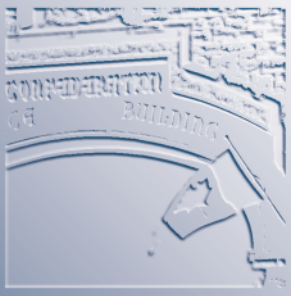

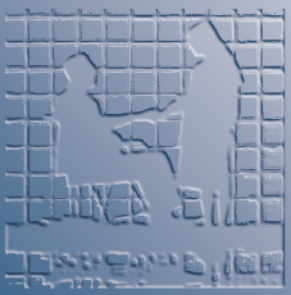

CCAF~FCVI INC.

PROGRAM FOR IMPROVED PUBLIC PERFORMANCE REPORTING

Ideas for Increasing Media Use of Public Performance Reports

PIPPR Task Force Members

Ed Archer is a Principal in Public Sector Accounting with the Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants.

Wilson Campbell is a project director at the Governmental Accounting Standards Board in the United States.

Katherine Graham is the Dean of the Faculty of Public Affairs and Management at Carleton University.

Susan Jennings is the Assistant Auditor General of BC, and the BC representative on the Performance Reporting Advisory Group of the Canadian Council of Legislative Auditors.

Lee McCormack is the Executive Director of Results-based Management at the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat.

Graham Steele is the Member of the Legislative Assembly of Nova Scotia for Halifax Fairview.

Chris Waddell is the Carty Chair in Business and Financial Journalism at the Carleton University School of Journalism and Communication.

CCAF's Improved Public Performance Reporting Program

CCAF, Canada's leader in research on public sector accountability, strongly believes that effective public performance reporting is an essential element of public sector accountability. We also believe that improvements in public performance reporting will require a much closer link between the needs of public performance report users and the production of performance reports.

In June 2006, in partnership with the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, CCAF launched its three-year program – the Improved Public Performance Reporting Program – to improve the quality and usage of public performance reporting. The Sloan Foundation, a philanthropic non-profit institution based in New York City, provides generous financial support for the program. We express especially our thanks to Ted Greenwood, a Program Director at the Sloan Foundation, for facilitating this support, without which this project could not have proceeded.

The aim of the program is not simply to promote the use of performance reports, but to realign performance reporting with the needs of report users (legislators, non-governmental organizations, the media and the public).

Ideas for increasing media use of Public Performance Reports

Imagine a world in which senior government managers and journalists agree on their shared responsibility to provide information about government performance to citizens, where managers provide unbiased, frank assessments in their public performance reports of their organizational successes and failures and cabinet ministers expect their managers to provide such information, where media outlets provide reporters with adequate time to thoroughly research their stories and reporters write balanced stories about government performance, with informed commentary on the reasons why targets may not have been met, and with kudos where targets have been met.

Imagine indeed. This is not the media reality in which we live, nor does our world appear likely to evolve any time soon into this seem utopia.

Ours is a world in which many government managers view journalists as cynical critics seeking controversy, because controversy can build a reporter's reputation and advance the interests of his or her media outlet. A world in which reporters pay little attention to performance information published by governments, seeing such information as little more than "spin" intended to make government look good.

At the level of theory, virtually everyone agrees on the central role that free media – and transparent and accountable government organizations – play in a functional democracy. The challenge is in bringing theory to life in practical ways.

This report is directed to the real world in which governments, within the constraints of our partisan parliamentary system, report on their performance, and media, facing tight deadlines and fierce competition, try to cover our highly complex institutions of government.

How this project links to earlier CCAF research

In June 2006, CCAF published the final report in the Foundation's long-running and highly successful Public Performance Reporting research program, *Users and Uses: Toward Producing and Using Better Public Performance Reporting – Perspectives and Solutions*. The report noted that governments have made much progress in improving their public performance reporting – and that they still have a long way to go to make performance reporting truly useful to such key audiences as elected officials, journalists, non-governmental organizations and the public.

When governments produce public information on their performance that is credible and used by legislators, media, advocacy groups, think tanks, policy institutes and the public, the democratic process is strengthened. CCAF's report looked at how these audiences actually use the public performance reports (PPRs) that governments produce.

CCAF's research and that in other jurisdictions indicated that the media have not shown a great interest in writing articles about government performance. Consequently, they do not generally use PPRs as a source of information in their reporting.

