



Communication Canada is the latest incarnation of an agency that throws too much money at political friends, says investigative journalist **KEN RUBIN**

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# A high price for hot air

**C**ommunication Canada, the federal agency entrusted to convey Canada's information messages, is already controversial after having only been around for seven months. That's because it's embroiled in defending payments made under its sponsorship program that make it look more like Controversy Canada.

The Auditor-General's examination concentrates on how \$1.6-million went to producing three skimpy reports, two very similar, to identify sponsoring events that could raise the Canadian government's visibility in Quebec. All were given to Groupaction Marketing Inc., a firm with Liberal connections.

But the inquiry needs to be broadened beyond those Groupaction reports. That's because Communication Canada is already beginning to resemble its controversial predecessors: Information Canada, the Canadian Unity Information Office and the Canadian Information Office, and their questionable spending practices and mandates.

Those agencies had a reputation for being partisan and propagandist; for being too focused on fighting separatism; for breaking or exploiting government contract spending rules; and for hiring political friends.

On Sept. 1, 2001, Communication Canada took over from the Canadian Information Office, inheriting its methods of using information, and its numerous contractors, to counter the Quebec separatist government's messages.

It also got the lesser-known Communications Co-ordination Services Branch from Public Works and Government Services. This latter agency was closely tied to cabinet, and also highly politicized when it came to dispensing a large amount of advertising, polling, and sponsorship work.

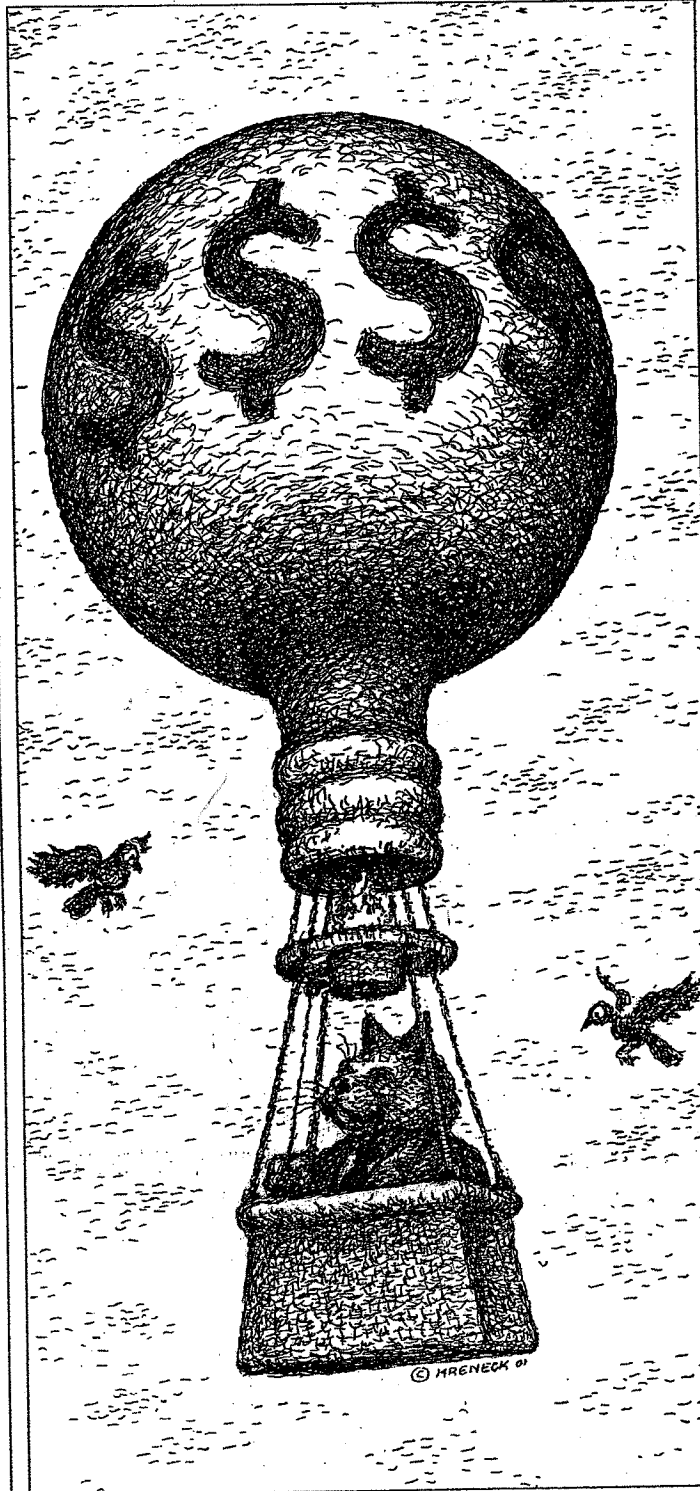
The merger was supposed to be a cost-saving measure that would offer greater focus for federal government marketing, advertising and information work than any past agency had done. But this rationale seems odd, considering that the most controversial and expensive programs it inherited remained intact and were neither cancelled nor cut back. Nor were they made less partisan.

