

More often than not, government communicators find themselves in a dilemma, with political representatives who want them to play roles of communication which may seem party political in nature. But government communicators are public servants, whose operational code is impartiality and professionalism as encapsulated in the public service regulations.

It must also be noted that communication tends to be an embodiment of politics and government administration with messages emerging from the administrative-political melting pot. The following is an abridged version of guidelines regarding the conduct of government communicators during elections.

4.4.1. Guidelines on government communication during an election period

The period of elections is usually a testing time for government

communicators because it requires them to identify the fine line between party political communication and government communication. It is normal practice in most democracies that, during an election period, particular attention is paid to ensuring that government communication structures and officials do not act in a way that advantages or disadvantages participants in the electoral contest.

Prior to the 1999 national elections, the GCIS developed Guidelines on government communication during the formal election period.

On 31 March 1999, the Cabinet decided on a possible 'framework to be formulated to regulate against the dissemination of government information during election periods' in a way that is to the advantage of one political party and to the disadvantage of others. It adopted the Guidelines on 28 April 1999.

The Guidelines also adopted during the local government elections in 2000 remain relevant. They are meant to



assist government communicators and other relevant public servants in determining the specific parameters within which they should conduct their work during an election period.

4.4.2. Scope of application

According to the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), an election period is the period during which the IEC's Code of Conduct and the Independent Communication Authority of South Africa's regulations apply. For the municipal elections this period will be determined once the date for the election has been announced, and party lists are submitted and participating parties and candidates confirmed. The period will end when election results are certified and announced.

The regulations state that during an election period: 'State-financed media shall not be used for the purpose of promoting or prejudicing the interests of any political party.'
'State-financed media means any newspaper, book, periodical, pamphlet, poster, media release or other printed matter, or statement, or any audio and video material, or any information in electronic format such as CD-ROM, Internet or e-mail which is produced and disseminated to the public, and which is financed by, and directly under the control of government.' Examples of State-financed media include *BuaNews* Online, internal and external government newsletters and magazines.
These regulations apply only to communicators and other relevant

public servants. Ministers, other political representatives, contractual workers and employees in role-playing posts in government are regulated by the Ministerial Handbook.

4.4.3. Public Service Act, 1994

In terms of the Public Service Act, 1994 (Act 103 of 1994), public servants are prohibited from acting in a manner that is intended to promote or prejudice any political party. In particular, Section 36 (c) of the Act reads: 'an officer or employee may not draw up or publish any writing or deliver a public speech to promote or prejudice the interests of any political party.'

According to Section 20 (g) of the Act, 'an officer, other than a member of the services or an educator or a member of the National Intelligence Services, shall be guilty of misconduct and may be dealt with in accordance with public service regulations if he or she makes use of his or her position in the public service to promote or to prejudice the interests of any political party.' This includes the use of government resources.

During an election period, these and other provisions of the Act continue to apply to all public servants. Communication agencies and components of government and their employees have to exercise special care to ensure that their media products, statements and public events do not promote or prejudice any political party.

4.4.4. Constitutional rights and obligations

Government communicators and their departments should continue meeting the obligation of government to provide information to the citizenry. They should continue exercising their responsibility to articulate, promote and defend the policies, programmes and actions of the Government. Like all other citizens, communication officers have the freedom of association. Subject to the provisions of the Public Service Act, 1994 and public service regulations, they may belong to any political party of their choice.

4.5. Understanding government policy

Government's policy of communicating with the people is founded on the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act 108 of 1996). Section 32 (1) of the Act states that:

- (1) Everyone has the right to;
 - (a) any information held by the State
 - (b) any information that is held by another person and that is required for the exercise or protection of any rights.
- (2) National legislation must be enacted to give effect to this right, and may provide for reasonable measures to alleviate the administrative and financial burden on the State.