Our report cited several reasons for this. It said bottom-line considerations have translated to less investigative, analytical journalism, and more demand for the immediate story. It said fewer reporters today are experts; generalist reporters tend to do only limited research and use government documents or reports relatively infrequently.

The journalists with whom CCAF spoke for that 2006 project commented candidly about their lack of trust in the public reports the government produces on its own performance. They said they might, at best, use PPRs for statistical information, but that they would not depend on them for substance.

Journalists said PPRs need to explain why the government has either embarked on certain activities, or decided to provide particular services. PPRs also need to explain the rationale for the objectives that the government has established for these activities and services. Broad social indicators would help in assessing programs and their effectiveness.

The report encouraged governments to make PPRs user-friendly, more visible and accessible to the media, easier to read and understand and more useful in terms of the information they contain. It also noted that the media have an opportunity (and perhaps an obligation) to ask more probing questions of government about the quality and cost-effectiveness of its significant programs.

In this new project, we wanted to go beyond the broad prescriptions of the 2006 report to identify specific measure that producers of PPRs could institute to increase the use of their reports by the media. Our thesis is that if media pay more attention to government performance, our democracy will benefit.

How we carried out this project

In our search for ideas, we talked to several thoughtful journalists and journalism educators in Ottawa: the national capital, the country's fourth largest city, and home to two prominent journalism programs. We also consulted three public service communications professionals, at three levels of government, with extensive experience in media relations.

We also received very valuable advice and guidance from Christopher Waddell, associate director of Carleton University's School of Journalism and Communication. Chris is a former Parliamentary bureau chief for CBC National News and former national editor of the Globe and Mail. The holder of a research chair in business and financial journalism at Carleton, he is a member of CCAF's Improved Public Performance Reporting Task Force.

CCAF assigned three research associates to this project:

- **Greg Gertz**, a graduate of the Carleton University School of Journalism. Greg worked for several years as a journalist, served as press secretary to a provincial premier, and was a communications analyst in the Communications Secretariat, Privy Council Office, Government of Canada. He has been President of Gertz Communications since 1995.
- **Derek Carlisle**, a journalism graduate of the University of Western Ontario. Derek was formerly Director of Parliamentary Affairs to a federal Cabinet minister.
- **Chris Hyde**, who supports CCAF's capacity development business line. Chris is completing his Masters degree at Carleton University.

Greg, Derek or Chris met separately with six journalists:

Joe Banks
A former rural community newspaper publisher and editor; and Coordinator and Professor, Journalism Program, Algonquin College

Randall Denley
City columnist, and former city editor, *Ottawa Citizen*

David McKie
National reporter and producer, CBC News Investigative Unit – Ottawa; and journalism teacher, Carleton University School of Journalism

Tim Naumetz
Freelance member of the Parliamentary Press Gallery

Derek Puddicombe
City Hall Bureau reporter, *Ottawa Sun*

John Robson
Columnist, *Ottawa Citizen*

In addition, three government media relations experts offered their input for the project:

Michael Fitzpatrick
Senior Media Relations Advisor
City of Ottawa

Robert Makichuk
Chief of Media Relations
Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat

Andréa Vanasse
Manager, Corporate Communications and Government Advertising Review, Office of the Auditor General of Ontario

What the journalists told us

The journalists we talked to reinforced the messages that we had received previously – that generally they do not think very highly of performance reports, and make little use of them.

We showed them several examples of PPRs, and asked for their assessments. Here is a selection of some of the critical comments they made to us about specific reports; we think these comments provide a flavour of the conceptual and practical issues that deter reporters from making greater use of performance reports in general:

- Incredibly full of "bureauspeak".
- Prominent subjects in the media are buried in the text.
- Responses to audits are played down.
- No references are made to what is being done to address identified problems.
- The report seems geared for an expert audience.
- The trouble with this report is that it lacks context. The whole "what does this mean?" aspect is not there.
- The report should be crisper with a proper executive summary. From a media point of view, such a summary is critical. Otherwise, there is no motivation to look through it.
- A phrase like 'program activity architecture crosswalk' doesn't do much to communicate with those outside of the department.
- This report would benefit from a revamp in which the drafters would reflect on:
    a) What are the problems?
    b) What are the solutions being applied?
    c) Where are we with those solutions?
    d) How do we make future headway?
    e) No page numbers are listed in the index of the on-line edition.

- The report is almost totally unreadable to an outside audience. The "measuring performance" section contains wordy, bureaucratic explanations in long vertical boxes.
- The language appears to have come from a management retreat: "teamwork", "value" and "integrity". The use of the phrase, "committed to best practices" leads to one ask cynically, "Who isn't?"

