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The rise and fall of the Strategic Communications Unit, 2017–18

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Introduction

Governments internationally are confronted with the challenge of communicating their activities to citizens in an increasingly complex media and political communication environment. Even before the Trump presidency in the US and the Brexit referendum in the UK, scholars were expressing concern about citizens not having access to clear and unbiased factual information in a digital era. Writing in 1999, Blumler & Kavanagh (p. 209) noted that 'Not only are the avenues of political communication multiplying in a process that is becoming more diverse, fragmented, and complex, but also, at a deeper level, power relations among key message providers and receivers are being rearranged; the culture of political journalism is being transformed; and conventional meanings of "democracy" and "citizenship" are being questioned and rethought.'

It is the prerogative of governments to maintain objective channels of communication with their citizens, and to ensure that information is truthful and clear. The latter outcome was presented as the objective in the establishment of a new Strategic Communications Unit (SCU) in Ireland in July 2017. Announced by Leo Varadkar shortly after his election as Taoiseach, the SCU was presented as a means to streamline communications on priority government campaigns, help ensure citizen-centred public engagement and improve citizens'

understanding of the work of government. Within a year of its formation, however, the SCU was disbanded amid allegations from the opposition that it was merely a publicly funded 'spin unit' for the Taoiseach.

This paper examines the development and ultimate closure of the SCU, and considers the implications for future communications and public engagement developments. The first section considers the challenges of changes in the media sector for reporting on politics and government activity, and the task political leaders face in communicating to citizens in a changing political communication environment. The second section considers the controversies that dogged the SCU throughout its year-long existence. The third section seeks to understand why the SCU failed, and what lessons should be learned from the experiment. Overall, the paper argues that the most significant impact of the SCU on the future of government communication in Ireland is to open a necessary conversation about politics and citizen engagement, and how to preserve and enhance the channels of communication between all stakeholders. As the analysis of the SCU failure shows, addressing and improving government communication is too important an issue to be derailed by party politics and electoral agendas.

A changing political communication environment

The news media's primary purpose is to inform and educate citizens on topics of importance, facilitating a platform for public discourse, while also undertaking a 'watchdog role' by holding elected representatives and other leaders to account. However, changing trends and demands have upended the traditional media business model and transformed production methods.

Technological developments have led to the rise of online media, amplifying audience fragmentation and increasing competition between news outlets for audience attention and retention. The media also has to contend with the 24-hour news cycle. Stories that are not necessarily important are being published to guarantee that content is constantly being produced, and the media risks being flooded with interest pieces rather than genuine news items (Lewis & Cushion, 2009).

A commercial, or entertainment-inspired, presentation of politics – through a focus on opinion polls, character conflicts, construction and destruction of image – impacts on coverage of policy debates, ideas

and the public's concerns. In many respects, this type of coverage treats voters as a passive audience and as consumers of mediated politics, rather than as citizens (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). As noted by Schudson (cited in Lloyd, 2004, p. 22), the media cannot create an informed citizen, but it does have a role in supporting the development of informed citizens through the stories it gives prominence to and the voices it provides a platform for.

Concerns arise where journalists have less time to verify sources and fact-check. As outlined by Vasterman (cited in Harcup & O'Neill, 2001, p. 265) 'journalists do not report news, they produce news … they reconstruct "a" reality'. This situation is of particular concern when considering the media's role in reporting politics and identifying 'newsworthy' political stories as well as holding those in power accountable for their actions. It raises the question as to whether the media can sufficiently fulfil these roles where it no longer has the capacity to adequately verify stories, and whether it is in a position to comprehensively communicate the significance of politics and political developments to citizens.

The globalisation of communities and the growth of social media have also impacted how politics is communicated by politicians. Changing dynamics within society have presented a challenge for politicians in how they prioritise policy issues and represent their diversified constituencies. The profile of the Irish public has dramatically changed in recent decades. Previously homogeneous community groups have diversified to include more citizens from different cultural, social, economic and religious backgrounds. Political parties can no longer rely upon traditional loyalties – their traditional publics have transformed, dispersed or decreased in size. As communities have become more diverse, so has a tendency to be more concerned about policy issues over party politics. However, this development poses its own challenges: 'Social fragmentation and the decline of group loyalties have given rise to an era of personalized politics in which individual expression displaces collective action frames in the embrace of political causes' (Bennett, 2012, p. 37).