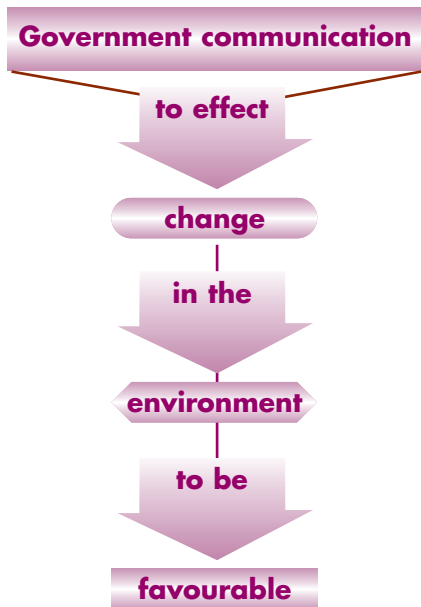
The Promotion of Access to Information Act, 2000 (Act 2 of 2000), seeks to give effect to the right of the public to access information, as provided for by

the Constitution. It is imperative for government communicators to have a firm grasp of government policies to be able to articulate government's position confidently.

4.6. Government communication and environmental scanning

Communication in government is pursued to fulfil the mandate and duty to inform the public. As a government communicator, you are expected to understand the chain of events in the Government communication system. Moreover, you should be able to examine all conditions that characterise the environment. Government communication takes place in an environment that must be improved, sustained or encouraged.

The illustration suggests that a communicator pursues the function of communication to alter the environments in favour of the fulfilment of government's mandate. It is, therefore, of paramount importance that as a government communicator, you make serious attempts to analyse the environment in which your messages will be communicated. As a government communicator you must realise that your function is directly linked to the function of meeting the information needs of society. Therefore, every communicator must seek to execute their function with the knowledge that the messages are to satisfy a public expectation. Various media may also mediate these messages. The challenge for a government communicator arises



communicated, what and who deals with these messages before they reach the target audience.

As a government communicator it is critical that you understand that the messages you communicate may reach your target audience through the interpretation of those who are mediating them. Hence your communication strategy must take this into account. The key issue to deal with is the possible changes in the message and how your strategy will minimise distortions to the content of your message.

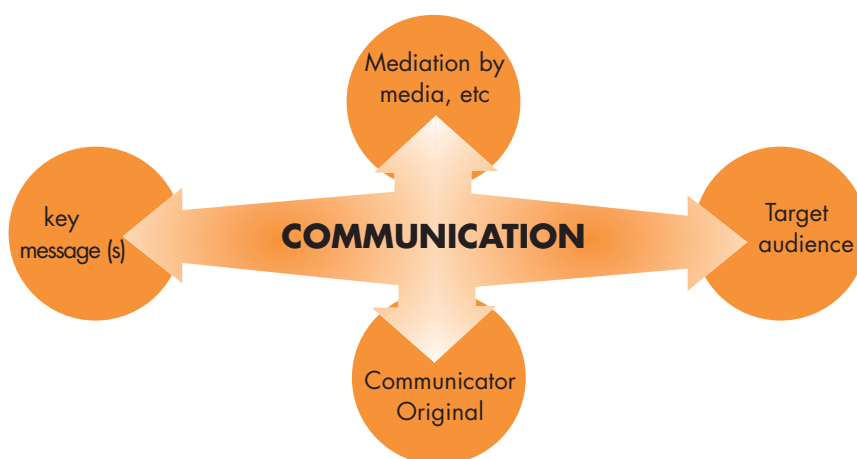
It is critical to understand the following key components of communication (see illustration below).

because these mediators are not devoid of interest group agendas, some of which might be inconsistent with those of government. A communicator must understand these dynamics within the environment.

The next challenge for a government communicator is to understand the journey taken by the messages to be

Guidelines for dealing with the media

'It seems clear in that context, that as government we have not done really what we ought to have been doing more effectively, which is to communicate about what the



government is doing and thinking. I think the message has come across very strongly, that this has been a very serious failure on the part of the Government. Clearly, it is something that we need to correct.' – President Thabo Mbeki addressing the Cabinet/South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF) *Indaba* held at Sun City, North West on 30 June 2001.

