

Proposed Strategic Communications Plan

February 10, 2020



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Executive Summary

Town Councilors and staff have acknowledged the need to consistently and adequately inform the community about issues, programs, policy, and initiatives that will directly impact residents' lives and/or their neighborhoods. Moreover, they have committed to regularly engage individuals in open and meaningful communications and dialogue.

The Communications Strategic Plan includes a background on the origins of this plan, an exploration of the evolving and critical role of communications in government, an overview of current strengths and challenges, plan goals, and the necessary action steps that will help meet these goals.

Background

The Town Council held four workshops in March, April, and May 2019 to discuss growth in the community, public outreach, and how best to plan for the future of the town with a robust public engagement process. The Town Council identified a plan for moving forward that was captured in a resolution, approved by the Town Council on May 29, 2019. Developing an enhanced communication system was a key component of the Resolution. Upon the election of three new Town Councilors, in June 2019, the Council continued discussion on the implementation of this plan and sought the new Council members' input.

In April 2019, the Town hired a part-time staff person to undertake an internal review of all communications systems. During several weeks between late April and early July, Education and Outreach Coordinator Erin Cadigan met with Town staff and department heads individually and in small groups to discuss communication methods and delivery systems within their departments,

throughout Town operations in general, and with the broader community. Additionally, a review of the Town website and Committee processes was undertaken to shed light on how information is conveyed to the public by various departments and committees. A report of this assessment was completed in August 2019.



*Town Council's August
2019 Work Plan Retreat*





In July 2019, the Town of Falmouth mailed a survey to residents regarding communications methods and the best means of imparting information to and receiving feedback from the community. The survey was also available online. A total of 345 responses was collected and analyzed. The results, often supporting staff observations, informed the assessments of current communications systems and the priorities and action steps laid out in the following plan. The results of this survey were presented to the Town Council on October 16, 2019.

In August 2019, at the annual Town Council Work Plan Retreat, the Council designated the creation of a communications strategic plan a top priority on the 2019-2020 work plan.

Guiding Principles

The Town is committed to doing a better job of communicating with residents and working more effectively and efficiently to inform a diverse population about the issues, programs, services, and initiatives that impact their community and their lives. Increasing engagement and awareness through more comprehensive communications systems will foster a greater sense of community and help to construct a shared vision of the priorities and initiatives we set together for Falmouth's future.

Communications: An Essential Function of Government

Delivering services to residents is the primary role of most Town departments. Residents most often interact with their local municipality in order to, among other things, pay taxes, register to vote, apply for a permit, participate in a community program, renew a vehicle registration, drop off trash and recycling, drive through road construction projects, or receive police, fire, or EMS interventions. It is through these front-line interactions that much of the public's perception is formed about their local government and its officials.

The key principles guiding this effort are:

- ⇒ We believe in an open and transparent Town government.
- ⇒ We believe in being the best and most credible source of information about the Town of Falmouth.
- ⇒ We believe in coordinating a proactive and timely approach to disseminating information that is relevant and useful to residents in a format that meets their needs.
- ⇒ We believe in fostering positive, respectful, and constructive discourse with residents and stakeholders.
- ⇒ We believe in promoting positive relationships and establishing productive partnerships, between the Town government, residents, businesses, community organizations, and schools.

It is in the arena of governance, however, that interactions between Town officials and residents can become more challenging. The public notification and participation required of town governments does not adequately inform and engage residents or create a dialogue regarding issues brought before the Town Council. Effective communication that goes beyond what is required by statute is central to a well-functioning municipal government and directly contributes to the satisfaction citizens have in their local officials and the decisions those officials make.

Governments are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that successful communications can harness the opinion of residents to inform policy, programs, and services. When governments provide residents with programs and services they want and need, when governments fairly and openly address issues that affect a community, when governments invite and encourage public participation in planning and policy initiatives, public satisfaction increases.

Effective public engagement in governance encompasses the myriad of ways to bring people together to consider issues of public importance. Its goal is to involve residents, solicit their feedback and opinions, and build consensus when possible in the process of decision making at a local level. Communications that encourage participation, in addition to providing information, promote inclusivity, establish relevance, and invite greater community involvement in government.