The public now has greater power to influence the political agenda and highlight the issues they want their elected representatives to focus on as channels for mass communication have developed beyond traditional media to include new social media platforms. These platforms allow the public to voice concerns and garner support for issues they believe are important. On one level, the fact that the public can 'take control' of politics and shape public opinion has the potential

to be a powerful tool in political engagement. However, publicly mobilised campaigns, sometimes focused on 'niche' policy issues or causes, have the potential to distract from other issues of greater societal importance.

The mediatisation of politics, competing with the media for public attention and engagement, has led to an increased use of political marketing and the 'popularisation' of politics, political discourse and political communication. Political marketing aims to use commercial techniques in campaigns and communications strategies to gain the public's attention. Its focus is not necessarily to inform the public of key policies or help shape political opinion, but rather to promote the politician or party, highlighting their positive attributes and successes.

In this environment the objective for candidates and parties is to remain in the consciousness of the voting public. But using commercial techniques to market politics risks reducing parties and politicians to little more than products to 'sell' to the public. Through political marketing, citizens risk becoming consumers – a public not encouraged to engage in the political process but instead to simply choose their preferred 'product' (Wahl-Jurgensen et al., 2005). Rather than improving engagement, this mediatised landscape instead creates further division between citizens and politicians (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999).

The impact of this changed political communication environment is that politicians are increasingly susceptible to media pressures and are themselves producing content to secure coverage. To get media coverage this content must be new, represent part of a coherent narrative, provide immediate and understandable solutions to recognisable problems, and be 'dramatic'. The relentless output of good news, or a 'permanent campaign', can lead to accusations of spin and increasing public distrust. This situation can result in a 'political communications paradox' – 'voters want politicians to be honest and accountable but this very demand means that politicians (and their proxies), implicitly, have another agenda in operation when they communicate with the public, that of securing their approval and subsequent electoral support' (Gaber, 2009, p. 84). McNair (2018, p. 35) describes this mediatisation of politics as a prison for politicians who have become more sensitive to the media and opinion polls, suggesting that those who are sensitive to public opinion are trapped by it, allowing it to guide or influence how they form and implement policies. This prison of public opinion qualitatively impacts our political system.

This political communication environment also contributes to the personalisation of politics where greater importance is placed on the profile or personality of a politician over policies (McNair, 2018). In the context of Irish political life, this view is supported by Seán McGraw (cited in Rafter, 2011, p. 122), who has argued that 'in general, catch-all parties dilute their ideological individuality in order to maximise their appeal to centre oriented middle-class voters. They compete for votes not on significant policy difference but rather on competency and personality, with competency equating with economic management and personality defined by the likeability of a party leader.'

Establishing a strategic communications unit

Generally speaking, holders of the office of Taoiseach balance the responsibilities of head of government with those of party leader. The differing objectives and motivations of these two positions undoubtedly impact how a Taoiseach communicates the work of government. For a Taoiseach who is head of government and party leader, there is the reality that what is in the best interest of the government may not be in the best interest of the party, and vice versa. It is a complex balance to maintain. Should a Taoiseach give too much attention to their role as party leader, they risk losing the support of the Dáil, which could result in their party losing their position as a governing party and ultimately losing the position as head of government. However, should a Taoiseach give too much attention to their role as head of government, they may lose the support of their party, whose members may challenge their continued leadership as party leader and ultimately as Taoiseach.

A Taoiseach also has to ensure that the resources they have access to as head of government are used solely for the work of government and not to enhance their party's projects or policy work. In this latter context, it is also important to consider the role of the civil service, the permanent non-political staff that remains in place regardless of changes in government. In a modern governmental system the civil service works alongside ministerial advisers, who provide media assistance and strategic advice on policy formation. Considering the conditions of their employment, and their reporting line to the political boss, it could be suggested that ministerial advisers are not necessarily employed to further the work of the government but rather to ensure the success of their minister. In this context, the civil service

may not share the same objectives as ministerial advisers, which could lead to a conflict of interest in communicating the work of the government.

