

Deadlines and Democracy

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For journalists deadlines are everything. You miss one and there is a black hole in your newscast, a white space in your newspaper or an empty link on your website.

So if you are a journalist, it is especially frustrating when other people you are relying on for information, miss deadlines...not by minutes...not by hours...but by days.

A particularly egregious case of deadline-breaking landed in my inbox this Monday morning.

Last Wednesday, the appetites of Royal watchers were whetted as the Queen announced Prince Charles and Camilla would visit Canada in 2012 as part of her Diamond Jubilee celebrations.

As the Ottawa journalist, I'm the de facto Royal watcher for Globalnews.ca, so I dutifully called up the Department of Canadian Heritage just after 10 a.m. for details about the upcoming Royal blitz.

A media relations officer respectfully took down my info and asked me what I wanted to know. I listed my requests, including:

- Did we invite the Royals?
- Where will they visit? Will it be different than Will and Kate's tour?
- What's the cost of the tour and the budget for the Diamond Jubilee Celebrations?
- How will this Jubilee be different from the Queen's big 50th celebration?

I thought they were straightforward, factual requests, nothing politically contentious in there, which would require a long-list of approvals.

So when they asked my deadline, I told them later this day at 4 p.m. (Wednesday) – a gracious move in my opinion considering I work online where deadlines are immediate.

The hours ticked by with no response from Canadian Heritage, so I dug up the answers as best I could, finding a lot of the information I needed on the department's own website. As

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the day wore on, I didn't hear anything from Canadian Heritage, not a call, no pleading request for an extension. Nothing.

I filed my story and in the mad rush of the ensuing news cycle, I completely forgot about the request until Monday morning when the answers showed up in my email inbox, five days later.

Adding to my frustration, the information did not fully answer all of my questions.

Bureaucrats missing deadlines is not news to journalists working on Parliament Hill.

Another example; I called Foreign Affairs on Nov. 29 around 10:30 a.m. to ask about security around the Canadian embassy in Tehran after the British one was attacked by protestors. I told the media relations staff it was urgent and needed a response by noon.

I got a response at 8:18 p.m., three hours past press time, and three of the five responses were: "We do not discuss the security requirements or protection of Canadian Embassies."

Other reporters in our office can tell their own stories, as can many journalists from other outlets.

To be fair, there are many requests that departmental officials answer in a fulsome and timely way. Some departments are better than others. The same can be said for political staff, at least most of them, who are generally much more responsive and timely than public servants and who also get enraged by bureaucratic delays.

All of this left me wondering how this disregard for deadlines reflects on democracy?

It reminds me of a piece I wrote recently suggesting [citizens were turned off of democracy](#) because of frustrating experiences with the political system, including the bureaucracy.

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The study, done by a non-partisan think-tank called Samara, found most non-voters tried to participate in politics, access a government service or request help from the government only to be ignored, put on hold or discounted.

The non-voters seemed to learn disengagement through their interactions with public servants, among others.

It made me think: If I'm a journalist who is engaged in politics and I'm frustrated by the lack of responsiveness, what is it like for the average citizen who doesn't have the access I do to the public service?

Samara's answer to political disengagement is simply responsiveness.

In the end, it's a reminder public servants can play an important role in strengthening democracy by being responsive, whether it is providing information to journalists in a timely fashion or providing services to citizens.

Thankfully, many public servants are quick to respond and should be applauded, but my experience suggests there's room for improvement.

As for why my request took five days to answer, I posed the question to the department this morning and am still waiting for a response.