Cultivating open, citizen-centric communications with residents requires the use of new technologies alongside traditional delivery methods to reach an increasingly broad and diverse audience. Making meaningful improvements in citizen engagement and satisfaction can require transforming operations including processes, mindsets, capabilities, resources, tools, and culture. Crafting impactful communications between Town and residents requires collaboration and cooperation between all Town officials, across all departments, with support from the Town Council. Therefore, establishing effective communication as a priority of the leadership's management agenda is imperative, as is carving out budgetary and staff resources for the specific purpose of communicating and engaging the public.

“Successful communications can harness the opinion of residents to inform policy, programs, and services.”



Business Safety Dialogue hosted by Falmouth Fire-EMS.



Current Tactics & Tools

The Town's current communication tools and assets include:

- Public meetings
- Social media (multiple Facebook and Twitter accounts)
- E-mails/e-mail blasts/E-Alerts
- Town of Falmouth website
- Videos (online on the website and YouTube)
- Falmouth Community Television Channel 1301
- Automated phone system
- Falmouth Focus* newsletter
- Department and committee newsletters
- Posters and flyers
- Newspaper articles
- Paid print advertisements
- Presentations and programs
- Press releases
- Publications (reports, guides, brochures, booklets, etc.)
- Handouts at meetings
- Banners and signage
- Town employees
- Residents
- Town Councilors
- Neighborhood Watch and other neighborhood-based groups
- Mass mailings/direct mail
- Reverse 911 call with recorded message
- Special events
- Tax bill inserts
- Online calendars and event postings

Current Strengths

The Town's expanded communications efforts are supported by the following strengths:

Staff

- Identified staff person to coordinate communication efforts
- Competent staff who prioritize customer service and are willing and eager to improve communications systems
- Key staff members trained in crisis communication, social media marketing, and general communications
- Dedicated IT department and staff to facilitate communications strategies through multiple technology platforms and provide training and assistance to employees as needed

Website

- Content rich, well-established website
- Software platform specific to municipal governments
- Flexible web platform that allows individual departments and multiple employees to upload information, update web pages, send e-mail alerts, and develop content easily and remotely
- Availability of expanded suite of software options that may enhance communication efforts



Reach

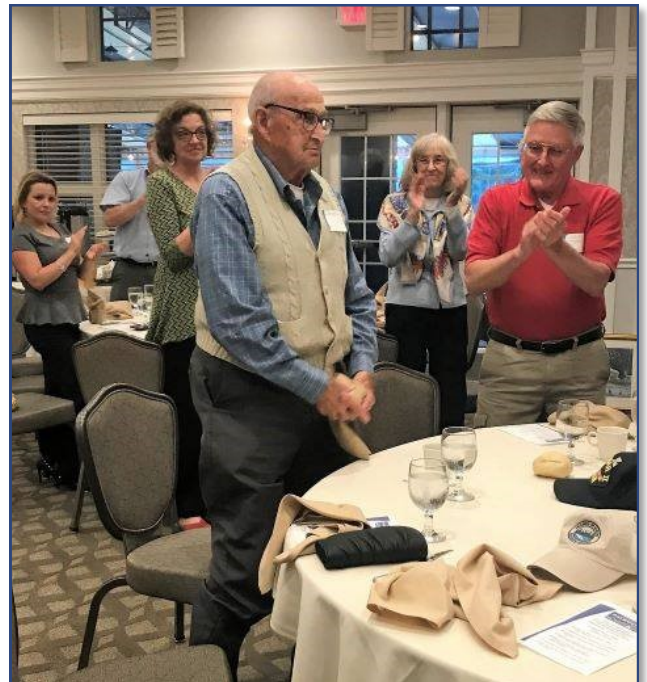
- High level of enrollment in E-Alerts system
- Broad reach thanks to array of platforms and capacities
- Local free newspaper to carry public notices and advertising, as well as provide coverage of events and issues
- Active and growing social media pages, including the Town of Falmouth, Falmouth PD, and Fire-EMS Facebook pages

Mindset

- Growing understanding and appreciation within Town government of the importance of effective communications and marketing
- Willingness on the part of Town officials to make change and improve communications systems
- Openness among Town officials to collaborate both internally and with the broader community in general to effect improved communication methods

Community

- Engaged, knowledgeable residents eager to participate, provide feedback, and get involved in their local government
- Strong force of capable volunteers who bring a wealth of institutional knowledge to the table



Recognizing the Citizen of the Year, Ralph Bonville, at the Volunteer Banquet in 2019.