Many of these considerations – set against the wider changes in political communications described previously – came to the fore following the establishment of the SCU in 2017. The concept was first referenced by Leo Varadkar when the newly elected Taoiseach responded to a parliamentary question on 12 July 2017. The SCU was identified as a means to address a perceived failure in the existing government communications structure (Varadkar, 2017a). It was also suggested that the new entity would ultimately make government communications more efficient and less costly (Varadkar, 2017b). The SCU was to work in partnership with existing government departments. The activity of the SCU was to streamline communications on priority campaigns to ensure public engagement was citizen-centred and focused on improving citizens' understanding of the work of government (Varadkar, 2018a).

Similar initiatives have been proposed in other countries, including in the UK by Tony Blair's New Labour government after 1997. The similarities between Blair's entity and the Irish unit are striking. Led by Alistair Campbell, Blair's director of communications, and consisting of a team of government communication officers and journalists, the UK unit existed to coordinate media activity and publicity for the government. However, it was also accused of becoming politicised, blurring the lines between political and civil service priorities, and was subsequently restructured.

While it was confirmed that members of the SCU met with their UK counterparts to discuss communications strategies and best practice, it is surprising that they appeared not to have learned from their UK counterparts' mistakes. Perhaps, the answer lay in an analysis of the British experience, which noted that 'now that the crisis has passed and the Government has other priorities, the lessons learned appear to be in the process of being forgotten … It appears to be the "fate" of communication that is doomed to an endless cycle of advancement and regression depending on the perception of risk that Governments face at any one time' (Gregory, 2012, p. 375).

It is also worth noting that the concept of an SCU is not the only means of addressing the challenges facing contemporary government communication. For example, Blumler & Coleman (2010, pp. 140–9) – who hold the view that 'there is a crisis of public communication that is sapping the vitality of democratic culture' – proposed establishing a

public institution designed to establish new links between communication and politics. This institution would be a publicly funded body independent from government. 'Its tasks should be to elicit, gather and coordinate citizens' deliberations upon and reactions to problems faced and proposals issued by public bodies … which would then be expected to react formally to whatever emerges from the public discussion' (Blumler & Coleman, 2010).

Alternatively, Liu & Horsley (2007, p. 384) proposed the introduction of a government communication decision wheel as a solution to addressing the existing limitations of government communication and contemporary communication challenges. 'This model incorporates the importance of the unique environmental characteristics of the public sector by identifying four coexisting, complementary microenvironments: multilevel, intragovernmental, intergovernmental, and external. The model also highlights eight environmental characteristics that affect government communication and proposes how these characteristics operate in each of the four microenvironments.'

Neither of these two models were considered in Ireland in 2017 although there was reference to, and consultation with, the British side on their experience of an SCU. Indeed, the Irish model was similar in its objectives to the New Labour entity with enhanced communications and increased citizen information stressed as core principles. Yet, despite these principles, and the objectives outlined by Leo Varadkar as Taoiseach, from the outset the SCU became a source of confusion over its ownership and direction. It was also a source of significant political and public controversy.

Conflict and controversy

The idea of an SCU under the direction of a Taoiseach could be considered a conflict of interest, at risk of being used – intentionally or not – to further personal and/or party political objectives. This potential conflict was at the heart of difficulties for the SCU from the outset. Varadkar initially claimed that the unit was a personal initiative but it quickly became clear that this would not be feasible. In a bid to quash concerns about his involvement in the SCU, the Taoiseach repeated his distance from the SCU on multiple occasions: 'the unit will not be doing any party political work. I have given that assurance on a number of occasions. It will inform the public of the work the Government is doing' (Varadkar, 2017d).

It was ultimately decided that while the SCU would come under the remit of the Department of the Taoiseach – Varadkar's own department – it would not be his responsibility, nor would the Taoiseach have any involvement in running the unit. Responsibility was instead vested in the secretary general of the Department of the Taoiseach (Martin Fraser, at the time the SCU was established). While Fraser had ultimate responsibility for the new unit, he was not in fact the head of the SCU. On 15 July 2017 the *Irish Independent* reported that John Concannon, a former director of market development at Fáilte Ireland – and who had overseen marketing campaigns such as 'The Gathering', 'Ireland 2016' and 'Creative Ireland' – had been hired as the head of the SCU.