The comments were not all negative. We heard that a highlights page in one report was useful; that another report deserved two thumbs up for demonstrating "Here's where we think we're doing a good job, and here's where we fell down." One report earned praise for providing useful information such as phone call statistics, time to resolve disputes, etc.

Trends influencing the media

It was beyond the scope of this project to attempt a comprehensive analysis of the numerous changes affecting journalism today. However, our interviewees did point out several trends we think are worth noting:

- Traditional media face a serious challenge from new media as purveyors of information. People can now get information directly from the source via the Internet – from government news releases posted on departmental websites, from interest group websites, and so on. And they can participate in the creation, dissemination or discussion of the news through blogs, chat rooms, online forums, etc. (For example, see this 2005 article on "collaborative citizen journalism": http://www.technologyreview.com/read_article.aspx?id=14459&ch=infotech&a=f. The concern of traditional media is that advertisers will switch their advertisements (and their money) to online media.
- Traditional media are responding to this challenge in several ways. They are beefing up their own online presence. Some daily newspapers and broadcast media, for example, provide online news that is updated constantly throughout the day. For reporters, this means they are always competing to get their stories out before the competition.
- Another response by traditional media is to increase their focus on local news, an area in which online media have not made as many inroads. The growth of community newspapers, made increasingly economic by the use of desktop publishing technology, is one sign of this trend.
- Finally, some media executives are rethinking the role of media in society. They are moving away from the idea of media as gatekeeper or filter of the news, and towards the idea that media should increasingly provide value added through in-depth analysis, post-event assessment, and so on.

A key message from these trends is that the media are undergoing fundamental change induced by technological developments. Those, including governments, who want to build relationships with the media need to keep in mind that the foundations for any relationship are in a constant state of flux.

Increasing media use of public performance reports

With these trends in mind, we asked our interviewees – journalists and media relations experts both – to share with us their ideas for encouraging media to make greater use of PPRs. The results can be divided into two broad categories of ideas:

- Ideas to make PPRs more usable by reporters
- Ideas to help the media see the value of PPRs.

Before we outline these ideas, we should note that, co-incident with this project, another CCAF project is looking at good practices in public performance reporting. The report from that project, *What can we learn from effective public performance reporting? Good practices for central agencies, legislators, auditors, and report producers*, brings together good practices from eight jurisdictions in Canada and abroad. Many of the practices, if implemented, would help encourage all users, including media, to make greater use of PPRs.

The ideas below are focused exclusively on the needs of media, and come out of the experience of the reporters and media relations experts with whom we consulted.

A. Ideas to make PPRs more usable by reporters

These ideas are intended to help government organizations produce public performance reports that are more likely to lead to media reports on government performance.

1. Ensure PPRs are newsworthy

If the "news" media are going to be able to use PPRs, then PPRs must contain news.

Journalism students are told that a news report should include as many as possible of these characteristics: timeliness, proximity (closeness to reader/viewer/listener), conflict, eminence and prominence (of people in a news story), consequence and impact (influence on the audience), human interest.

By highlighting elements of their performance story that contain these qualities – without sliding into "hype" – government organizations can entice reporters to look for story ideas in PPRs.

2. Provide anecdotes

Performance reports tend to be big on numbers. Although the media do run pieces based on statistics, they will often attempt to humanize them by showing what they mean for real people. PPR producers can help busy reporters do this by illustrating their performance story through real-life anecdotes. For example, instead of simply stating that doctors have access to x new MRI machines this year, tell the story of a patient whose life was changed by rapid access to an MRI.

3. Write about interesting things

People want to learn about things that interest them, and reporters want to tell interesting stories. Government organizations do many interesting things. By telling their performance story through the lens of the interesting work they do, PPR producers can pique reporters' interest.

4. Provide relevant information

People want to know about matters that are relevant to them. What is relevant in the context of performance reporting? Journalists ask themselves such questions as, "What would our audience want to know about this?", "What impact could this have on taxes?", "How would this affect families," and "What are the implications of this for the future?"

Producers of PPRs can attempt to anticipate what reporters would find relevant by identifying developments in their area that could generate public concern, and then address those topics.

5. Provide context

If a PPR says that program applications increased 17% in the previous year, a reporter has little information on which to hang a story. Explaining why applications increased (more funding available? larger target audience? greater need for program benefits?) provides the context a reporter needs to turn a statistic into a story.

