence the agenda setting exercise.

However, in Canada today, there is far less social and civic premium being paid to the value of a shared national information experience, in effect the national agenda setting process. In part that is because of centrifugal pressures in a rapidly regionalizing society, in part it is true because media news definitions have expanded so substantially that it is hard to assemble coherent, mutually agreed upon hierarchies of importance — the traditional core of what people used to call News Value. “What happened today” is much more complex question than it used to be.

News organizations have begun to reject their professionally articulated mandate, that of establishing and communicating Importance, to a much more commercially viable mandate of communicating issues of relevance and interest. The broader the range of issues, the more emotional, divisive, entertaining and interesting those issues are, the larger the prospects of assembling new coalitions of audience. However, by definition, that broader range of issues yields a series of eclectic choices made for different target audiences, rendering each news agenda idiosyncratic.

We have had, and will continue to have for a while, a situation where mass media is the main source of information for most people; it determines its news agenda by commercially driven criteria; that news agenda is understood by the electorate to be a public policy agenda and leadership is evaluated by the electorate and a sometimes hostile media by the way it hews to, and resolves, that agenda. So at this point, let me move ahead to the real core of this discussion, the interplay among media, government and public policy.

The coverage of power and leverage. The exercise of power and leverage through government and public policy has always attracted journalists because of the “special role” they have adopted for themselves. That is the role of media as public watch dog, as the arbiter of accountability. It sometimes is expressed in the wonderfully telling phrase that media’s job is to “afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.” It was what helped create an agenda of “intrinsic importance” — economics, politics, finance. Abuse of power has been a legitimate target for decades for the same reasons.
Now, however, coverage of power has become not so much a content marketing tool as a crucial tool for corporate positioning.

The process from Meech Lake to Charlottetown and the national free trade debate reconfirmed to media that a dispassionate assessment of power, an emphasis on intrinsic importance, could put it on the “wrong” side of the gulf between elites and those who feel disempowered and alienated. Mass media has moved from reporting and evaluating to trying to represent and empower its audience. It has understood that people are alienated and suspicious and it has 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.

Its quest to represent and its fear of being on the “wrong” side has led it to not only be suspicious of power and its exercise, it has led to a suspicion of expertise because that is seen as a tool of the powerful. It is no accident that mass media emphasis tends to concentrate on “ordinary” people and their preferred options and solutions. Remember that media are highly consumer sensitive, and they are reacting to public opinion and marketing realities.

In a complex and threatening world, an alienated citizenry wants control over what may threaten it or the ability to wreak retribution. People do not want to believe that things happen haphazardly or randomly. They don’t want to believe that things can’t be easily fixed. They want to believe that someone is in charge and more to the point, that if someone were truly in charge, the world would become safe and comfortable again. To make that construct work, someone has to accept responsibility if things go wrong.

In response, since most journalists don’t care about the institutional or systemic impacts of their work and since they are not terribly interested in technical issues, they are happy to lead the search for blameworthiness because it is a better story.

On the whole, the public has a pretty good idea what it wants. It doesn’t know much about how to get it and it certainly doesn’t understand and accept real world constraints. Impediments like jurisdiction meet with angry impatience. Intellectual understanding of the difficulty in providing comprehensive quick medical care doesn’t reduce the emotional angst of being on a waiting list. The inability of leaders to admit error or uncertainty does not 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 resolutions that are the product of loud and angry partisan and ideological dialectic.

And though media understands there is a public demand for solutions and quiet collaborative partnerships, and it understands it has lost the confidence of the public as it appears to be exclusively negative, it also understands that the public likes its media to act out the public’s generalized sense of grievance. Media believes those conflicting impulses may be irreconcilable and goes with what it believes entertains and sells.

As a result, 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 that functions reasonably well. It is
the elite brokerage and resource allocation process of classic political science texts. The other is the system that kicks in once mass media enters the process, a system that often becomes dysfunctional and spins out of control.

People involved in governance, whether directly, or trying to influence it, tend to think that media has a responsibility to inform and educate and to act as fair witness to the process. Actually media has no interest in, nor the ability, to become a more effective link in the process of governance. Though journalists tend to accept their responsibility in fostering democracy and generally tilt towards 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.

People often forget that though their own issue is all-consuming, political reporters work in a wider overall context. They try to fit virtually everything within the dramatic narrative which is the ongoing political context — the current level of success and viability of the government in power. Every issue has the potential of advancing a government’s interests or setting it back, of testing a Minister’s competence and popularity. Sometimes, to media the importance of issue resolution is not the actual substance of the resolution but the way in which it was accomplished and the political consequences it has set off.