A lack of comprehensive information about the new communications entity became a dominant theme in parliamentary questions as well a feature of debate in the Dáil chamber and in extensive media commentary. From these debates, it became apparent that the initial explanation for, and description of, the SCU was not only insufficient but also subject to change. As such, Varadkar was repeatedly called upon to explain the purpose and remit of the SCU. As the controversy grew, the purpose and control of the SCU were increasingly called into question.

The controversy was further amplified following Budget 2018 when it was revealed that €5 million had been allocated to finance the SCU. This budget figure undermined one of the main arguments for the unit – that it would be a 'cost-saving' initiative for government communications. The SCU's budget had not been clearly referenced in any government budget speeches. The funding allocation was only noted in the *Expenditure Report* for Budget 2018.

There was also a lack of clarity about the source of the €5 million allocation. Varadkar subsequently clarified that the €5 million budget was a reallocation from existing resources within the Department of the Taoiseach (Varadkar, 2017c). This money had already been designated for public information campaigns to help improve citizens' awareness of the government's work. This latest controversy only served to reinforce existing opposition and media suspicions about the purpose for establishing the SCU.

A core issue here is that parliamentary questions and Dáil debates were the primary source of information about the SCU for the media and the opposition. The ongoing absence of a detailed overview of the unit, its role and responsibilities only served to sustain the sceptical narrative surrounding the unit and its potential. This confusion and

mistrust is evidenced in politicians' comments and their parties' press releases during this time frame, further igniting an increasingly critical media and public reaction.

For example, on 12 July 2017 Labour Party leader Brendan Howlin questioned the Taoiseach on the proposed SCU in the Dáil. Subsequently, a Labour Party press release, dated 30 August 2017, cited Howlin describing the SCU as 'a vanity propaganda project, and a means of providing further communications advice to the Taoiseach without properly appointing special advisers'. Howlin further criticised the Taoiseach in the press release, noting: 'Never before has the establishment of a communications unit been handled with so much secrecy. We have been told who will head up the new unit, but not his salary or grade. We don't know how many people will work in the unit. And we don't know what it will cost the taxpayer' (Labour, 2017). Howlin's comments later appeared in *TheJournal.ie*, on 31 August 2017, the article's subheading noting that 'Those in opposition have dubbed the new communications unit the Taoiseach's own "spin machine" '.

Similarly, on 10 October 2017 Deputy Pearse Doherty, during a Dáil debate about the Budget Statement 2018, observed that 'the Minister managed to find a few bob for pet projects and I am sure his ministerial colleagues are patting him on the back. Deep in the document he produced today, on page 132, we see that he found €5 million each year for the Government's new spin machine although previously, if we are to believe him, the Taoiseach told us it would be cost neutral.' These views were echoed by Deputy Paul Murphy, who noted, 'We were told that the Taoiseach's strategic communications unit would not cost us anything but we see from these documents that it will cost us €5 million. This means that people – those on social welfare and low-paid workers – are paying for the Government's spin.' The deputies' comments were later reported in the media: 'The Government has maintained its Strategic Communications Unit – dubbed as its "spin department" – will be cost neutral despite the Budget 2018 documents showing it will cost €5 million to run next year. Opposition parties yesterday highlighted the conflict between the document and earlier statements by the Taoiseach on the subject. They say the unit is a "spin machine" for Mr Varadkar and Fine Gael that will be used to promote political propaganda' (Burns & McGee, 2017).

Despite only being in operation for a mere three months, the SCU was proving to be a bone of contention among the opposition parties,

and the Taoiseach's attempts to assuage their fears had not only failed but become a source of further frustration and negative media attention.

On 6 December 2017 James Lawless, a Fianna Fáil TD, introduced the Online Advertising and Social Media (Transparency) Bill 2017 in the Dáil. The Private Members' Bill was aimed at ensuring integrity in the online political sphere and tackling orchestrated, anti-democratic online campaigns. Notably, the Bill proposed making it illegal for public money to be spent in supporting a political purpose. In discussing his legislation, Lawless noted that 'in an Irish context, there is very real concern emerging about the purpose and activities of the new multi million euro "Strategic Communications Unit". This legislation will help ensure that citizens can be reassured that none of the five million euro of their money will be used to advance any political agenda' (Fianna Fáil, 2017).

