

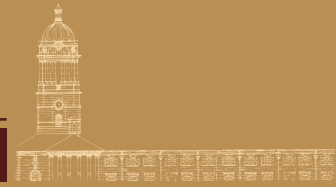
CHAPTER 2

GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION IN CONTEXT



government
communications

Department:
Government Communication and Information System
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION IN CONTEXT

The approach to government communication takes its cue from the constitutional imperative of freedom of information and the objectives of building a truly democratic state. This requires government to maintain continued interaction with the people to be able to understand their needs. This type of communication will enhance an informed and appropriate response to people's needs to enable all South Africans to become active and conscious participants in social transformation.

Government communicators have a critical role to play in harnessing goodwill for productive purposes, in helping to shape the national mood and nation-building. They should be able to address these issues by using an appropriate mix of activities and channels driven by a strategic overview. A fundamental need of government communication is to reach the majority of the population, especially the disadvantaged and those previously marginalised from all forms and channels of communication. Communication trends have influenced the way governments interact with the public and these trends are triggered by recognising the role of information as an agent of empowerment. Having communicators who are always at the cutting edge of their profession and understanding the environment better is critical.

2.1. Politics and the government communicator

If there is one area of governance that fully represents the political and administrative interface, it is the task of communication. The communicator straddles the relationship of political and administrative operations and harmonises the varying emphasis of these two fraternities to emerge with messages that reflect their unity of purpose. It is the government communicator who must package messages in a manner that harmonises the administrative and political arms of government.

Indirectly, the work of a communicator is likely to be related to party-political expression as they communicate policy positions, most of which, if not all, are associated with a ruling party. To this extent, a government communicator presents policies, positions and information which may be counter to those of opposition parties.

We need to make the fine distinction between communicating government policies and improperly using one's position to promote or prejudice the interest of a political party. Government communicators are public servants, whose operational code includes impartiality and professionalism as encapsulated in the Public Service Regulations. Section 36 (c) of the Public Service Act, 1994 (Act 103 of 1994), states that public servants are prohibited from acting in a manner that is intended to promote or prejudice any political party. It reads as follows: *An officer or employee may not draft up or publish any writing or deliver a public speech to promote or prejudice the interests of any political party.*

It must also be noted that communication tends to be an embodiment of the politics of a ruling party and government administration with messages emerging from the administrative-political melting pot. The following guidelines regarding the conduct of government communicators should be followed during an election period:

2.1.1. Guidelines on government communication during an election period

It is normal practice in most democracies that, during an election period, particular attention is paid to ensure government communication structures and officials do not act in a way that advantages or disadvantages participants in the electoral contest.

On 31 March 1999, Cabinet decided on a 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.

The guidelines were adopted during the local government elections in 2000 and the national and provincial elections in 2004. However, it is important to note that the provisions of the Public Service Act, 1994 were amended in 2007. They assist government communicators and other relevant public servants in determining the specific parameters within which they should conduct their work during an election period.

2.1.1.1. 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 Communications Authority of South Africa's regulations apply. This period is determined once the date for the election has been announced, party lists are submitted and participating parties and candidates confirmed. The period ends when election results are certified and announced.

The regulations state that during an election period:

- state-financed media will not be used for the purpose of promoting or prejudicing the interests of any political party.
- state-financed media should continue to be used for the distribution and dissemination of government information.

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.



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These regulations apply only to communicators and other relevant public servants. Ministers, deputy ministers, premiers, Members of Executive Councils (MECs) and all political representatives, contractual workers and employees in role-playing posts in government are regulated by the *Ministerial Handbook*.

2.1.1.2. Public Service Regulations, 2001

Paragraph C.2.7 of the Code of Conduct for the Public Service provides that: *An employee does not abuse her or his position in the Public Service to promote or prejudice the interest of any political party or interest group.* Paragraph C.2.9 provides that *an employee recognises the public's right of access to information, excluding information that is specifically protected by law.*

2.1.1.3. Public Service Amendment Act, 2007 (Act 30 of 2007)

Section 32 of the Public Service Amendment Act, 2007 provides that: *An employee may be a candidate for election as a member of the National Assembly, a provincial legislature or a municipal council, subject to the Code of Conduct contemplated in Section 41(l)(b)(v) and any other prescribed limits and conditions. An employee elected as a member of the National Assembly or a provincial legislature or a full-time member of a municipal council shall be deemed to have resigned from the Public Service with effect from the date immediately before the date he or she assumes office as such member. An employee appointed as a permanent delegate of the National Council of Provinces shall be deemed to have resigned from the Public Service with effect from the date immediately before the date he or she assumes office as such delegate. An employee elected as a member of a municipal council may only remain an employee in the Public Service if he or she serves as a part-time member of the council; and shall comply with Section 30(1).*

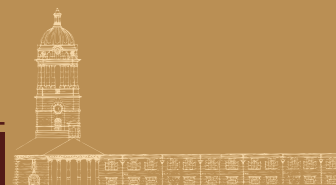
During an election period, these and other provisions of the Act continue to apply to all public servants. Communication agencies and components of government and their employees have to exercise special care to ensure that their media products, statements and public events do not promote or prejudice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

2.1.1.4. Constitutional rights and obligations

Government communicators and their departments should continue meeting the obligation of government to provide information to the people.