Although the GCIS regularly arranges media briefings on behalf of Clusters or departments, communicators are often required to respond to issues raised by the media or in response to requests by principals. Depending on the nature of the issue being addressed, communicators may have to decide on the best way to respond. Some of the options at the disposal of the communicator are:

Media statements: This might be a simple statement correcting a report in a particular newspaper or broadcast. On the other hand, such a statement may have to be directed to a range of media houses if a story has been widely and incorrectly carried. There is often no guarantee that the information will be used as media houses are reluctant to publish apologies or corrections unless there are legal consequences which compel them to do so. Even then, the media retain legal counsel for such purposes and in certain instances will choose to go to court if they are convinced of the strength of their information.

Letters to the editor: This could appear on the letters' page in the name of the political principal or the communicator. A stronger response

can be achieved if the corrective information is put in the public domain in the name of a third party not seen to be in government. It is advisable that communicators cultivate contact with third-party endorsers who can be requested to respond to certain issues. There is generally a strong likelihood that such a letter will be published as the letters' page is a media institution recognised as the columns through which the public has its say on current affairs. Such letters do, however, have to conform to laws governing libel, defamation, etc. before being considered for publication.

Opinion-editorial (op-ed) pieces

An op-ed piece is perhaps the strongest response a communicator can use in correcting inaccurate reporting. As the name implies, the content of such a piece is a combination of both opinion and editorial and does not conform to the conventions of the 'objective hard news' report. Space in newspapers for such pieces cannot be booked and involves negotiations with editors. Editors subject such pieces to a number of tests to decide whether they are worth publishing, including the test of newsworthiness. The op-ed allows a communicator to develop a reasoned response to an issue or a new development in order to explain it to the public more clearly.

Although some of the suggestions in this section of the Handbook are based on a reactive response to messages in the public domain, the op-ed allows government to be proactive in placing new issues on the media agenda before they enter the

communication environment. As with letters to the editor, a third-party endorser or expert often is a better signatory for such a piece than a government communicator or principal. Communicators can invoke a media convention known as the 'right to reply' to ensure publication of such a piece. On the other hand, if media made unsuccessful attempts to elicit government response because of a slowness to respond to media queries or evasiveness on the part of the communicator, the likelihood of such a piece being placed diminishes.

Advertisements: Often used by government to respond to issues or to bring new issues to the public domain, this is the weakest tool at the disposal of the communicator because of the high cost of advertising in both electronic and print media. Secondly, the credibility of information in an advert is often treated with scepticism by the public. Finally, it indicates that the communicator was not successful in packaging the information in a manner newsworthy enough to attract the attention of a journalist. Although a weak option, there are times where communication in the form of adverts can be used, but this should be seen as necessary only when required as part of a broader communication strategy or a last resort.

Advertorials: Like an advertisement, an advertorial (advertisement + editorial = advertorial) is a paid-for media space. The difference, however, is that it appears to the reader as news copy, although branded as 'advertorial'. Although creating the effect of greater credibility, advertorials

still carry a high cost factor and, where they are detected, an image of low credibility.

While the above represent some of the tools in the communicator's toolbox, one of the most effective ways of dealing with the media is through direct contact. Direct contact can be structured in a number of ways:

One-on-one briefings with journalists: These often arise as a result of requests from media houses, but can be effectively used for proactive communication. As media are driven by the psychology of the scoop or the exclusive story, this can be very effective on certain issues particularly where communicators have strong relationships with individual journalists covering their beat. This can also work well where a particular journalist has been consistently incorrect or off-message on an issue.

Beat briefings: Although government is generally covered by political journalists, it might often be required that certain beat journalists be targeted for special briefings. These could be from health, transport, finance, agriculture, etc. Such briefings are important as these specialist journalists have a finer (and sometimes more troublesome) understanding of a particular area. Keeping them constantly aware of developments on their beats is vital to government.

General briefings: The GCIS frequently arranges briefings for the media on specific issues and some that affect government in general. Departments and Clusters also conduct

briefings from time to time and these have had the effect of reducing speculative reporting around some issues as pertinent information has been placed on record for the media.