By the end of 2017, rather than improving government communications, the new unit was proving to be an ongoing negative distraction from the work of Varadkar's minority government, and the SCU remained a constant presence in political reportage into 2018.

On 16 February 2018 *Project Ireland 2040* was launched by the Taoiseach at the Institute of Technology, Sligo. The information campaign behind *Project Ireland 2040* – costing €1.5 million – was identified by the Taoiseach as the most important campaign planned for 2018. The work programme was coordinated by the SCU and involved multifaceted, year-long communications activity, including a series of nationwide briefings, events and forums, as well as informational videos. The campaign also included content partnerships with local, regional and national media.

The programme came unstuck, however, when the Ireland edition of *The Times* revealed that as part of the campaign, regional newspapers had been instructed to make publicly funded advertorials promoting the government and Fine Gael election candidates; these advertorials were to be published in the manner of independent reportage (Coyne, 2018).

Opposition politicians immediately raised questions as to whether the intention was to use the SCU communication campaign for *Project Ireland 2040* to promote Fine Gael election candidates, rather than informing the public about the national development plan. In response, government representatives explained that a third-party media-buying organisation – and not the SCU – had handled this aspect of the media campaign. The Taoiseach said the SCU had no direct contact with regional media organisations and was not involved

in selecting or contacting any external or third-party interviewees (Varadkar, 2018b).

An already troubled entity was by now in serious difficulty. Opposition TDs – in a majority in the Dáil – were now questioning the capacity of the SCU to remain non-partisan. Further difficulties emerged in March 2018 when a Freedom of Information (FOI) request revealed that the SCU had been involved in parliamentary questions. Emails obtained by the *Irish Examiner* under the FOI Act showed that the SCU had been asked to draft a response to a parliamentary question submitted by Maurice Quinlivan, a Sinn Féin TD. Rather than respond to the parliamentary question, the Department of the Taoiseach had forwarded the question directly to the SCU for a response. This action was perceived as a direct conflict, and increased opposition calls for the unit to be disbanded.

On 1 March 2018 the Taoiseach requested the secretary general of the Department of the Taoiseach to undertake a review of the SCU since it had been established in July 2017. While this review was underway, a Dáil motion proposing the disbandment of the unit was tabled by Sinn Féin. On 20 March 2018 Pearse Doherty, the Sinn Féin spokesperson on Finance and Public Expenditure & Reform, called for the Taoiseach, the secretary general of the Department of the Taoiseach and the head of the SCU to appear before the Committee of Public Accounts to answer questions about how the unit spent its budget. He also proposed the establishment of an independent panel to examine the best method of communicating the work of government.

The Sinn Féin motion was supported by Fianna Fáil, which was supporting the minority government in Dáil votes from opposition benches by means of a 'confidence and supply' arrangement. It was a clear sign that the SCU had reached a terminal position when Micheál Martin, the Fianna Fáil leader, strongly attacked the unit:

> This unit is the personal project of the Taoiseach. He asked that it be established, he recommended its head, and he secured its budget. In addition he has followed a policy of giving as little information as possible to the Dáil and his Department has tried to withhold basic information when sought through the Freedom of Information process. The entire purpose of this Unit is political. It has been set up and given unprecedented staffing, resources and political access for the sole purpose of promoting the political message of the government. (Fianna Fáil, 2018a)

With the exception of Fine Gael and the Independent Alliance, all other political parties supported the Sinn Féin Dáil motion, which was carried (by 85 to 49 votes) on 22 March 2018. Four days later, on 26 March 2018, the report of the secretary general of the Department of the Taoiseach (the Fraser Report) was published. The report recommended winding down the SCU, and that the Department of the Taoiseach should return to an updated Government Information Service (GIS) model, with a smaller budget, fewer staff and a more limited role than the SCU. The report also proposed new procedures across government departments to ensure cost-effective, modern and professional communications (Varadkar, 2018c). The government accepted the findings of the Fraser Report on 27 March 2018, and by July 2018 – twelve months after it had been established – the SCU was wound down.

