5th CANADIAN SCIENCE POLICY CONFERENCE

CSPC

P10: The Solitudes:

Government science, the media, and those who help them Interact

Can we ever get along under today's rules of engagement?

NOVEMBER 2013 TORONTO, ON

Stephen Strauss

Jim Handman

Tim Vale

John McKay

STIFLING SCIENCE

Presentation by Jim Handman

A survey puts numbers to perceptions that government scientists in Canada are being muzzled.

90%
Feel that they cannot speak freely to the media about their work

48%
Had seen information withheld, causing the public or government to be misled or misinformed

86%
Could not report actions that might harm the public without fear of censure

43%
Had been asked to exclude or alter information in government documents for non-scientific reasons

50%
Had seen public health and safety compromised by political interference in science

37%
Had been blocked from answering media requests in the past 5 years

THE SOLITUDES: MEDIA TRAINING & GOVERNMENT SCIENTISTS

Presentation by John McKay

RMA

Rutherford McKay Associates

Clear Communication

In a Perfect World

RMA
Rutherford McKay Associates

In a Perfect World

Independent Government Scientists

- Independent, unencumbered by organizational context and accountabilities
- Completely self-directed
- Concerned only with science
- Go on the record about anything, at any time

RMA
Rutherford McKay Associates

In a Perfect World

Unfettered Journalists

- Also unencumbered by organizational context and accountabilities
- Immediate and complete access to the public service and any scientist
- Get what they need, when and how they need it

RMA
Rutherford McKay Associates

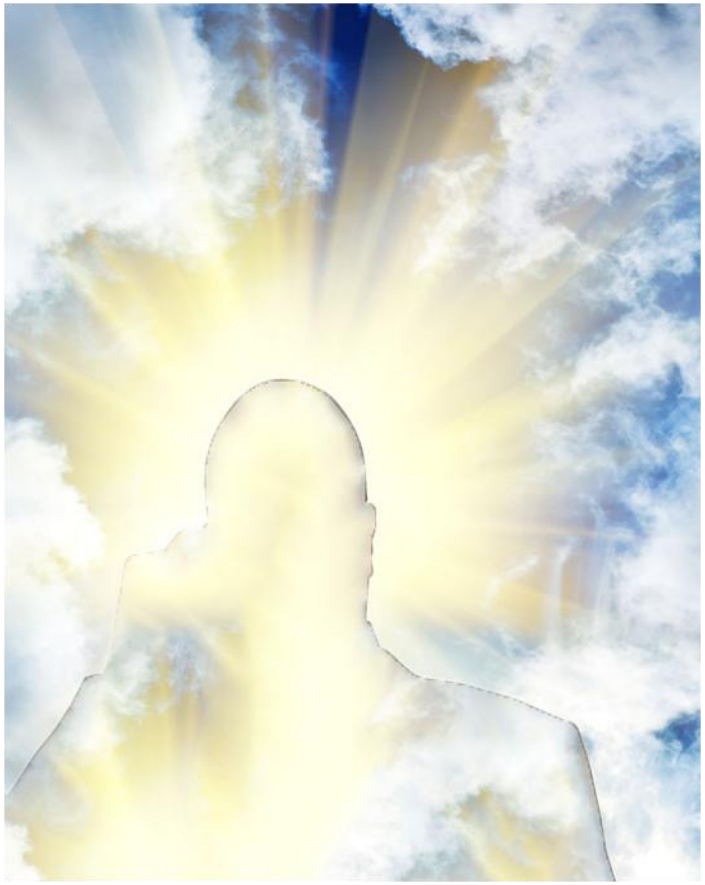
In a Perfect World

Objective Decision Makers

- Public opinion is driven primarily by evidence
- Political and public service decision makers are not affected by: public opinion, politics, debates, media
- Make wise policy decisions based only on facts and evidence

RMA
Rutherford McKay Associates

Presentation Overview



1. Why it is an imperfect world
2. Who we are
3. Our media training
4. Why **nothing** has changed
5. Why **everything** has changed

RMA
Rutherford McKay Associates

WHY IT IS AN IMPERFECT WORLD

Rutherford McKay Associates

Clear Communication

Why It Is An Imperfect World

Complicating Factors

- Science, journalism and government are all messy
- Each has multiple, competing accountabilities, responsibilities
- Different “time universes”, restrictions
- All with different “rules of engagement”

RMA
Rutherford McKay Associates

Why It Is An Imperfect World

Messy Journalism

- Journalistic standards
- Speed versus accuracy
- Working definition of objectivity ("both sides of story" can skew)
- Demands of the medium
- Organizational responsibilities and considerations (bosses, competition, office politics, etc.)
- Legal considerations

RMA
Rutherford McKay Associates

Why It Is An Imperfect World

Messy science (all sectors)

- Scientific method
- Self-correcting field – debate, controversy, peer review
- Organizational/institutional/ company politics and accountabilities (incl. funders)
- Regulations

