CAN SCIENTISTS SPEAK?

An assessment of media policies in Canadian federal science departments for openness of communication, protection against political interference, rights to free speech, and protection for whistleblowers.

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Key Findings:

Media policies in Canadian federal science departments were graded for openness of communication, protection against political interference, rights to free speech, and protection for whistleblowers. Overwhelmingly, current media policies do not effectively support open communication between federal scientists and the media.

- Government media policies do not support open and timely communication between scientists and journalists nor do they protect scientists’ right to free speech.
- Government media policies do not protect against political interference in science communication.
- Over 85% of departments assessed (12/14) received a grade of C or lower.
- The Department of National Defence scored top marks for open communication, while the Canadian Space Agency, Public Works and Government Services Canada, Industry Canada and Natural Resources Canada were all tied for last place with failing grades.
- The media policies governing science-based departments received on average a C- for how well they facilitate open communication between scientists and the media.
- These grades are significantly lower than those for federal agency media policies in the United States in 2008 and 2013 (graded by the Union of Concerned Scientists).
- All but one department (Department of National Defence) scored lower that the United States average in 2013 (as graded by the Union of Concerned Scientists).

Key Recommendations:

1. Make policies easily available online for scientists, journalists and the public.
2. Make it explicit that scientists can speak freely about their research to facilitate clear and timely communication between scientists and journalists.
3. Give scientists the right to have the final review of the scientific content of media products (e.g. press releases) that make substantial use of their work to protect against political interference.
4. Include a ‘personal-views exception’ to allow scientists to express their personal opinions in a professional and respectful manner as long as they make clear they are not representing the views of their department.
5. Include provisions to protect whistleblowers and effectively resolve disputes.

Federal government scientists play an important role in keeping Canadians safe and healthy by providing their expertise to both the public and decision-makers. The safety of our food, air, water, and environment depends on the ability of federal scientists to provide information to Canadians. Federal scientists also review and regulate thousands of consumer and industrial products, including pesticides and medicines.

Scientists are the best spokespeople for their own work and, barring rare instances where information is highly sensitive, it is essential that they be able to communicate their expertise to the media and the public.

Scientists are the best spokespeople for their own work and, barring rare instances where information is highly sensitive, it is essential that they be able to communicate their expertise to the media and the public. When scientists converse directly with the media, the public gains a better understanding of how science is being used for government decision-making, and is consequently better able to hold their government accountable. Information must be timely, accurate, and governed by strong external communication policies that help scientists communicate their work. The public also has a right to this essential, taxpayer-funded information. Recognizing this, the Communications Policy of the Government of Canada states that, “Canadians value freedom, openness, security, caring and respect. It is important for their government to communicate in a spirit that reflects those values.”

Over the past several years, Canadian scientists working in the federal government have experienced a substantial shift in the way they can communicate their research to the public and the media. Reports of widespread muzzling and delayed access to Canadian government scientists have been covered in prominent national and international media. Extensive coverage and concern prompted the Information Commissioner of Canada to pursue an investigation, currently ongoing, into the alleged muzzling of scientists. A recent survey by Environics Research Group and the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada (PIPS) finds similar sentiments among the scientists themselves, showing that 90% of federal scientists feel they are not able to speak freely about their research.

When federal scientists are prevented from communicating their work, it denies the public access to vital information required for informed decisions. Perhaps more pressing, however, is the fact that when the public cannot access this information, it is increasingly difficult to determine whether government decisions are being supported by the best available science. Science itself also thrives on transparency: science is strengthened when there is open dialogue stimulating debate and fruitful collaborations among scientists.
Can Scientists Speak?