Parliamentary Press Gallery Association (PGA) briefings:

The PGA comprises reporters whose dedicated beat is Parliament. Located in Cape Town, briefings with the PGA are regularly organised by the GCIS. The most frequent briefings with the PGA take place following Cabinet meetings and during the Parliamentary Media Briefing Weeks following the Opening of Parliament and various *makgotla* as well as after each two monthly cycles of Monitoring and Evaluation reports to Cabinet.

Lock-up briefings: Most frequently conducted by the National Treasury, the lock-up briefing is based on the idea that complex information requires assistance from the media with interpretation. The release of statistics or complex results of studies might require a lock-up style briefing during which principals explain the information and field questions on information presented to manage the manner in which it enters the public domain. Usually information presented during such a lock-up is embargoed until the end of the lock-up. The GCIS can assist line-function departments in the protocols required for such a briefing.

Foreign Correspondence

Association (FCA) briefings: Some foreign correspondents based in South Africa are members of the FCA. Through analysis of stories in international media and requests from

the FCA, the GCIS regularly arranges media briefings for FCA members and line-function departments. Because not all foreign reporters are members of the FCA, the GCIS maintains a database of foreign reporters in South Africa to facilitate contact with the international media.

Formats for briefings

Briefings of the kind described above can take many formats.

Communicators need to establish the format with the principal(s) leading a briefing prior to its commencement. The chair of a briefing should then announce the format before the briefing begins. The formats are:

On-the-record briefings: As the term suggests, all information at such a briefing is for broadcast, is printable and is attributable. In other words, the person(s) leading the briefing can be quoted by name by the media in attendance and all the information is considered a matter of public record. Although this might be obvious, it needs to be clarified at the start that such a briefing is on the record and attributable by name and designation to the principal (s) conducting the briefing. This format need not be announced in advisories to the media as it is generally assumed that briefings are on the record.

On-the-record, but not-for-attribution: This is a trickier briefing to conduct and manage. The media need to be given a clear indication that the information being discussed can be used in coverage, but the source cannot be named. A clear indication needs to be made on

whether the source can be referred to as 'a senior government official' (i.e. anonymously) or not at all. These are sometimes referred to as 'background briefings' and the format and terms of the briefing must be announced both in the advisory (as a background briefing) and at the briefing itself.

Off-the-record and not-for attribution: As the term suggests, this is intended to be a background briefing for the information of the media and the material can neither be used, nor can any reference be made to the source by name, by designation or anonymously. The format and terms of such a briefing must be made clear both in the advisory and prior to the start of a briefing. These are sometimes called 'deep background briefings'. The advisory sent to media can describe it as a 'deep background briefing', but might want to omit the name of the principal conducting the briefing. Such briefings require high levels of trust and are best done on a one-on-one basis.

On-the-record and for anonymous attribution: It is often necessary to prepare the communication environment for certain important developments. In such instances it might be useful to brief the media on the record but not have a principal quoted by name. Media should be given an indication on whether the source of the information can be described in general terms or more specifically within the idea of anonymous attribution. For example, would the attribution 'senior official in the Department of Foreign Affairs' or

'a representative from the Ministry of Health, speaking on condition of anonymity' lend more credence to a particular story than 'government official' or 'senior ministerial official'? The statement 'speaking on condition of anonymity' is usually associated with negative or leaked information and communicators must ensure that such briefings do not lend themselves to such a description of principals. This format needs to be announced at the briefing and should not form part of the advisory.

As the above formats make clear, there are some rules of engagement with the media that make the task of communicators a little clearer. One of the most frequently made errors in briefings is the failure to announce the format of a briefing before it begins. This confuses media and sometimes leads to unintended publication of sensitive information. It is therefore vital that formats are announced, both where necessary in the advisory and prior to the commencement of a briefing.

Another frequently made error is the tendency to move between on-the-record and off-the-record formats. Briefings should be consistent with the stated format or constructed in such a manner that principals are clear, within the timeframe of a single briefing, on where on-the-record ends and off-the-record begins. Erratic skipping between the two increases the likelihood of damaging communication appearing in the public domain and the consequent erosion of trust between government and the media.

As a rule, some principals do not make off-the-record statements that are not defensible in an on-the record context. Others who have strong relations of trust with the media, comfortably impart information in an off-the-record, not-for-attribution context.