RMA
Rutherford McKay Associates

Why It Is An Imperfect World

Messy government

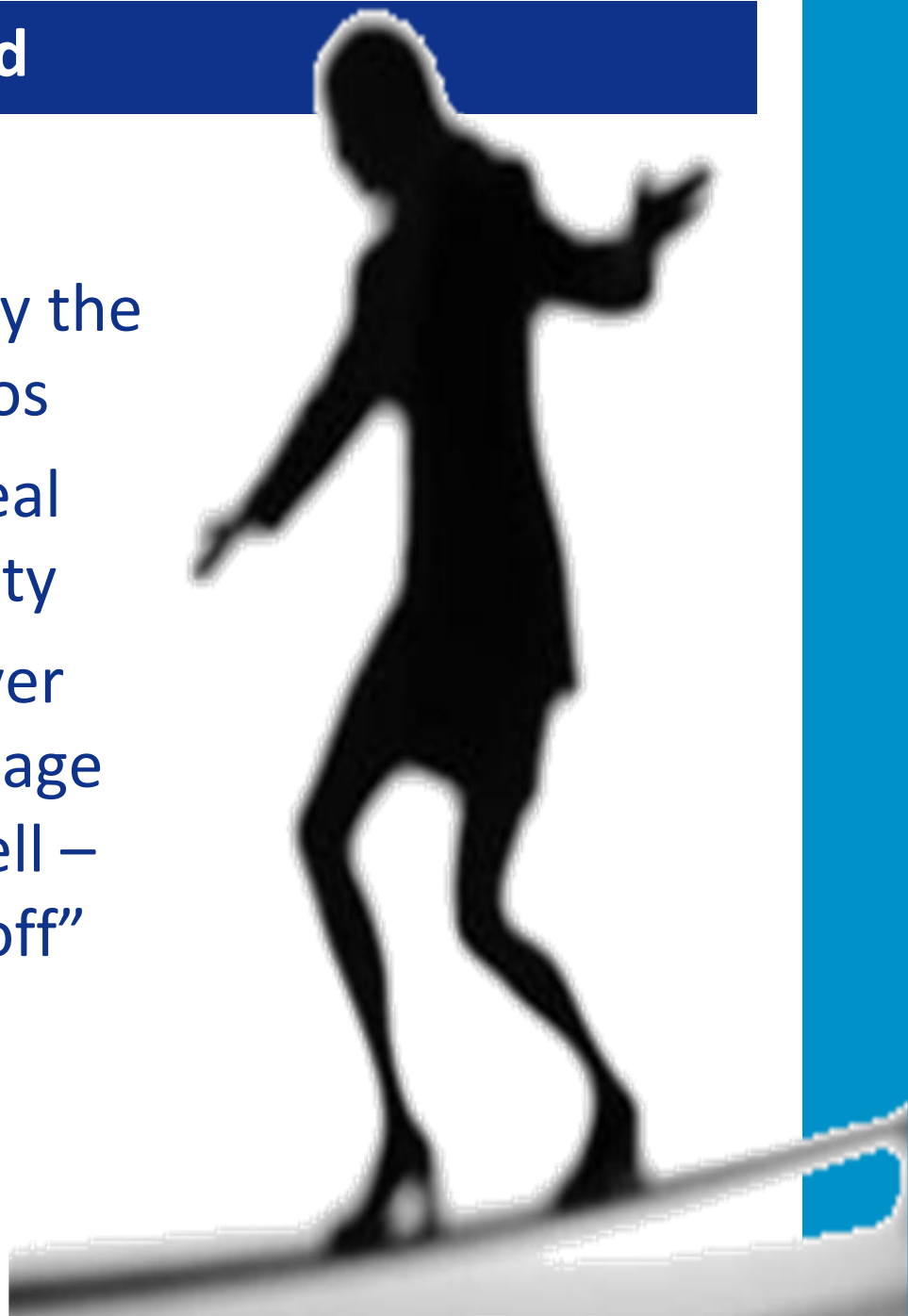
- Politics, public opinion, media, ideology
- Public service / bureaucracy accountabilities
- Legislation, regulations
- Transparency, accountability
- Science is just one of many factors in policy development

RMA
Rutherford McKay Associates

Why It Is An Imperfect World

Balancing Act

- Our minds try to simplify the mess with ideal scenarios
- Disconnect between ideal and reality causes anxiety
- Particularly when a player seems to not quite manage the messy trade-offs well – when their balance is “off”



RMA
Rutherford McKay Associates

ABOUT US

Rutherford McKay Associates

Clear Communication

About Rutherford McKay Associates (RMA)

A National Communications Co. (13 years)

- Provide strategic communications, media relations, training, writing and production services
- Three divisions:
  1) Government Services
  2) Science & Technology
  3) Education & Advocacy
- A second company, Nanos Rutherford McKay & Co., a partnership with Nanos Research