6. Provide comparative information

Similarly, comparative information can help reporters understand the significance of performance data. How does the increase of program applications compare to previous year increases? To other jurisdictions? To similar programs?

7. Appeal to reporters at the very beginning of the PPR

Busy journalists receive a constant stream of documents from governments. They have little time to analyse these documents for story ideas. And based on past experience, their expectations of such documents as sources of story ideas are low. Most quickly scan the Executive Summary and Table of Contents; if nothing grabs their attention, the document is likely to end up on the shelf – or in the recycling box.

The producers of PPRs can break through this barrier by ensuring that the Executive Summary and Table of Contents are written to appeal to reporters. For example, drawing on the ideas above, the Executive Summary and Table of Contents can show that the PPR is newsworthy, contains anecdotes, is about interesting and relevant developments, and provides context and comparisons for performance information.

8. Don't turn off reporters at the very beginning of the PPR

Journalists fully expect governments to "spin" their performance stories, i.e. to present them in a positive light. What irritates journalists is when performance reporting ignores obvious issues or clearly serves a partisan purpose. A *Message from the Minister* on the first or second page of a PPR, particularly if it can be perceived as whitewashing or ignoring controversial issues, is likely to doom a PPR in the eyes of an already sceptical reporter. If a PPR must contain a *Message from the Minister* upfront, the message should address real issues in a frank manner.

9. Make performance information easily accessible

Many performance reports already make effective use of bullets, charts, graphs and visuals to convey performance information. For reporters facing tight and constant deadlines, these tools can make their jobs much easier. At a glance, they can see key issues and trends, and determine quickly if their audiences (and editors) would be interested.

PPR producers can also make their reports accessible by using plain language. If reporters have to translate bureaucratic language into words their audiences will understand, their job becomes more difficult. This is increasingly important as government becomes more complex and tight editorial budgets mean reporters have to cover a wider range of topics.

10. Provide good visuals

Images are increasingly important for the news media. Television, where most people get their news these days, has always sought out pictures that can accompany and help convey a story. Newspapers, following the lead of *USA Today* (founded 25 years ago), are going with more graphics, photos and colour.

And with the growing role of online media, visuals in electronic format are gracing the websites of many news media outlets.

PPR producers, by providing visuals in formats to suit a variety of media needs, can make the reporter's job easier and increase the odds of generating coverage.

In this regard, the cover of a PPR is often particularly important. If it is visually arresting, it is likely to catch the eye of a television camera operator or a newspaper or magazine art director.

An organization can also assist television outlets by giving them a couple of day's notice of what is coming up so they can plan and shoot visuals themselves in advance. The Office of the Auditor General of Canada, for example, announces the subjects that will be covered in a report several days before it is released.

11. List media contacts

Reporters often need to obtain additional information or get a quote for a story. They can do this more easily if a PPR contains contact information for one or more people within the organization.

Some organizations provide contact information for several people, each with a different area of program or policy knowledge. Others prefer to have all media queries routed through a media relations officer. While many reporters would rather forego the middleman, others appreciate the help of a knowledgeable media specialist who can direct enquiries to the appropriate desk.

B. Ideas for helping the media see the value of PPRs

A public performance report that is prepared (with approaches such as those we've described above) to be useful by reporters may not on its own be enough to break through the barriers described in CCAF's report *Users and Uses: Toward Producing and Using Better Public Performance Reporting.*

Our second group of ideas is intended to help reporting organizations reach out to the media and both encourage and support them in reporting on PPRs.

1. Talk to reporters about performance reports

A handful of journalists often account for the bulk of media reporting about a government organization. Half a dozen may regularly report about developments in a medium-sized city. A provincial press gallery may have several particularly thoughtful journalists. Specialized topics, such as agriculture or defence or health, may be the assigned beats of a few well-informed reporters.

Reporting organizations could identify such individuals and ask them for their views on the organization's performance reports. Have the reporters ever looked at the reports? Do the reports provide useful information? What would make them more useful?

There are always risks in approaching reporters with such questions – the approach itself could become a story, or expectations about future performance reports could be raised beyond reach. But we believe many reporters, if asked for their views in a straightforward way, would see the approach as a genuine attempt to consult them on a matter that affects their ability to do their jobs.

2. Involve the organization's media relations experts at an early stage

Most government organizations these days have communications/media relations experts on staff. Often these experts are kept very busy providing advice and support to such officials as ministers or senior elected or appointed officials. Their role in the organization's public performance report may be limited to drafting a covering news release and disseminating the report to key audiences.