To gain a better understanding of how federal scientists are able to communicate their work to the media, we studied the media policies that govern them. Our protocol was slightly modified from that used by the Union of Concerned Scientists in the U.S.11

Methods

We reviewed all government-wide and department-level policies that determine the nature of the interaction between federal scientists and the media for 16 science-based federal departments. Adapting methods from the Union of Concerned Scientists11,12 we assessed each department based on five key questions:

1. Is the policy accessible, current, clear, and consistent?
2. Does it promote open and timely communication with the media?
3. Does it safeguard against political interference?
4. Does it protect scientific free speech?
5. Does it include provisions to protect whistleblowers and effectively resolve disputes?

We answered these five questions for each department using a set of 14 sub-criteria. Marks were assigned to each criterion and the total score was converted to a letter grade (for details on grading criteria, scoring, and the assignment of letter grades, see the Detailed Methods Appendix, available online at evidencefordemocracy.ca/canscientistsspeak/appendix). Our grading results establish a baseline assessment that can be expanded upon in future studies, and provides a straightforward comparison with government media policies in the United States.

Scoring Rubric

Media policies were graded out of 95 points. Scores were then used to generate a letter grade for each department.

1. Accessible, Current, Clear and Consistent (15 points)
   a. Publicly available on the agency/department website (5).
   b. Clear and consistent (5).
   c. Updated in the past 10 years (5).

2. Promotes Openness and Timeliness (20 points)
   a. Explicitly calls for open communications between agency employees and the public (15).
   b. Ensures timely responses to interview requests and quick release of press releases or agency communications (5).

3. Safeguards Against Political Interference (25 points)
   a. Does not require pre-approval for contact with the media (5).
   b. Does not re-direct media requests to approved department spokespeople (5).
   c. No required clearance for interview questions (5).
   d. Does not require public affairs officials to sit in on interviews with scientists (5).
   e. Specifies that only scientists, or those with the necessary technical expertise, may edit the scientific content of agency communications (5).

4. Protects Scientific Free Speech (30 points)
   a. Explicitly permits employees to speak about their personal views (15).
   b. Explicitly permits employees to review the final version of documents that make use of their expertise (15 points).

5. Resolution of disputes and protection for whistleblowers (5 points)
   a. Gives protections for whistleblowers, or, alerts employees to their rights under federal whistleblower law (3 points).
   b. Defines a process for resolving disputes about media contacts or relations (2 points).

Policy versus practice

There are often considerable differences between the text of media policies, and the way those policies are implemented. A good media policy can only support effective science communication when there is also a strong commitment from department managers to put the policy into practice and to continuously evaluate and improve it. This report only looks at the policies and does not attempt to assess current media practices. A recent survey of federal government scientists suggests that there are some serious concerns around media practices – nearly half of the respondents felt that their communications department is not effective at responding to the media with scientifically defensible and accurate information.1 Improvements to media policies will not be effective unless current practices and self-censorship among scientists are also addressed directly.

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1 We included 11 science-based departments, 3 agencies, 1 commission (Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission), and 1 Crown corporation (Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd.). Throughout this report we use the term ‘department’ broadly, inclusive of all these organizations.
Canadian federal departments and agencies score, on average, a C- in their communication policies. Overall, media policies do not adequately support effective science communication and lack essential elements for facilitating open and timely communication between government scientists and the media.

When examining each of the five criteria independently, we found:

**Current and Accessible Communications Policies**

Most policies have been recently developed or updated and clearly outline the responsibilities of scientists and communications personnel. However, most of the media policies are not easily available online and had to be obtained through access to information requests. Of the 16 departments evaluated, only the Department of National Defence and the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat had policies that are publicly available online. Others may be available online but we were not able to locate them despite a diligent search.

**Open and Timely Access to Scientists**

While many departments include statements supporting open communication, the procedures for handling media inquiries do not facilitate open and timely access to scientists (see below for details).
Can Scientists Speak?