Take the case of the expensive ministerial tour program, which was taken over by Communication Canada, in which Canadian cabinet ministers go on the road to separatist hot spots in Quebec, and now the West.

On taking over as Public Works Minister in mid-January, Don Boudria was informed during a briefing by senior Communication Canada officials that in the year 2001 the program sent "nine ministers visiting 15 Quebec regions, taking part in 153 activities that generated 146 newspaper articles."

Out west in Manitoba and British Columbia, "10 ministers got as far as 21 communities with time to make 63 activities for a grand total of getting 52 newspaper articles."

But, the notes — which usually accompany such briefings — made no mention of the partisan nature of such tours or of the excessive organizing expenses paid. In fact, more than \$1-million a year was paid to two outside firms with links to the Liberals, Communication et Stratégie Tourne-  
 née du Québec, and Tremblay Guittet



KEVIN KIRNECK/L.A. TIMES SYNDICATE

Communications, to implement the program. The latter firm was headed by a close friend of Alfonso Gagliano and received more than \$1-million in contracts

while Mr. Gagliano was minister of Public Works.

I believe that in most cases, the ministerial tours could have been organized by

staff bureaucrats as part of their regular duties, costing essentially nothing, other than travel expenses.

Mr. Boudria does seem agreeable to cutting off the use of such outsiders.

Another case is the \$240-million, five-year sponsorship program, of which the infamous duplicate reports were a part. Much of the reputed commission and subcontract work, done by outside contractors, was not properly accounted for, according to a scathing internal audit in August, 2000. Groupaction Marketing Inc., Groupe Everest and its affiliate, Media I.D.A. Vision, were among the biggest beneficiaries of the more than \$80-million paid to contracted firms for largely undocumented work.

Nor does there appear to be any end to (nor any new restrictions on) the millions of dollars in spending that goes to friendly third-party contractors doing general government advertising work. They act as go-betweens to place government-friendly advertising in the media.

But it is not just these programs in Communication Canada's mandate that are cause for concern.

What's ringing alarm bells is the agency's belief that an aggressive marketing campaign is needed to bombard Canadians with expensive regional and demographically targeted messages about the quality of Canadian government programs. When records show, for instance, that the agency is looking into marketing strategies promoting the federal government to three- to 12-year-olds, at a cost to taxpayers, it's time to check out where this agency is heading.

And it's inconsistent that Communication Canada is billing itself as a one-stop-shopping central information agency, when there is no discernable corresponding cutback in the numerous, expensive information programs done by other federal agencies.

There is also Communication Canada's too-close association with the PMO that makes it unsuitable to carry out a mandate of producing and giving out unbiased and accurate information.

Indeed, last fall, a Public Policy Forum/d'Ombrain Inc. report, directed by David Zussman, one of Jean Chrétien's closest advisers in Ottawa, recommended just such a close connection so as to give the Prime Minister a stronger national leadership role. The report indicated that Ottawa had no effective "political direction of communications at the highest level," and what was needed was "a larger ... hands-on direction of major communications events."

Many Canadians are not against getting the straight information goods by dialling Communication Canada's 1-800 number, using its Web site, and attending fairs and events and receiving its materials. They just want information that is useful, and not preachy, grossly expensive, or the product of patronage.

Communication Canada may have some merit. But, after the exposure in recent weeks of questionable deals for which it now bears responsibility, it's time to reassess what Communication Canada is about and to investigate its communications products and operations.

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