If asked, they might be willing and able to do more. If engaged at the beginning of the PPR drafting process, communications officers could help report drafters frame sensitive issues, develop good visuals, tighten up and simplify language, alert key reporters to the upcoming release of the PPR, and so on.

In *What can we learn from effective public performance reporting? Good practices for central agencies, legislators, auditors, and report producers*, we noted that the Government of Alberta's Communications Directors are charged with reviewing the Ministry Annual Report Standards before the provincial government issues the standards to its ministries. This early engagement taps into the communicators' talents, and encourages their ongoing involvement in the production and distribution of public performance reports.

3. Tell assignment editors when performance reports will be released

Most reporters do not get to call the shots about what they will cover. Usually they receive their daily assignments from an assignment editor in the newsroom.

A government organization might obtain more coverage of its performance report if it alerts assignment editors a day or two in advance of the release of the PPR. This is particularly true for television, which needs time to prepare and set up. Similarly, the organization might inform key reporters (including freelancers) in advance so the reporters can suggest a story idea based on the PPR to their assignment editors.

Staff in the media relations office can usually help with these approaches.

4. Provide media briefings

Rather than simply send a performance report out to reporters, government organizations could invite reporters to attend a public performance report briefing for media. The briefing could outline the main points of the report, explain how the report is organized, and offer reporters an opportunity to ask questions about the report.

Apart from the value of the briefing itself, such an event would communicate to the media that the organization (a) considers its PPR to be an important document and (b) wants to help reporters use it effectively. The invitation to the briefing could reinforce messages about the role of PPRs and the media in the government accountability process.

Reporters will want to know if a briefing is for "background" or is on the record. They prefer having someone present who can be quoted. Television reporters need someone who will talk in front of the cameras.

5. Offer live online expert access sessions

Technology is making possible some interesting ways to connect reporters with public servants. One such technique, as an alternative or supplement to a media briefing, is a live online session in which reporters in any location can submit questions about a PPR for response in real time by a public service expert. (For more information, see this article on chat rooms in Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chat_room).

In cases where public interest in a PPR might be high, a briefing could be webcast live so people could watch it across the country.

In addition to the PPR, the government organization can provide reporters electronically with key support documents (e.g. a backgrounder on the Estimates process) prior to the session. After the session, the questions and answers and links to key documents can be posted on the organization's website for future reference by reporters or other members of the public. The briefing can even be recorded and put on a website where reporters could watch it later.

6. Help reporters find stories in a performance report

Government organizations can work with key reporters or media outlets to help them identify stories within a PPR that would be of interest to the media outlet's audience.

This approach could be particularly valuable with community newspapers, which are unlikely to report on high-level performance messages, but much more likely to cover local developments. Technology could play a role here.

Using a search tool, the PPR producer could find all occurrences of, for example, the name of a community, and then send a message to the media in that community highlighting those references. The message could say something like, "You may be interested in looking at the implications of the information on pages x, y and z for [name of community]." The headline or email subject tag could play up the local angle of the message: e.g. "Information of Vital Interest to [name of community]".

A similar approach might work for beat or freelance journalists looking for story ideas on a particular topic or geographic area.

7. Talk to journalism instructors about PPRs

This suggestion is most likely best directed to central agency staff responsible for public performance reports – or such organizations as CCAF that are engaged with journalism schools.

The journalism instructors we consulted for this project noted that journalism students are usually taught how to find and use sources of government information for stories. They encouraged us to demonstrate to them and their colleagues the value of PPRs as information sources about government performance. If we make a convincing case, they will pass this on to their students in reporting methods or research techniques classes.

The opportunity exists for champions of public performance reporting to reach reporters at a formative stage in their careers and help them learn to use PPRs effectively as they play their role in the accountability process.

Conclusion

Public performance reports are an important part of the accountability process – a key mechanism for a government to demonstrate to its citizens that it is performing effectively, and acting to improve its performance where necessary.

But PPRs are of limited value if they sit unread on a literal or electronic shelf.

Although the Internet now provides most citizens with direct access to PPRs, few people are likely to look for or find them. Governments still rely largely on reporters to take PPRs and turn them into interesting stories that people will read, watch or listen to.

If governments, using ideas such as the ones in this report, can help reporters do this job, citizens might end up better informed about government performance. And thus better informed, citizens can contribute more fully and effectively to decision making on important public issues.