**Political Interference**

In many media policies, the process outlining how scientists should interact with the media does not protect against, and may even lend itself to, political interference. Often scientists require approval from their department’s media relations officers to speak with the media, and questions and answers need to be pre-approved for interviews. Only the Department of National Defence does not require that scientists get pre-approval before connecting with media. None of the policies examined include explicit provisions for scientists to have the final review of the scientific content of media products that make use of their research, something which is necessary to ensure their work is accurately communicated.

**Duty of Loyalty**

The Values and Ethics Code for the Public Sector applies to all public servants and outlines five key principles that should guide their behaviour throughout all aspects of their work. One of these principles is ‘Respect for Democracy’, which includes the tenet, “Public servants shall uphold the Canadian parliamentary democracy and its institutions by loyalty carrying out the lawful decisions of their leaders and supporting ministers in their accountability to Parliament and Canadians.” This duty of loyalty implies some limits on how public servants express criticisms of the government.

**Personal-Views Exception**

Best practices for open science communication recognize the importance of scientists’ right to express their personal opinions, as long as they make clear that they are not speaking as official representatives of the department (e.g. a ‘personal-views exception’). Despite the fact that all federal scientists must abide by their ‘duty of loyalty’ to the government (see side box), this does not preclude scientists from expressing their views respectfully and professionally. This freedom is afforded scientists in many other jurisdictions including the U.S. This kind of open dialogue promotes public trust in government science and facilitates government transparency (a critical feature of a healthy democracy). Personal-views exceptions also protect the government by requiring that scientists acknowledge that their views do not necessarily represent the views of the department.

**Dispute Resolution and Whistleblower Protection**

An integral aspect of establishing good communication practices among government employees is ensuring that, when conflicts arise, there are procedures in place for resolving disputes fairly and protecting whistleblowers from reprisal. We found that while these topics were not explicitly addressed in media communication policies, they were usually (and commendably) addressed in departmental Values and Ethics Codes, which have been developed in response to the Public Servants’ Disclosure Protection Act. In particular, the department of Public Works and Government Services Canada has developed a guideline that highlights whistleblower protections at the departmental level, and Health Canada provides a thorough list of department contacts relating to conflict resolution and whistleblowing.

**NRC Personal Opinion Statement**

“IT is recognized that all employees have the right to their personal points of view regarding any issue. However, personal opinions may conflict with NRC’s official position. Therefore, ... an employee may not identify him or herself as an NRC employee in any letter or email to the editor, and he or she must include language which states the views set forth are the employee’s personally held opinions, not those of the organization.”

We note, however, that other studies looking at whistleblowing have found Canada remains far behind other countries in providing effective measures to protect those who speak out. In addition, Canadian federal scientists overwhelmingly agree that the public would be better served if federal whistleblower policies were strengthened. Support for dedicated whistleblower protections was highest among scientists surveyed at the Canadian Space Agency, which is the only department that does not explicitly state protections for whistleblowers in their Values and Ethics Code.

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See page 13, Scientists’ freedom of expression is hindered by media policies.
Comparison to U.S. Media Policies

When compared to communication policies in the U.S. (scoring an average of B-), Canadian policies lag far behind in their ability to facilitate open and timely communication between journalists and federal scientists, to incorporate measures that safeguard against political interference, and to protect scientists’ right to free speech (Figure 1).

Media policy scores for United States federal agencies in 2008 and 2013 and for Canadian federal departments in 2014. U.S. data were collected by the Union of Concerned Scientists. 

For each analysis, departments were ordered from best (highest score) to worst (lowest score). There were four agencies (Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd., the National Science Foundation (2008), the Food and Drug Administration (2008), and the Department of Energy (2013)) that scored “Incomplete”. Scores were converted to be out of 100 points for comparison with the U.S. The complete set of department and agency scores can be found in the Detailed Methods Appendix.

