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## Christie's publicity blitz costs New Jersey taxpayers \$5 million

By Mark Lagerkvist / February 2, 2015 / 1 Comment



Phot by Tim Larsen | Governor's Office

POWER TIE: New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie gets ready for his next YouTube moment

By Mark Lagerkvist | New Jersey Watchdog

It took more than charm, chutzpah and media savvy to catapult Chris Christie into a national celebrity and presidential contender.

The New Jersey governor also used \$5.43 million from state taxpayers to pay the team that helped turn him into a rising star on television, radio, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and other outlets.

While Christie publicly boasted of his successes in downsizing government, the total salaries of his communications officers have increased by nearly 50 percent in five years, according to a New Jersey Watchdog analysis of state records.

The governor's media team has expanded to include 16 full-time staffers and a payroll of roughly \$1.36 million last year. Five of the employees collect six-figure incomes, led by communications director Maria Comella at \$140,000 a year. [\(Click here](#) for the




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staff roster and salaries.)

While it is usual for governors to hire press secretaries or communications specialists, the scope of Christie's media operation is without precedent. It also raises the question of who benefits most from the hoopla — New Jersey or Christie.

Christie is the first governor to make extensive use of YouTube. Virtually all of his public appearances are recorded, photographed and videotaped for possible use. His staff selects moments and encounters to fit the image they want the public to see.

Of the hundreds of videos posted on the [governor's official YouTube channel](#), the biggest hit has been Christie's confrontation at a town hall meeting with a teacher upset by school layoffs and cutbacks.

"If what you want to do is giggle and put on a show nearly every time I talk, then I have no interest in answering your question," [the governor scolded the teacher in a video](#) viewed online more than 3.5 million times.

The videos and other releases from Christie are emailed to 2,500 reporters, editors and TV producers. [Matt Katz of WNYC was allowed to see](#), but not copy, the distribution list as part of the settlement of his public records lawsuit. New Jersey Watchdog also is seeking the list under the Open Public Records Act.

Christie's team reserves special access to the governor for its favored media targets. It is no coincidence when a New York Times reporter is invited to watch him tape his weekly radio show or when a Washington Post writer sits with him at a high school football game. Nor is it happenstance when the governor offers exclusive interviews to a network news program or appears as a guest on a late-night talk show.

The publicity machine Christie has built at taxpayers' expense stands in contrast to the governor's publicized efforts to reign in the cost of New Jersey state government.

"We have to stop spending so much," [Christie told CNBC](#) in a televised interview shortly after taking office in 2010. "People don't want bigger government."

At the time, the governor's office had an annual budget of [\\$4.68 million a year](#). Five years later, that [figure ballooned to \\$6.7 million](#) — an increase of 43 percent.

The expense of Christie's media team has grown even faster.

In 2010, the state paid less than \$912,000 to employees in the governor's communications office. The cost of those salaries had risen to \$1.36 million a year by 2014 — a hike of 49 percent.

Despite the size and cost of the operation, Christie's team has a reputation for not returning calls or answering emails from reporters — particularly those who write stories the governor doesn't like.

Christie's spokesmen did not respond to New Jersey Watchdog's requests to comment.

The governor, meanwhile, is boosting his visibility on an international stage. Traveling



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in London, Christie was scheduled to meet Monday with British Prime Minister David Cameron.



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**Mark Lagerkvist**

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