Discussion: Understanding why the SCU failed

According to a research paper published by the government in February 2018, the rationale for establishing the SCU was informed by a comparative analysis of other governments' approaches to communications, identifying key strategies for improving citizen engagement and addressing public dissonance. The research paper concluded that 'internationally, best practice has seen a move to streamlining and simplifying government communications in response to the recognition that Government communications had become fragmented and difficult for citizens to understand' (Department of the Taoiseach, 2018). The points raised in the research paper reflected the views expressed by Leo Varadkar while discussing the SCU and its centrality in improving government communications.

The SCU was designed to address government communication on three levels: streamlining communications for citizens, developing and delivering cross-government communications campaigns, and improving communications capacity across government. However, the controversies surrounding the SCU ultimately outweighed any perceived benefits. Rather than improving the government's engagement with the public – and in doing so enhancing the work of government – the SCU's existence within the Department of the Taoiseach threatened to undermine it.

The Fraser Report found that the SCU had become a dominating issue to such an extent that it was at risk of detracting from other key functions and priorities at the Department of the Taoiseach.

According to the report, 'dealing with the intense political and media interest in the work of the SCU had come to dominate much of the time of the staff of the unit and of senior management' (Fraser, 2018). By March 2018, the SCU had been the subject of 203 parliamentary questions and 63 FOI requests, and was a key topic in numerous parliamentary debates as well as being the subject of extensive media coverage.

The most fundamental criticism of the SCU centred on potential politicisation of the civil service and non-political government communications. Locating the SCU in the Department of the Taoiseach was not an issue – the existing GIS already came under the remit of the department while other departments also had their own media operations. The issue of potential politicisation, however, crystallised around the appointment of the head of the unit and a lack of clarity over who had made the appointment – the Taoiseach or the secretary general – and the terms of the position. An appointment by the Taoiseach would suggest the head of the SCU was a ministerial adviser, whereas an appointment by the secretary general would point to the head of the SCU as a civil servant (even in a temporary capacity). As discussed previously, the motivations and objectives of ministerial advisers and civil servants differ.

During the SCU controversy, it emerged that the head of the SCU had been appointed to the position by the secretary general at the Department of the Taoiseach. However, opposition and media criticism continued to raise concerns about the Taoiseach's involvement in the appointment. These concerns were exacerbated by the controversy surrounding the *Project Ireland 2040* media campaign. Not only did it raise concerns about how the SCU engaged with the media – dictating the terms of how press releases were covered – it also called into question the legitimacy of other campaigns managed by the SCU. Furthermore, that controversy reinforced a belief that the SCU was a political body, concerned with promoting the Taoiseach and his party's work rather than focusing solely on communicating the work of government and enhancing public information channels. It is worth noting, however, that the Fraser Report found no evidence of a breach of the *Civil Service Code of Standards and Behaviour* by civil servants working in the SCU.

When the Fraser Report was published in March 2018, it was accompanied by a supporting review document that focused on whether there had been any breach of the *Civil Service Code of Standards and Behaviour* associated with the *Project Ireland 2040*

campaign. This review was undertaken by Elizabeth Canavan, an assistant secretary general at the Department of the Taoiseach. Canavan's conclusions reflected the findings in the Fraser Report:

> I am satisfied that there is no evidence of any effort on the part of the SCU to promote specific individuals or any political party within 'paid for' content; or to conceal the fact that content was 'paid for' content. There is no evidence that there was any direction given or any concerted effort to use non-office holders of political parties in the use of images or quotes. [Furthermore] there is no evidence that civil service staff, PHD or INM working on behalf of the SCU pressurised editors to portray advertorials as news content. While Mediaforce also emphasized the need for content to be clearly identified as a government initiative, it appears it may also have suggested that the use of 'Advertorial' was not required. There is no evidence that this was a direction it had received from PHD. (Canavan, 2018)

Whatever about these findings, there is little doubt that the establishment and operation of the SCU had been poorly handled, leading to extensive negative media coverage and political criticism. The wider communication environment, however, also needs to be considered as a contributory factor in the eventual end of the SCU.