Next we discuss each department’s individual performance. For three departments that do not have departmental policies (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission, and Transport Canada), we used the broad, government-wide policy to complete their assessment. These departments are therefore grouped together under the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat. For a full description of how the grades were assigned, see the Detailed Methods Appendix.
ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS AND NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT CANADA (AANDC)

| Accessible, Current, Clear, and Consistent | 8/15 |
| Promotes Openness and Timeliness | 17/20 |
| Safeguards Against Political Interference | 9/25 |
| Protects Scientific Free Speech | 10/30 |
| Dispute Resolution and Whistleblower Protection | 5/5 |

**Total Percentage** 52%

**Recommendations:**
- Clarify the process that non-spokesperson scientists should follow when interacting with media.
- Clearly state that employees may speak freely as long as they acknowledge that their views do not represent those of the department.
- Reduce the number of approvals for media correspondence. This will encourage open communication and reduce the opportunity for political interference.

**From** conducting research about the impacts of climate change on shipping routes to responsible resource development, AANDC scientists are a small but crucial group that work towards economic and environmental sustainability in Canada’s Arctic. The AANDC Media Policy and Procedure outlines the roles for communications staff and departmental spokespeople. Notably, it implies that scientists should be involved in media relations by acknowledging that media relations officers are not the content experts. It also includes a fast-track approval process to ensure Interview request approvals are obtained within a one-day news cycle. However, AANDC almost received a failing grade because of policies that do not adequately support scientists’ right to free speech and that place many restrictions on how they interact with the media.

**Designated spokespeople are reminded to “confine remarks to matters of fact,” and there is no direction given for non-spokespeople on how to express personal opinions. The media policy also requires that media lines and talking points undergo several rounds of approvals.**
ATOMIC ENERGY OF CANADA LIMITED (AECL)  | INCOMPLETE
---|---
Accessible, Current, Clear, and Consistent | Incomplete
Promotes Openness and Timeliness | Incomplete
Safeguards Against Political Interference | Incomplete
Protects Scientific Free Speech | Incomplete
Dispute Resolution and Whistleblower Protection | Incomplete
Total Percentage | Incomplete

**Recommendations:**
- Develop a formal media policy to facilitate transparency and support scientists in their communication with the media.

AECL is the Crown corporation responsible for advancing Canada’s nuclear science and technology goals, and employs more than 1300 scientists. Their work ranges from handling nuclear waste products to producing medical isotopes. AECL does not have a formal media policy or code of values and ethics that governs employees’ interactions with the media. As a Crown corporation, AECL is not required to adhere to the Communications Policy of the Government of Canada.

The requirement by the Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act to develop a Code of Values and Ethics also does not apply to Crown corporations. We could not formally assess AECL due to incomplete information.

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6 Scientific and professional employees are defined as, “people in jobs that require at least one academic degree or nationally recognized professional qualification, as well as those with equivalent experience.”

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CFIA employs over 500 veterinary scientists and over 600 biologists who work to ensure the safety of Canadians’ food. CFIA is one of just four federal departments that has developed a policy on the Responsible Conduct of Research and Development. It highlights freedom from political interference for science conducted at CFIA, stating, “we do not manipulate science to achieve a desired outcome but acknowledge that other factors must be taken into account in this decision making.” It also supports scientists’ right to access, edit, and review documents that make use of their research.

The CFIA Overview of Media Relations and Guide for Spokespersons, however, ensures all media inquiries are routed through media relations and are subject to approval.

Policy in Practice
96% of scientists surveyed are not able to speak freely to the media about the work they do at CFIA. This was the highest percentage of any department surveyed.

The number of full-time equivalent employees at CFIA in these science positions was obtained through an Access to Information request for the fiscal year 2012-2013. This information was not available through Statistics Canada.
The CSA is a small agency with a big mission as their scientists work to advance space exploration. The CSA media policy includes several restrictions, such as “the appropriate authorities” must approve all information released to the media, interview requests are subject to approval, and all news releases and media advisories must be approved by media relations.

The CSA media policy makes no reference to scientists’ right to free speech and their right to have the final review on media documents that make use of their work.