An intuitive understanding of the competitive interests of media and the impact of media “frenzies” usually leads, in government, to risk avoidance, careful communications planning, secrecy, a difficulty in discussing or disclosing options. It also leads to a paranoia about interest groups and public lobbying because they turn the spotlight onto divisive issues. Put a bit more generously, government has far more room to manoeuvre and far more flexibility when it can sort out competing demands relatively quietly. When media becomes involved, the rules change.

Government (political and bureaucratic) and media too often see themselves as permanent residents locked in a difficult and perhaps mutually destructive ritual dance. Interest groups and stakeholders are seen as transients and their issues are usually, depending on their visibility, just agenda items on day timer lists, or temporary battlefields to move into and out of. To extend the metaphor a bit, competing groups and issue stakeholders often become surrogate forces for the real competitors, government politicians, officials, opposition parties and media.

What are more appropriate roles and practises for media and the institutions of government? Everyone knows what they should be. Fostering an open system with the ability to discuss options, tell the whole truth and encourage informed debate and dialogue. Where mistakes are simply mistakes; where opinions can change and evolve, where accountability is clear, where every issue does not assume deep political consequence. We need to lower the stakes. The clear road would involve desensitizing and depresurizing the system.

However, there may actually be no incentive for media to change because there is no indication that there is a real public willingness to engage in public policy and its issues. And that is a truth few want confront.
At Earnscliffe we have been doing a great deal of research for eight years now on the levels of engagement among the public in aid of our communications efforts for both the public and private sectors. It appears that about 30% of the population is active in social, political and community affairs. These people are far and away the most interested in public affairs issues and they are the influencers, the people who seek out others to inform and sway. They consume media in highly disproportionate numbers and generate about 90% of the letters to the editor and about 85% of the 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% is virtually disconnected from the public affairs of the nation except at election time (and even then, their participation is diminishing steadily) or when some massive policy issue with direct impact on them surfaces. 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 public affairs is of no practical relevance to them. The depressing reality is a majority of Canadians choose not to expose themselves at all on even a quasi regular basis to the news about these issues. Often that is the answer to the puzzling phenomenon when a “beltway” issue is not widely understood outside Ottawa or an issue of elite controversy hasn’t been absorbed at all by most people. It’s not that people are stupid—they have decided not to pay attention and could care less.

But because they represent the large majority share of potential consumers, mass media organizations try to enlist these people as purchasers, if albeit disengaged ones, and proceed to select and redefine content to interest them and pander to them. It is here that much of the apparently simple-minded distortion of issues takes place. And when issues become current in this arena, they are at their most volatile and most difficult to manage. Fortunately perhaps, few issues are very resonant here.

These days in Ottawa, competent communications advisors try to stay away from the mass media whenever they can. Government does not have the tools, 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. Where there is a choice, there are four basic rules of thumb most consider before making a decision to draw the general public and the mass media into an issue.

- The public tends to withhold its consent or get actively hostile unless it believes that government gets it—in other words, that it 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 on 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.

- That the issue on which it is being consulted and asked to decide in some way is truly important. And finally

- That the need for resolution is truly urgent.

If issues don’t meet these rules of thumb, it is often better to stay out of the overheated mass media environment.

Nevertheless, there still IS a need for traditional information among elites and issue stakeholders and in order to serve them, media has stratified in much the way it has in the U.K. But because the market is so much smaller in Canada, even elite media have needed to adopt at least some of the mass media model to capture sufficient critical mass. As a result, the private newsletter — electronic and written — has become an important source of analysis and routine information to people who absolutely require raw data and dispassionate information.

These elite and specialized media organizations tend to cover parliamentary and government processes more routinely and run across issues other organizations do not. They operate closer to the professional model of journalism and are consumed primarily by the people we call the Involved Canadians. Often, communications and public affairs strategies deal almost exclusively with these media organizations and as an objective, try to define issues in ways that will seem technical or marginal to other media. 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 were managed this way — transportation deregulation and reform of financial institutions are two that come to mind.

Journalists who work for specialized or elite media tend to pride themselves on their ability to understand and communicate complexity. They tend to have longer institutional memory. And they can be made to conform, most of the time, to professional standards. They also work under stricter — though this should not be overstated — rules of internal accountability. As a result, points of view are more likely to get a fair hearing. On the other hand, they are quite likely to reach what they consider to be informed conclusions about issues and then sometimes enter the debate themselves, expressing opinion and taking sides. They are harder to coopt or to turn around once they reach their conclusions.

Their readership — the Involved Canadians — are, by definition, busy and engaged in a variety of issues. They tend to pick and choose carefully how they will expend energy and interest. Most issues that seem routinely procedural or technical tend not to engage them. They tend to understand the system and have more tolerance for its vagaries. But pique their interest — and remember they are heavy news consumers — and they will start to destabilize the generally closed loop of government decision making because they are the people from whom politicians tend to hear first and most articulately.