Key Challenges



The key challenges facing the Town in its ability to deliver a consistent and positive message to residents and key stakeholders include:

Staffing

- Maintaining staff resources dedicated to communications
- Staff's need to focus primarily on core public service duties means that proactive communications and outreach can be challenging
- Lack of centralized communication flow as multiple people manage communications for different departments
- Multiple staff offices throughout Falmouth can hinder the flow of internal communications between employees in different buildings

Audience

- Broad audience with differing interests, viewpoints, expectations, and needs
- Target audiences have differing preferences for how they like to receive information (online, social media, printed publications, broadcast media, etc.)
- Information must be available in a variety of formats that is repeatedly delivered via each method to ensure success

Lack of branding

- Inconsistency in the format, quality, look, and feel of Town publications and other communications materials

Volume of information

- Difficulty in organizing the sheer volume of information and documents available to the public in a way that is user-friendly, intuitive, and easily accessible

Rapid and continuing shift in the impact and use of traditional communication systems

- Diminished capacity of community newspaper to cover the community
- Sheer volume of methods individuals use to garner information requires use of multiple methods which can shift depending upon audience or content
- The speed with which communications technology and platforms change and user-habits shift necessitates frequent assessments, updates, and modifications to communications systems often requiring staff and monetary resources





Public Perception

- Limited awareness of Falmouth's offerings beyond the town limits
- Not unlike most communities, there can be negative perceptions of the Town government
- Competition for awareness and media coverage from nearby, larger metropolitan areas
- Survey results regarding residents' satisfaction levels in Town communications efforts, as well as residents' self-assessed level of knowledge regarding Town activities, suggest need for improvements

Expense

- Significant expense of communications technologies, platforms, and staffing

Goals

The goals of this Communications Strategic Plan are to:

- ⇒ Effectively and efficiently inform residents about Town activities, programs, policies, and services
- ⇒ Improve communications between the Town and its residents
- ⇒ Increase resident engagement in Town government

Action steps to attain these goals fall under three broad categories:

1. Establish Consistent, User-Friendly Messaging Systems and Communication Processes
2. Utilize New, Expanded, and Updated Communication Methods
3. Promote Engagement and Expand Reach



1. Establish Consistent, User-Friendly Messaging Systems, Policies, and Communication Processes

Establishing consistent systems and processes across departments will project professionalism, credibility, and competence, set expectations for both staff and the public, alleviate confusion, and facilitate the distribution of reliable information to residents that is readily identifiable as a Town of Falmouth communication.

Branding

Establishing brand standards across all Town departments will facilitate greater cohesiveness of all print and electronic materials ensuring that all information coming from the Town of Falmouth is recognizable as such.



Action Steps:

- Establish brand standards and guidelines.
- Create consistent document templates for agendas, minutes, reports, presentations, brochures, and other Town documents.
- Evaluate current signage in all Town buildings and properties to assess consistency and address areas in need.
- Utilize the Town logo in all communications.

Website

The Town of Falmouth website is a content-rich resource for residents seeking information. However, organizing the magnitude of information available on the website is daunting and keeping it up-to-date is a challenge. Placing more emphasis on how users are accessing information from the website will increase its functionality and usefulness for residents.

Action Steps:

- Conduct thorough review of website and analyze all data relevant to traffic and usage.
- Develop a plan to ensure web content meets the needs of the residents and to ensure that web content is easily accessible, informative, and engaging.
- Form a working group to coordinate efforts and carry out plan initiatives.
- Ensure content managers are consistently reviewing their pages for relevant, timely, and accurate information.
- Continue to track and assess website statistics to determine areas of improvement.
- Explore more options and packages offered by Civic Plus platform.
- Offer more staff training on Civic Plus platform.



Social Media

Developing an effective social media policy and strategy is a fundamental component of the Town's communications plan. It both supports and promotes traditional communications methods activities while serving as a means for residents to directly engage with the Town.



Action Steps:

- Establish a social media working group across departments.
- Develop and implement digital and social media best practices and policies.
- Develop a social media strategy to best meet the goals of increasing engagement, informing the public, and welcome two-way communications.
- Require training program for employees who will be posting to Town's social media pages.