### CANADIAN SPACE AGENCY (CSA)

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<td>Promotes Openness and Timeliness</td>
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<td>Safeguards Against Political Interference</td>
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<td>Protects Scientific Free Speech</td>
<td>10/30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dispute Resolution and Whistleblower Protection</td>
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**Total Percentage**: 47%

**Recommendations:**
- Reduce and clarify the number of approvals required throughout the media relations process.
- Include the rights of scientists to speak freely and review documents that make use of their work.
- Outline procedures for non-official spokespersons.
Canada’s national security and defence programs depend on high quality research in areas such as communications networks and personnel protection. DND received the highest grade in our assessment, scoring a B grade (just above the average grade for U.S. agencies in 2013). The DND media policy includes a number of elements that other departments should strive towards, including fewer restrictions on scientists’ ability to communicate their research, and clearly defined roles and responsibilities for employees, spokespeople, and media relations personnel.

The media policy does not require inquiries to be routed to Public Affairs (PA) but scientists “can seek advice and support from PA through their chain of command, when desired or if in doubt about how to respond.” This approach empowers employees to interact positively with the media.

However, the DND policy does not include a personal-views exception and states that employees speaking in official capacity must not “speculate about events, incidents, issues or future policy decisions or offer personal opinion on government, DND, or Canadian Forces”.

While the right of scientists to have the final review is included within the Defence Research and Development agency’s Publishing Reference Manual (still in the draft stage), this does not apply to media products.
One of the biggest employers of scientists in the federal government, EC is tasked with protecting our natural environment and providing weather information. EC's media policy has previously come under scrutiny and its ranking is comparatively low due to a restrictive policy that focuses on message control rather than supporting effective communication.

Scientists must refer all media inquiries to the media relations office and are not to respond until given approval by a media relations officer. It is not clear when media relations will collaborate with the scientists or direct the call to a spokesperson.

Scientists' freedom of speech is not well supported by the EC media relations policy. Speaking in official capacity, spokespersons are asked not to offer personal opinion on government, or EC policy. The media policy does not mention scientists' right to speak freely and their right to final review, although it is mentioned in the EC Publishing Policy (which does not apply to media products).

### ENVIRONMENT CANADA (EC)

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**Recommendations:**
- Remove the requirements that all employees must seek approval before speaking with the media and that all inquiries must be directed to an approved spokesperson.
- Add statements that support scientists' right to speak freely and their right to final review.

91% of scientists at Environment Canada do not feel that they can share concerns with the public or media about departmental decisions that, based on their scientific knowledge, could bring harm to the public interest, without fear of censure or retaliation from the department.9

**Scientists’ freedom of expression is hindered by media policies**

Environment Canada's Media Relations Policy notes that when scientists attend conferences where they expect to interact with the media, they first need to contact media relations officers to determine if there are any “potential issues.” If permission is given, scientists may speak to the media without an approval for each individual media request, but they must “speak only to the science or technical aspect at hand.”
FISHERIES AND OCEANS CANADA (DFO)

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<td><strong>Total Percentage</strong></td>
<td><strong>62%</strong></td>
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**Recommendations:**
- Remove the restrictions that media inquiries must be routed to designated spokespersons and that Q & A’s must be pre-approved before interviews.
- Include a personal-views exception statement to clarify how employees may express their opinions.

From developing nautical charts to ecosystem-based research, DFO scientists maintain safe waterways and sustainable ocean resources. With one of the most comprehensive media policies, DFO ranks third of the 16 departments assessed. DFO’s media policy supports scientists’ involvement in developing messages for media, and implies (but does not explicitly articulate) employees’ right to final review. The Publishing Policy and Guidelines (Communications Branch) emphasizes that authors must approve any edited text, since they are responsible for its content. All DFO policies evaluated emphasize the importance of openness in communications with the media and the public.

Nonetheless, interactions between employees and the media are highly controlled. If an employee receives a media request directly, they are to immediately advise communications staff, implying that approval is needed.