Looking ahead, the centrifugal forces seem to be accelerating somewhat. As I
indicated, serving the information needs of very different people under very different circumstances has led to an increasing stratification of media, a process that is being accelerated by information technologies and in the application of those technologies to information gathering and distribution.

Furthermore, digitization and the Internet with an ensuing distribution convergence for content like print, film, television and multimedia will have a profound impact on the way people gather information, distribute information and consume information. They will undeniably increase choice for the consumer (to the point of paralysis for most) and probably weaken for a time, centrally organized, proprietary journalism as we know it. The business case for central infrastructure will become quite tenuous.

The privileged protection of the journalist as quasi-certified professional will be eroded and may disappear altogether as anyone with the technical skill set will be able to assemble and transmit journalism from virtually anywhere. The multiplicity of channels, modes of transmission and most importantly, the internet and its successors, will afford to virtually anyone a distribution outlet. The networks' primary reason for being — their distributional advantage — will have disappeared. That process is well underway now, seven short years after the Internet began to emerge from infancy. It has begun to signal the end of the other half of the journalist's protection — the implied authority and conferred credibility of the standalone organization for whom the journalist works.

In fact as we have begun to see in specialty networks, there is the clear prospect of closed-loop networks — information gathering and distribution systems organized by interest groups, religious groups or market affinity groups who will employ their own information gatherers and processors, distribute their own material and incur very little cost doing it. All will use the same multimedia conventions and forms — they will be virtually indistinguishable.

None of this would be terribly important and could be dismissed as an artifact of the evolving marketplace, if it wasn't for the difficulties for governance posed by the twin dilemmas of agenda setting and diminishing shared information experience. If news agendas and common experiences continue to differentiate, we will have pools of people with different information bases, different sets of agendas, different sets of expectations, different sets of standards for government performance, different sets of policy demands, and different levels of attachment to traditionally common institutions and values.

More worrying is the current and likely accelerated decoupling of broad masses of electorates from particular classes of important information or even from traditional news information itself.

When there is no civic premium paid to sharing information experience and no practical way to do it or enforce it, and worse still, when trying to connect demands a level of patience and skill people are unwilling to invest, logic says the likeliest outcome is more and more detachment from all but the most threatening or overwhelming kind of information. That means a general differentiation in 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 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 refusals to delegate fundamental decision making to public and political leadership?

Now, lest this sound entirely pessimistic, let me acknowledge that there are countervailing influences and logics.

Despite all of expressed alienation, cynicism and suspicion of government, most Canadians still believe government can and should be the keeper of the common good and the public interest. 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 scepticism about media and its coverage of government.

The broad and reasonable middle group of Canadians is getting increasingly uncomfortable about the minorities who are far ahead in their access to information and leverage. They have also begun to resent those who have disengaged or who have been disengaged and who put unreasonable demand on government to satisfy their needs. The common sense survival instincts of that broad middle usually tend to prevail. For instance, as they have for a very long while, local grass roots movements are once again operating around important local issues as Involved Canadians try to re-engage the rest of us in order to build broad based community driven solutions.

Despite the current discouraging turmoil in media, there are also some countervailing tendencies. Though the economics of one stop shopping and general information are difficult, the logic of the need for them is not. Given a choice, one that is economic, relatively painless, and relatively compact, most people are still likely to delegate to others the bother of assembling an inclusive menu of information they need.

At the most basic level, journalism has always been driven by consumers’ need for reasonable and consistent threat assessment — roughly the questions all journalists try to answer are: “is it safe to leave your home? is your country safe? is your world safe?” or put another way “what do I need to know about what might affect me as I go about my life today?” Most people understand there are risks out there they need to assess. But they want to know that the assessment being provided is accurate.

There will be demand once again for relatively dispassionate and important news once again. Part of the current growing public distaste for journalism reflects the public desire for the journalism they want but the practitioners have virtually abandoned. That is the one that hews to the traditional professional model people continue to believe to be quite important.

As well, it is reasonable to assume that as the technology of information transfer becomes more and more user friendly, it will be far less painful to extract and consume. The cost of access should drop. Visual media literacy increased exponentially over the past 20 years. So should digital competence over the next. As the ease of accessing more and more transparent information increases, the public fear of elite information manipula-
tion should diminish. The ability to personally direct digital access to a diversity of facts and views will provide a degree of comfort in that regard. Though most will probably choose not to do so, the fact that they can, will provide a measure of security.

Put together, an optimist might say there is the potential for an interesting coincidence of trends. They would combine a more restrained media (with the less pressurized environment it might bring); higher levels of civic engagement; more transparent, accessible information sources and increased public tolerance for appropriately motivated government initiative. Reasonable people would call that a significant opportunity.