Print Advertising

Falmouth regularly uses print advertising to communicate with residents, specifically in the legally required posting of public notices. Coordinating all paid advertisements through one department will ensure accuracy, consistency, and professionalism and help to realize any potential cost savings that may be obtained by purchasing a larger number of advertisements.

Action Steps:

- Develop a process by which all paid print advertising is coordinated through the communications office to ensure timeliness, placement, consistency of quality, and pricing discounts.
- Place weekly ads in the *Northern Forecaster* creating a "go to" place for information regarding Town activities.



Crisis Communication

Formalize a rapid response program along with the necessary protocols for responding to resident and media inquiries related to sensitive issues, inclement weather situations, and crises both large and small.

Action Steps

- Identify a crisis communications team.
- Establish a crisis communication plan.
- Provide training as needed in crisis communications.



Public Engagement Processes

Establishing a pro-active public engagement process allows residents and stakeholders to voice their viewpoints in a forum where they are both respected and heard. This two-way communication process fosters an environment in which trust can be built between residents and their local government as they approach complex and often difficult policy decisions. These interactions inform the creation of policy, programs, and services that better meets residents' needs.

Action Steps:

- Establish a flexible deliberative public engagement process to support various types of planning projects, policy initiatives, zoning changes, road construction projects, or any initiative requiring Council action.
- Create worksheets, checklists, toolkits, FAQs, guides, and other resources to support this process and provide residents and stakeholders with a consistent, transparent, and comprehensive understanding of how policy is formed and decisions are made.



Internal Communications

Developing protocols and best practices around internal communications can alleviate confusion and misunderstandings among staff and between departments, as well as ensure that accurate information is distributed to front-line staff. This is especially important in town government where employees are spread over multiple buildings and interaction between departments may not frequently occur.

Action Steps:

- Establish a process to immediately notify all department leaders, the communications team, and management of breaking news, upcoming events, potential policy issues, developing projects, etc., so that this news is accurately distributed to staff in a timely manner.
- Improve process for sharing media coverage to Councilors and staff to ensure everyone is aware of key messages.
- Create policies or protocols for all employee announcements, such as staff changes, procedural changes, or new policies so that all staff are kept well informed of changes or updates.
- Better equip staff to be effective advocates and ambassadors for Falmouth.



Falmouth Town Hall

2. Utilize New, Expanded, and Updated Communication Methods

New and expanded communications methods can help the Town reach constituents more easily and effectively, with a wider variety of tools that capture a greater share of residents by engaging them in the method they most prefer. Many of the action steps below were informed by responses to the Communications Method Survey in which residents ranked communications methods by their effectiveness and likeliness of use.

Surveys

Action Steps:

- Increase use of surveys in garnering resident feedback.
- Explore available survey software or online platforms to aid in surveying residents.

Text and Phone Alerts

Action Steps:

- Explore the feasibility and costs associated with offering text messaging or automated phone alerts to subscribers.



Print Mailings

Action Steps:

- Given public interest in receiving more frequent mailings, develop a process to determine under what circumstances townwide or targeted mailings are necessary and/or beneficial.
- Explore methods for targeting residents geographically, by interest, or other possible categories to ensure relevant information is reaching those most impacted in a way that best utilizes Town resources.

Newsletter

Action Steps:

- Continue the publication of a bi-weekly e-newsletter to residents sent via the E-Alert online system.
- Supplement the digital newsletter with two print versions mailed bi-annually with property tax bills.
- Develop a master calendar for recurring news/informational items.
- Consider methods to encourage interactivity of users with newsletter content.



Print Advertising

Action Steps:

- Run weekly *Forecaster* ads thereby establishing a “go-to reference point” for residents seeking information about Town activities, consolidating Town information in one easy-to-find place, and leverage the cost savings of multi-ad purchases.
- Consider the need for additional print advertising on case-by-case bases.



Website

Action Steps:

- Update and standardize the website across all departments to be more user-friendly and more easily navigable.
- Use Google Analytics and tracking tools associated with Civic Plus to discern trends and key information about how visitors are using the website.
- Enhance website with photographs and videos to create a more engaging and inspiring user experience.
- Consider additional software management options to enhance website offerings to both visitors and staff.