Media inquiries must be directed to designated spokespersons and Q & A’s need to be pre-approved.

Although the media policy states that scientists should avoid discussion of personal opinion, the Values & Ethics Code acknowledges that a balance must be achieved between upholding employees’ freedom of speech and their duty of loyalty.

Policy vs. Practice

Despite DFO’s comparatively high score, DFO scientists in this department are the least satisfied with the way the federal government and DFO communicates or broadcasts the results of their work to the media or general public, compared to any other department surveyed.9
HEALTH CANADA (HC) AND PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCY OF CANADA (PHAC) C-

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<td>Dispute Resolution and Whistleblower Protection</td>
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**Total Percentage** 58%

**Recommendations:**
- Reduce restrictions on scientist-media interactions to facilitate the open communication that Health Canada recommends in its Scientific Integrity Policy.
- Increase the transparency of criteria used for approving spokespeople and granting interviews.

**HC** employs more than 2000 scientists who conduct key research on food and drug safety, hazardous substances, and biotechnology. PHAC is a smaller organization that conducts research on issues ranging from prevention and control of disease outbreaks to enhancing public health programs. As these two organizations share communication services and policies, they were assessed together.

Overall, they promote the involvement of scientists in creating media products and include language supporting open and timely communication. Both departments support scientists’ right to final review. The PHAC publishing policy is particularly supportive of scientists, highlighting that supporting and communicating government policy must be balanced with the need to contribute knowledge openly and “to nurture the careers of its scientists.”

The publishing policy also protects the integrity of scientific manuscripts by explicitly stating that recommendations for changes “do not alter the findings of the research.”

However, there are several key restrictions. All media inquiries are to be directed immediately to media relations, who will then decide the appropriate response. Only approved spokespeople may speak with the media, using approved messages. Assessments are made to determine if interview requests are granted, but this process was not outlined in the policies we obtained. All granted interviews need to be monitored by a media relations official.

**Timely Communication**
Health Canada takes its commitment to timely communication seriously: the spokespersons policy states that media inquiries should be acknowledged within one hour and the Standard Operating Procedure notes that many of the required approvals need to be obtained within 45 minutes.
Scientists employed at IC are mainly concentrated at the Communications Research Centre of Canada (CRC). This organization works to improve Canada’s wireless communication through research in satellite communications and networks technologies. CRC media guidelines are brief and focus on ensuring that media inquiries are first routed to the media relations division for approval and then responded to by a designated spokesperson.

While media relations staff are encouraged to work with the researcher to develop key messages, the relevant policy provides very little detail about the nature of the approval process and the roles and responsibilities of scientists.

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<td><strong>Total Percentage</strong></td>
<td><strong>39%</strong></td>
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**Recommendations:**
- Develop a departmental policy that applies to all employees and clearly outlines the roles and responsibilities of employees, spokespersons, and media relations.
Grading communication policies for federal government scientists

NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL CANADA (NRC)

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<td><strong>Total Percentage</strong></td>
<td><strong>69%</strong></td>
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**Recommendations:**
- Highlight scientists’ rights to edit and review scientific media products (such as press releases).
- Include an explicit statement that only scientists may edit scientific content.

With more than 1300 scientists on staff, NRC research ranges from vaccine development to bioenergy. NRC stands out from many other departments in both their media policy and their Research Integrity Policy. The NRC media policy is the only policy that includes a personal-views exception statement: scientists may speak freely if they give a disclaimer that their views do not represent those of NRC. The media policy also encourages communications personnel to liaise with scientists to ensure the accuracy of information released. However, NRC scientists may not respond directly to media inquiries.

The Research Integrity policy acknowledges the importance of open communication and contains protections for employees bringing forward cases of research misconduct, such as the falsification of data. However this policy lacks broader concepts of scientific integrity such as promoting the free flow of scientific and technological information, (which was identified as one of the main principles that should be included in scientific integrity policies for the United States government).
Can Scientists Speak?