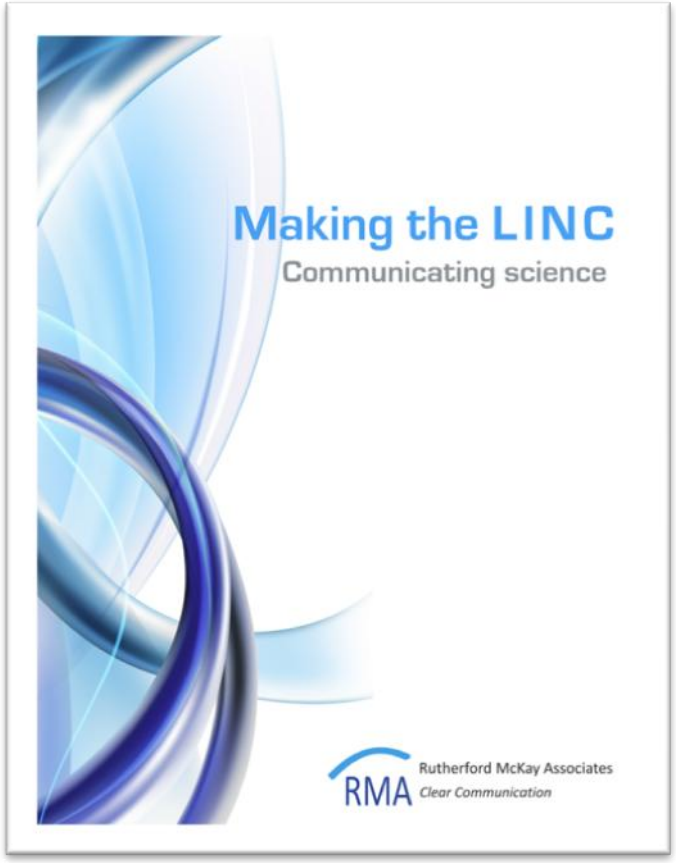
RMA
Rutherford McKay Associates

www.rmassociates.ca

About Rutherford McKay Associates (RMA)

Science communication and media training:

- Most major federal government science-based departments and agencies
- Hundreds (thousands?) of government scientists and STEM experts in variety of fields, all across Canada



RMA
Rutherford McKay Associates

www.rmassociates.ca

OUR MEDIA RELATIONS TRAINING

Rutherford McKay Associates

Clear Communication

Our Training Courses

Reality-based Training

- Practical – “what is”
- Focus on real files
  Theory -> Example -> Practice -> Critique
- How to explain to non-experts with clarity – LINC
- Bridging worlds of science, news media, government

RMA
Rutherford McKay Associates

Our Training Courses

Some key elements:

- Plain language, communicating science
- Government of Canada Communications Policy
- How the media work – and why
- Responsible use of messages
- Practical audio and video interview exercises and critique

RMA
Rutherford McKay Associates

www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pol

Our Training Courses

"Special Guests"

RMA
Rutherford McKay Associates

Government of Canada Communications Policy and why it is important

- Role of subject matter experts versus that of elected officials
- “Feet on the Ground”
- Matters of fact
- Stay in your lane

RMA
Rutherford McKay Associates

Our Training Courses

Spokespersons do not speak to:

- Subjects outside area of expertise and responsibility
- Political/advice to Minister
- Personal opinion
- Matters protected by privacy
- Matters before the courts
- Speculative/hypothetical questions
- Matters that could compromise safety and security

RMA
Rutherford McKay Associates

WHY NOTHING HAS CHANGED

Rutherford McKay Associates

Clear Communication

Why Nothing Has Changed

- What we teach more affected by changes in media than changes in government

  - Fewer reporters, feeding more platforms, more quickly
  - Impact of web, social media, digital multimedia

- Communications policy/rules are the same
- Same challenges faced by scientists and experts in explaining complex info to non-experts

RMA
Rutherford McKay Associates

WHY EVERYTHING HAS CHANGED

Rutherford McKay Associates

Clear Communication

Why Everything Has Changed

How and where new skills are used

- Skills still used even if not as much with the media
- Scientists feel that science and evidence is not valued by the current government
- Approvals, riskier (real and/or perceived)
- The degree to which the policy is followed in letter and spirit
- Media access, government responsiveness
- The changing media landscape (technology, speed, downsizing, etc.)

RMA
Rutherford McKay Associates

CONCLUSION

Rutherford McKay Associates

Clear Communication

Conclusion

- Government scientists have many accountabilities
- Balance seems “off”
- Feeling undervalued and restricted
- Pushing for more opportunities to communicate

RMA
Rutherford McKay Associates

Conclusion

When parts of the perfect world break through …

… and scientists do get opportunities to communicate …

RMA
Rutherford McKay Associates

Conclusion

… they need the skills to **make the most** of those limited opportunities …

… and communicate with non-experts in an understandable and engaging way.

RMA
Rutherford McKay Associates

Conclusion

- The “ideal worlds” have elements to strive for, but they over-simplify the discussion
- A more realistic understanding of each party’s accountabilities and trade-offs is needed
- Especially when one or more of the parties aren’t seen to be getting it quite right



RMA
Rutherford McKay Associates

Conclusion

Rutherford McKay Associates

Clear Communication

John McKay

Tel: (613) 699-2007 ext. 2

e-mail: mckay@rmassociates.ca

www.rmassociates.ca