At the time that the Dáil was debating the Sinn Féin motion, and Martin Fraser was reviewing the rationale for the SCU, Cambridge Analytica was accused of illicitly harvesting personal data via Facebook profiles and using this information in political campaigns to target individuals and influence public opinion. Although unrelated to the SCU controversy, the Cambridge Analytica scandal in March 2018 further reinforced fears surrounding the SCU's influence over government's public engagement activities. The Cambridge Analytica scandal was used as a reference point when criticising the SCU, and it fed into a wider conversation surrounding government communications and the veracity of public information campaigns, intensifying the spotlight on the SCU and its activities. For example, motivated by the Cambridge Analytica revelations, James Lawless criticised government opposition to his Online Advertising and Social Media (Transparency) Bill 2017. Lawless queried the motivations for this opposition, going so far as to suggest that the government wanted to avoid establishing 'proper oversight over the actions of their own Strategic Communications Unit' (Fianna Fáil, 2018b).

Conclusion

This opinion article shows that the implementation and operation of the SCU in 2017 ultimately undermined the rationale for its existence, notwithstanding the fact that the concept of an SCU could have been a viable solution to assist with the challenges faced by contemporary government communication.

There was, ironically, very poor communication about the SCU's role and objectives, combined with uncertainty about its budget, all of which only served to increase suspicion that the SCU would politicise the civil service. These concerns, coupled with a lack of comprehensive information about the unit, overshadowed the dialogue surrounding the SCU and its successes. Rather than a source for citizen-focused communications and engagement, the newly formed unit became a sensationalised media item. The sustained negative reaction to the SCU throughout 2017, and into 2018, dominated political debate and media coverage, and ultimately led to the end of the exercise.

It is also worth asking why the format of an SCU was chosen to address the issues facing government communications in Ireland, considering similar strategies had failed, or had been perceived as too controversial, in other countries. If best international practice was considered as part of the unit's research, then why was Leo Varadkar and his team not better prepared for the previously identified issues of concern and their subsequent implications. More specifically, why did they not follow the trajectory of Tony Blair's unit and learn from their mistakes? As summarised by Gregory (2019), 'Being focused on delivering efficiently and effectively for Government can be at the expense of the quality of relationships with citizenry. Listening, understanding the impact of policy and feeding that back to policy makers, on-going dialogue, being prepared to engage citizens in a meaningful way for them and treating governing as a privilege and a contract that has to be constantly reviewed and renewed are features of effective governance and of sustainable democracies.' The result is that the fate of the SCU distinctly echoes that of the British Prime Minister's own communications unit.

Interestingly, while the Fraser Report ultimately concluded that the SCU should be disbanded, it also confirmed that a reimagining of government communications in Ireland was needed and that, although flawed, the unit did address some shortcomings in cross-government communications. In commenting on the Fraser Report, the Taoiseach noted, 'the report finds that there is significant benefit to be realised

by implementing the communications reform programme which had been led by the SCU' (Varadkar, 2018d).

Effective government communication in the twenty-first century remains an issue to be resolved, and the failure of the SCU should not be used as an excuse to abandon attempts to address this challenge. As summarised by Martin Fraser in his review report: 'It is no longer sufficient for civil servants engaged in communications to concentrate on the traditional methods of communications, such as a ministerial speech or a press release … Information must be provided to citizens in the manner that they wish to receive it. If Government Departments do not have the capacity to do that effectively (and impartially), then our society will be the poorer for that' (Fraser, 2018, p. 19).

The legacy of the SCU debacle could help shape a new approach to improving government communication – the most significant flaws and faults of the SCU helping to highlight key elements of a successful scheme defined by cross-government stakeholder engagement; clear communication of ownership, objectives and associated costs; and clearly defined campaigns with an obvious benefit to the public. Such an approach may also require the separation of any new SCU from the Department of the Taoiseach so that the entity would be viewed more as a public service and less like an office for enhancing the government's public image.

Taking these perspectives into consideration, perhaps a new version of an SCU could be modelled on the Referendum Commission, an independent body whose purpose is to communicate objective, factual information about referendums. Any attempt to reimagine an SCU would also be best advised to carefully examine 'best practice' internationally in how governments communicate their business in a non-political partisan manner, given the demands of modern political communications.

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