**NATURAL RESOURCES CANADA (NRCan)**

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<td>Dispute Resolution and Whistleblower Protection</td>
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**Total Percentage** 38%

**Recommendations:**

- A departmental media policy should be developed that is consistent throughout the department and highlights the roles, responsibilities, and rights of scientists and communications personnel.
- Reduce the number of approvals required for employees to interact with the media and reduce the emphasis on message control.

**With** a research portfolio that spans oil sands, forestry, and natural hazards such as earthquakes and landslides, NRCan scientists are tasked with a broad but critical research area. NRCan lags behind the other departments studied as it does not have official departmental policies for media relations or scientific integrity. Therefore, we based our analysis on two sets of media guidelines, the NRCan Science and Technology Publications Policy, and the NRCan Values and Ethics Code.

NRCan policies emphasize message control and place restrictions on who may interact with the media. Media relations will develop messages together with the spokesperson and communications managers; approval is then required from the Minister’s Director of Communications and, in some cases, from the Privy Council Office.

The NRCan Values and Ethics Code states that employees’ right to free speech needs to be balanced with their duty of loyalty and spokespersons should not offer personal opinion.

NRCan’s Values and Ethics code specifically notes that NRCan supports “working together in a spirit of openness, honesty and transparency that encourages engagement, collaboration and respectful communication;” however, it does not promote open communication with the media.

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These guidelines were last circulated to employees in 2010 and although they are no longer in use (pers. comm. Paul Duchesne, Manager of NRCan Media Relations), there is no evidence that these policies have been officially rescinded or replaced with a department media policy.
The PWGSC Code of Conduct stands out from other departments regarding whistleblower protection: it includes the PWGSC Guideline on Employee Retaliation Protection with Respect to Formal Recourse. This is described as the first guideline of its kind in the public service, providing internal protections as an alternative to those provided when a disclosure is filed through the Public Servant Disclosure Protection Act.

PWGSC employs a comparatively small number of scientists and engineers who are involved in overseeing government property and buildings. The PWGSC Answering Media Inquiries policy is a straightforward document that clearly outlines the roles and responsibilities of the media relations unit, regional communications’ offices, and employees. However, the PWGSC media policy scored poorly compared to other departments for two main reasons. The policy makes no mention of employee’s rights to speak freely or review and edit scientific documents. Moreover, media communications is highly controlled, with many restrictions and required approvals. For example, a media relations or communications representative must monitor all interviews between a spokesperson and the media.

### PUBLIC WORKS AND GOVERNMENT SERVICES CANADA (PWGSC)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Score</th>
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<tr>
<td>Accessible, Current, Clear, and Consistent</td>
<td>12/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotes Openness and Timeliness</td>
<td>17/20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safeguards Against Political Interference</td>
<td>2/25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protects Scientific Free Speech</td>
<td>10/30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispute Resolution and Whistleblower Protection</td>
<td>3/5</td>
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</tbody>
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**Total Percentage: 46%**

**Recommendations:**
- Reduce the restrictions on those employees who are not departmental spokespeople from interacting with the media.
- Highlight employees’ rights to scientific free speech.

The PWGSC Code of Conduct stands out from other departments regarding whistleblower protection: it includes the PWGSC Guideline on Employee Retaliation Protection with Respect to Formal Recourse.
To assess departments that do not have a departmental media policy, we used the TBS, which issues policies and guidelines that pertain to all public servants. The Communications Policy of the Government of Canada (GoC) is a broad document that applies to many aspects of communication, including media relations and spokespersons (sections 19 and 20). Overall, this policy includes language supporting open communication, however its lack of sufficient detail may result in communications personnel and managers implementing an overly restrictive interpretation of the policy. The GoC Communications Policy focuses on the responsibility of communications personnel to route media requests to spokespersons. Spokespeople must limit their remarks to matters of fact when speaking as an institution’s official representative, but no direction is given for statements in an unofficial capacity or for non-spokesperson employees.