It is the task of the communicator to establish the preference of his/her principal and the specifics of the content on which media are to be briefed.

Rapid Response Unit

The GCIS, in conjunction with the International Marketing Council's (IMC's) Communication Resource Centre (CRC) – which is responsible for daily monitoring of international media – convenes a daily Rapid Response Unit teleconference. The activity is intended to empower line-function departments to address challenges faced in the communication environment. As an aspect of a

number of government communication cycles, the outcomes of the teleconference are communicated to a number of line-function departments, external stakeholders, the GCIS project teams and senior government officials. A key objective of the teleconference is to make recommendations and implement them in time for departments to respond to issues raised by the media.

Departments are encouraged to become more actively involved in the rapid response process through alerting the GCIS to developments in the communication environment affecting them and by participating.

To participate, contact:

The CRC – (012) 366 1900

GCIS: International and

Media Liaison – (012) 314 2131 or
(012) 314 2145/
2162/2131

News Service – (012) 314 2167

National Liaison – (012) 314 2286

4.7. Generic Key Performance Areas (KPA) for HoCs

The Cabinet approved the introduction of measures to allow the GCIS to monitor and co-ordinate government communication more effectively and ensure implementation of the overall GCS.

These measures include the introduction of generic key performance areas for HoCs, which are aimed at enhancing the co-ordination and integration of government communication. This follows the resolution taken at a GCF to the effect that the GCIS should be more involved in the processes aimed at improving government communication.

This initiative should enable the GCIS to improve government communication for better co-ordination and integration of messages, campaigns and programmes. The KPAs outline the generic functions of the HoC in a Ministry and department. This empowers the HoC to be actively involved in the strategic decision-making machinery of their respective departments in terms of creating a new consciousness and appreciation of communication as a tool for service delivery.

Functions of HoCs:

Cabinet approved that communicators should fulfil their obligations towards the co-ordination of government-wide communication by adhering to mechanisms that have been established to fulfil this objective.

The HoC shall, among others:

- o submit departmental communication strategies and programmes developed in line with the overall GCS within two weeks of Cabinet approval to the GCIS
- o participate and contribute to the programme of Communication Clusters, GCF, meetings for HoCs and MLOs to plan for Post-Cabinet Briefings, Pre-Cabinet meetings, training fora, Government Communicators' Extranet, submission of news releases and diary information to *BuaNews* Online and *Bua* Magazine, and development of communication strategies for Clusters
- o ensure quality of the work of the MLO, with specific reference to the following:
 - (i) respond to all media enquiries and issue media statements, opinion pieces and feature articles
 - (ii) maintain a healthy relationship with the media, including the PGA
 - (iii) develop deliberate strategies to keep the foreign press corps informed of the department's work and approaches to issues
 - (iv) ensure that there are clear plans for each campaign and that such are linked to the GCS.
 - (v) ensure professional and strategic presentations for Media Briefing Weeks
 - (vi) contribute to the Cabinet Memoranda, in particular the item on communications implications

- (vii) communicate with the GCIS the plans and outcomes of exchange programmes with other countries
- (viii) improve proficiency and maintain quality standards in so far as adhering to the basic fundamentals of communication management, such as:-
 - (aa) managing advertising and other agencies that do communication work for the department
 - (bb) ensure strategic planning around main communication events such as Budget Vote; national and international days; any other main campaigns and events aligned to the department
 - (cc) proactive communication activities for the Minister and department
 - (dd) ensuring cost effectiveness in the use of resources
 - (ee) strategic management, monitoring and evaluation of campaigns
- (ff) manage the distribution of publications and materials to reach target audiences, including through the IRC, GICs and MPCCs
- (gg) build capacity for the communication division by implementing training programmes.

Assessment of KPAs

The Minister and/or Director-General will conduct regular assessments of the HoC, or any other senior official delegated by them as per Public Service Regulations. The 'assessing authority' will also consult the GCIS on its views regarding the performance of the HoC, especially on matters pertaining to his/her contribution within the Government communication system as a whole. The form of such consultation will be worked out between the GCIS and the Ministry/department concerned.