They should continue exercising their responsibility to articulate, promote and defend the policies, programmes and actions of government.

Like all other South Africans, communication officers have freedom of association. Subject to the provisions of the Public Service Amendment Act, 2007 and Public Service Regulations, they may belong to any political party of their choice.



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2.1.2. Use of parliamentary forums

Because these forums are a key source used by the media, it is an opportunity for government to set the media agenda.

2.1.2.1. Guidelines in answering questions for written reply

- The process of questions and answers (Q&As) for written reply is a standard item on the Parliamentary calendar.
- It starts in mid-January and continues until the first Friday of December of the same year.
- This process consists of Members of Parliament (MPs) posing written questions to ministers who have seven working days to respond.
- Parliament releases the responses immediately after they have been forwarded to the author (MP).
- Upon receiving the response, the MP has the prerogative to decide which communication route to take.
- The MP can decide to either call a media briefing and/or or release it to the media with a supporting statement.
- The ministry in turn has no control over the released response.

2.1.2.2. The role of government communicators

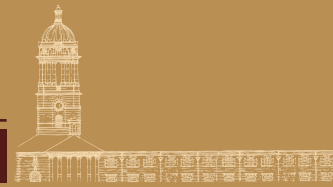
- Communicators should always provide more information on the replies. Answers containing detailed information, including statistics and figures, must include explanatory notes that provide context.
- In dealing with enquiries from the media on issues relating to parliamentary replies, communicators must always use right of reply to further contextualise figures.
- Communicators must be aware and consulted at all times to ensure that they plan around communication implications of the responses to questions.
- In case the need arises, communicators should secure ministers and directors-general (DGs) to make further pronouncements in one-on-one interviews and media briefings.

Recommendation

The Q&As have a strategic importance to Parliament and present communication opportunities for government. In this context, departments should treat them as a continuation of the communication programme that commenced with the State of the Nation Address (SoNA) and ensure that the core message **“Working together, we can do more”** is reflected in communication.

2.2. Budget votes by departments

The presentation of budget votes is an opportunity to provide more detail of the implementation of government's implementation activities. Communicators should use this opportunity as a communication channel. All



the budget votes are preceded by the presentation of strategic plans to the parliamentary committees. Communication by principals must ensure that information is shared in a form and language that people understand and can relate to.

2.3. Media briefings and interactions

Media briefings on the implementation of government activities are instrumental in disseminating focused messages to the broader public and stakeholders. Communication on the visible achievement of milestones, which have a direct impact on the public, should be highlighted.

There are various types of media briefings that are used as channels to communicate the Programme of Action (PoA) and broader service delivery. These include: post-SoNA media briefings, quarterly media briefings, DG briefings, the mid-year progress report and strategic review, continuous briefings by principals and post-Cabinet media briefings (by the CEO of the GCIS).

2.3.1. Portfolio and select committees

Ministers, DGs, CEOs of state-owned enterprises and senior officials regularly brief these committees. These meetings are open to the media and communication strategies should be in place to deal with issues affecting departments.

2.3.2. National Assembly and National Council of Provinces (NCOP)

Ministers and deputy ministers deliver speeches and provide oral responses to questions in these two houses. Ministers and deputy ministers also make policy statements and these are communication opportunities afforded to government to make pronouncements on issues affecting the country.

2.3.3. Parliamentary Press Gallery Association (PGA)

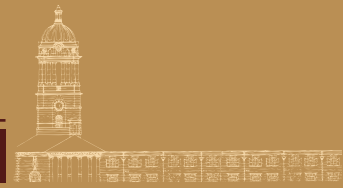
The PGA is a recognised structure of the South African National Editors' Forum. The PGA's membership is made up of the most senior political journalists in the country and they are permanently based at Parliament.

They cover all stories within the parliamentary precinct. It has a representative structure, which promotes the interests of its members. Ministerial liaison officers (MLOs) and heads of communication (HoCs) are encouraged to forge good relationships with PGA members as they cover most political stories happening in Pretoria and Cape Town.