While scientists’ rights are not explicitly discussed in the context of media relations, “functional specialists” (including analysts and researchers) are required to “participate actively in the planning, co-ordination and implementation of an institution’s communications.”

This implies that scientists will have access to drafts and be able to edit media products; however, there is no explicit statement that communications personnel must not edit media products in a manner that changes the scientific content.

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<th>TREASURY BOARD OF CANADA SECRETARIAT (TBS)</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Used to Assess:</strong> Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission, Transport Canada</td>
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<td><strong>Dispute Resolution and Whistleblower Protection</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Total Percentage</strong></td>
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**Recommendations:**
- Clearly state details regarding the roles and responsibilities of media relations, spokespersons, and all other employees.
- Affirm employees’ right to speak freely, provided that they acknowledge that their views do not represent those of the department.
**Solutions**

Based on evidence from previous studies and feedback from the scientists themselves, we believe that strengthening media policies is an effective way to help establish good practices within departments, facilitate the free communication of scientific information among scientists and between scientists and the public, and strengthen public trust in government science.

In keeping with the stated goals of the Government of Canada's communications policy that government communication should be in the spirit of "freedom and openness,"1 departments should put these goals into action by improving the media policies that govern federal scientists' communications with the media and the public.

We have five key recommendations for how Canadian federal departments and agencies can improve science communication policies:

1. Make policies easily available online for scientists, journalists and the public.
2. Make it explicit that scientists can speak freely about their research to facilitate clear and timely communication between scientists and journalists.
3. Give scientists the right to have the final review of the scientific content of media products (e.g. press releases) that make substantial use of their work to protect against political interference.
4. Include a 'personal-views exception' to allow scientists to express their personal opinions in a professional and respectful manner as long as they make clear they are not representing the views of their department.
5. Include provisions to protect whistleblowers and effectively resolve disputes.

Some changes are simple, such as making the media policies available online and incorporating provisions supporting timely communication. These small additions could improve government transparency almost immediately. However, the greatest impact would come from a fundamental shift in government communication policies from a strict focus on message control to a more facilitative role, supporting interactions between scientists and the media.

It is critical that this shift be incorporated into the Government of Canada Communications Policy.

This broad policy, which applies to all public servants, sets the standard for communications, and currently lacks key measures that are necessary for it to be effective. Although this kind of change requires a substantial commitment from department management, it is not impossible.

When the Union of Concerned Scientists repeated their U.S. media policy assessment in 2013, five years after their initial assessment, they found that increased U.S. government support for scientific integrity19 had positively affected media policies and improved communication between scientists and the media.11

Science communication in Canada can be improved through better media policies and a strong commitment from all levels of government to uphold the values of openness and transparency.

As government science becomes more transparent, the government itself will benefit by building the public trust and attracting high-quality researchers to work within the government. All Canadians will benefit from our increased ability to hold the government accountable and ensure that decisions about our health and environment are based on the best available scientific evidence.
Can Scientists Speak?

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Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Centre for Coastal Studies at SFU, Evidence for Democracy, the NSERC Canada Discovery Grants Programme, the Willow Grove Foundation, with additional support from the University of Ottawa. We thank Scott Findlay, Arne Mooers, Patricia Gallaugh, Wendy Palen, Gretchen Goldman, Emily Norgang, Jon Moore, Sally Otto and Alana Westwood for input of various kinds and help with scoring. We thank Anish Parmar for designing the final report and Philippe Marchand and Marie-Michelle Gagné for the French translation.

We thank volunteers at Evidence for Democracy and the SFU FAB* Lab members for their feedback and assistance with scoring. We also thank Paul Dufour and two additional anonymous reviewers for useful comments on an earlier version of this report.

References


