

A media perspective on free and frank policy advice

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From gamekeeper turned poacher

PM's office staffers sometimes considered free and frank advice as the equivalent of farting in public – sometimes unavoidable, but not desirable

As an opposition staffer, free and frank advice is seen as unlimited ammo for paintball – the only use for it is to fire it at your opponents as quickly as possible

Now as a form of media, I have a more nuanced view of it as understanding risks and unintended consequences

More advice is becoming accessible

More common for cabinet papers and sometimes advice to be released proactively by Government

OIA requests used to go to just the requester but now many are published

Media often put up full advice on their websites

Many requesters use the FYI site which automatically publishes responses online

Who seeks your advice?

Ombudsmen complaints break down in 2014 as:

- Individuals 55%
- Media 16%
- Corporates 10%
- MPs 12%

In 2008 it was:

- Individuals 38%
- Media 12%
- Corporates 13%
- MPs 22%

Social Media

LinkedIn is for people you now

Facebook is for people you used to know

Twitter is for people you want to know

Instagram is for photos of food

Google Plus is an example that Google doesn't get to win at everything

Social Media Challenges re advice

Your advice can end up on social media

Not the entire 20 page cabinet paper or ministerial advisory, but the one paragraph someone has taken a screen shot of

On Facebook likes and shares can spread it virally

On Twitter it is favourites and retweets

Highly followed NZ Twitter accounts

- John Key 175,000
- NZ Herald 155,000
- John Campbell 111,000
- Stuff 51,000
- Jay-Jay, Mike & Dom – 39,000
- Patrick Gower 28,000
- Corin Dann 14,300
- Me 10,700
- NBR 10,600
- Audrey Young 2,500

Media

- Press Gallery – most likely to report gotcha stories, but some will do actual analysis of advice
- Specialist beat reporters – may do in depth story on advice
- Blogs
 - Issues Blogs – Eric Crampton, No Right Turn, Jarrod Gilbert etc – detailed reading and analysis
 - Attack Blogs – Whale Oil/The Standard - Prove Minister/Opposition MP is wrong
- Television – does it fit in 30 seconds?

When is not following advice newsworthy?

A Minister making a decision not in accordance with official advice is not by itself particularly newsworthy

Dr Cullen once referred to some unpalatable advice from Treasury as an “ideological burp”

But Bill English has also not followed Treasury advice on many occasions

Generally there is less “shock” today that Ministers can take a different path to official advice

If things are going well, then what the advice said is less salient

However when things go wrong, then that is when you get the real media focus, and why it is so vital that the advice has been free and frank

What “good” media will look for

Clear problem definition

Consideration of alternatives

Risks

Unforeseen consequences

Options

Recommendation

Many experts out there now

Social media and the Internet has allowed unprecedented scrutiny by not just media, but also experts

An example is Stats Chat, a blog run a professor of statistics

Many academics and experts are now blogging and part of the wider fourth estate

A failure to give free, frank and robust advice is now more likely to get noticed and commented on