2.4. Proposed communication structure for national departments

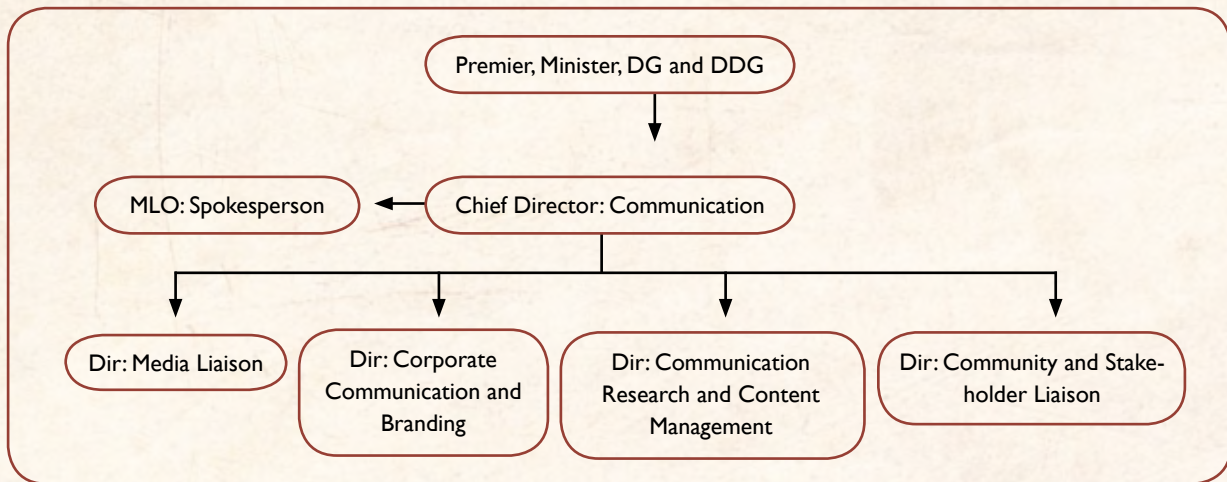
These guidelines set out a norm for departmental communication structures and functions and are informed by the two Cabinet memorandums on communication as approved by Cabinet:

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- *Cabinet Memo 8 – 1998*
- *Cabinet Memo 16 – 2000.*

The structure can be adapted to fit the responsibilities of a particular department. What cuts across is that the level of HoC should not be below that of Chief Director.

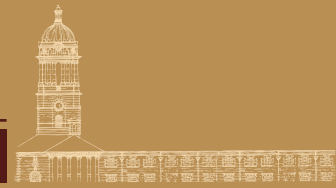


2.4.1. Chief Director

The HoC is responsible for heading communication within a department and giving overall direction to the department, as a strategic aspect of government.

The Chief Director is:

- the HoC in the department
- the spokesperson of the department
- sits in management meetings so as to be kept informed of relevant issues affecting a particular department/province
- is responsible for drafting and implementing the communication strategy
- is responsible for promoting integrated communication with all spheres of government.



2.4.2. Directors

- Director: Community and Stakeholder Liaison
- Director: Communication Research and Content Management
- Director: Corporate Communication and Branding
- Director: Media Liaison.

Pending the size of the department and the amount of its work, the department can assess which of the key activities are important for the department. Based on that assessment, a decision could be made whether to have all the functions or merge them according to the department's needs and affordability.

2.5. The 10 basic principles of government communication

2.5.1. Government work is a public activity

- In any democracy, government is elected by its people, and is therefore an institution for the people and by the people. It is essential that ordinary citizens are constantly informed about government work and empowered to take active part in it.
- Government needs to make an effort to continually counter insinuations that government work is secretive whenever and wherever they surface.

2.5.2. A central communication service must have the authority to carry out its work – it must be located in the highest office

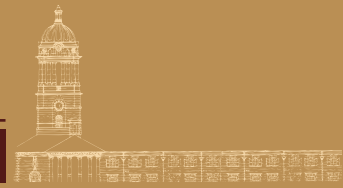
- To ensure legitimacy and effectiveness, all government communication must have its genesis and coordination from the highest office in the Government's structure.
- On all other levels, communication structures must be placed in the offices of political principals.

2.5.3. Political principals are the main communicators

- Government communication must, in the main, be done by individuals holding positions of political oversight or leadership.

2.5.4. Everyone in government is a communicator

- Everyone working in government is indirectly a communicator and must therefore assume the role of an emissary and be a positive representative of government.
- This is pertinent in every public service member's behaviour, including verbal and non-verbal interaction with people.



2.5.5. Communication must be based on an integrated communication strategy and programme (with core messages that guide all actors)

- The central communication service must coordinate the formulation of the main and all encompassing communication strategies for the whole of government.
- All different spheres and parts of government must at all times communicate in one voice, meaning there must be consistency in messaging.

2.5.6. Communication structures do not determine policy – they articulate it

- Government policy and priority are pre-determined and communication structures are there to inform and accurately disseminate them to the public.

2.5.7. Communication is more than just media liaison

- In communicating, special efforts must be taken to seek, evaluate and, where feasible, employ all available measures or tools to get the message across.
- In implementing major campaigns in particular, a multimedia approach must be adopted for effective message diffusion and sufficient reach.

2.5.8. Direct communication and mutual exchange of views with the public is the most effective form of communication (where possible, there should be communicators in all localities)

- Communication structures must be established to enable interaction, mediated or otherwise, between government and the public.

2.5.9. In working out campaigns and programmes, there must be a deliberate effort to understand the communication environment

- Research is an integral part of the communication process.
- In any event, the success of communication depends on the accurate diagnosis of the surroundings that will inform, among other things, the selection of appropriate messages, target audiences and media platforms.

2.5.10. Communication campaigns work best when they are carried out in partnership with others outside of government

- Government does not function in a vacuum and for maximum communication impact, especially in terms of credibility and reach, role players such as non-governmental organisations, opinion-makers and other important figures need to be involved.

(Joel Netshitenzhe, Challenges of Government Communication: The South African Experience, 18 March 2003)