New Resident Packet/Senior Resource Guide

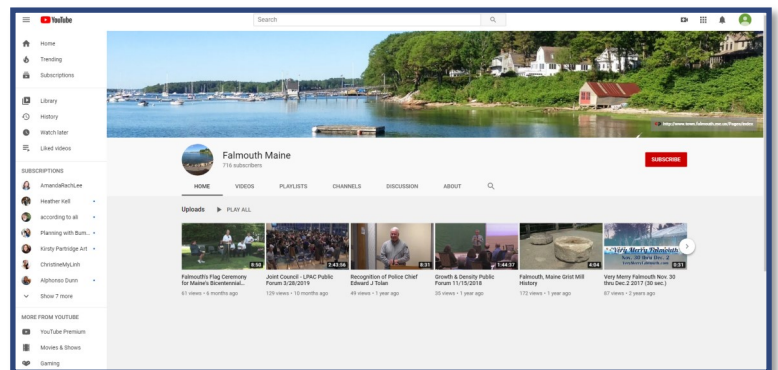
Action Steps:

- Working with other community groups, create a new resident packet of information to include contact information, Town Department operating hours, newsletter, events calendar, senior resources, and other pertinent information beneficial to those new to Falmouth.

Video

Action Steps:

- Continue to expand production of short videos with Town departments to meet specific needs and reach specific audiences.
- Share videos via social media to enhance and expand engagement on these platforms.



Phone System

Action Steps:

- Conduct an assessment of the current phone system to identify problems and determine if changes are necessary to provide a more user-friendly experience for callers.

Customer Service/Face-to-Face Transactions

Action Steps:

- Develop a customer satisfaction survey specific to face-to-face services offered by the Town in order to pinpoint problem areas and identify successes that could be duplicated elsewhere.
- Track compliments as well as complaints, thanks, or positive comments, and other feedback from residents to provide additional data in assessing customer satisfaction with Town services.



3. Promote Engagement and Expand Reach

Focus staff and resources to increase and expand communications, engagement, and reach by proactively and accurately communicating information regarding Town programs and services through a framework of unified, layered, multi-pronged communication methods. Use storytelling to highlight success stories and encourage participation. Cultivate community partnerships and develop special events and programs to build community spirit, participation, and engagement.

General

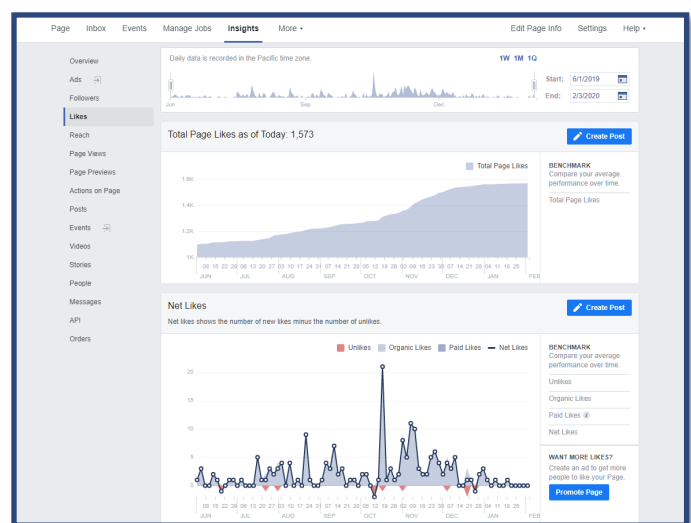
Action Steps:

- Regularly communicate Town Council decisions and actions and their relevance to the lives of residents.
- Make information regarding Town programs and services readily available and easy to comprehend.
- Produce quality communication that adheres to industry best practices and standards.
- Coordinate communication outreach efforts across departments through the creation of a calendar of regular events, activities, programs, deadlines, etc., to update website, print ads, newsletter, and social media on a consistent and timely basis.
- Proactively share success stories, such as awards, projects accomplished, or Town officials doing good work.

Social Media

Action Steps:

- Use analytics tools to better understand user interactions and inform decisions regarding content, format, and timing.
- Better coordinate posts across all Town social media platforms using content calendars and other strategies.
- Consider offering incentives to encourage followers, interest, and interactivity.
- Take advantage of specific platform tools and resources, including training from company regional representatives.
- Consider establishing additional social media accounts such as Instagram.
- Leverage social media tools such as paid advertising to promote activities and expand reach as well as engagement.





Volunteerism

Action Steps:

- Through social media, the website, and newsletter use informed and targeted messaging to better describe volunteer opportunities within Town government.
- Share stories of the good work volunteers do, their successes, and more personalized accounts of individuals and their efforts.
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Meeting and Forum Participation/Attendance

Action Steps:

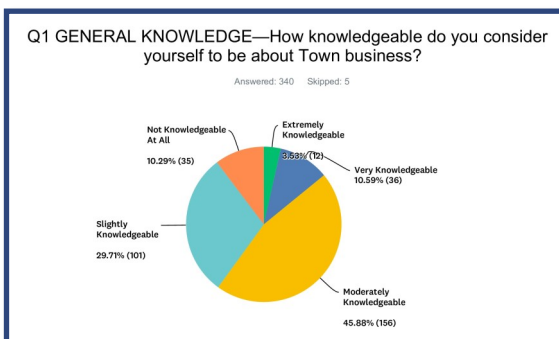
- Broadly publicize meetings and public forums and encourage participation.
- Stress, through stories, the importance of engaged and involved citizens in the effective work of government in general, and as it relates to specific policy issues or changes under discussion.
- Continue to explore formats and best practices for engagement at public forums and discussions.
- Explore additional formats such as informal coffees, listening sessions, or neighborhood meetings.



“Subscriptions”—E-mail lists, newsletters, social media

Action Steps:

- Publicize broadly the methods for “staying connected.”
- Consider offering prizes, drawings, raffles, or other incentives to encourage sign-ups.
- Work to make content relevant and useful in improving the everyday lives of residents.
- Leverage tools provided by social media platforms to enhance engagement and build reach.



Survey Response

Action Steps:

- Research various software and online survey platforms to determine tools most useful for our efforts.
- Mail surveys directly to residents when possible.
- Consider offering incentives.



Special Events, Programs, and Outreach

Action Steps:

- Continue working in partnership with community groups to present the annual Very Merry event, among others.
- Partner with organizations and events such as the commemoration of the State of Maine Bicentennial.
- Implement and promote

additional community events, programs, workshops, and outreach as staffing and resources allow.



Collaboration

Action Steps:

- Support efforts and programs of community groups and non-profits.
- Continue to seek and expand partnerships with community groups, businesses, schools, and other area organizations.



Conclusion

Work is already underway to generate interest and increase engagement among residents through enhanced and expanded communication efforts. The steps outlined above will further direct the flow of information between the Town and its residents by establishing credible, “go-to” sources of information that can be accessed in a variety of formats to meet the needs of a broad audience. At the same time, new efforts, supported by new technology, will encourage interactions with and gather feedback from residents to inform policy, programs, and services. In doing so the Town will better involve residents in the process of governance, creating greater accountability, transparency, engagement, and a more informed citizenry.

Select source materials: Baig, Aamer, Andre Dua, and Vivian Riefberg, “Putting Citizens First: How to improve citizens’ experience and satisfaction with government services,” McKinsey Center for Government (November) 2014. Available at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/industries/public%20sector/our%20insights/how%20us%20state%20governments%20can%20improve%20customer%20service/putting%20citizens%20first%20how%20to%20improve%20citizens%20experience%20and%20satisfaction%20with%20government%20services.ashx-10>; Dudley, Emma, Diaan-Yi Lin, Matteo Mancini, and Jonathan Ng, “Implementing a citizen-centric approach to delivering government services,” McKinsey Center for Government (July) 2015. Available at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/implementing-a-citizen-centric-approach-to-delivering-government-services>; Greensweig, Daniel J., Aimee Gourlay, and Irene Kao, “Increasing Productive Communication in Local Government and Decreasing Barriers to Community Interactions,” *Mitchell Hamline Law Review* (Vol. 42: Iss. 5, Article 8) 2016. Available at: <http://open.mitchellhamline.edu/mhlr/vol42/iss5/8>; Killingsworth, Colleen, “Municipal Government Communications: The Case of Local Government Communications,” *The McMaster Journal of Communication* (Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 5) 2009. Available at: [file://falmouth/CTX/URF/ecadigan/Downloads/247-Article%20Text-293-1-10-20140911%20\(2\).pdf](file://falmouth/CTX/URF/ecadigan/Downloads/247-Article%20Text-293-1-10-20140911%20(2).pdf).