

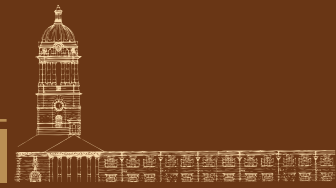
CHAPTER 8

DEALING WITH THE MEDIA



government
communications

Department:
Government Communication and Information System
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



DEALING WITH THE MEDIA

8.1. Media perceptions audit of government communication

In 2005, the Government Communication and Information System (GCIS) commissioned research into the media perceptions of government communication to improve government's services to the media. The research consisted of 67 in-depth interviews with prominent journalists between August and October 2005. It was done by Kuper Research and the Media Observatory, a project of the University of the Witwatersrand's Journalism Programme.

Research revealed that although most senior journalists believed there had been improvements in government communication in recent years, they felt that still more advancement was needed.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Avoid an adversarial relationship

There needs to be an alignment of government communication and the media behind common objectives. A “them” and “us” mentality is counterproductive. The culture needs to be one of information-sharing, trust and respect.

Understand the needs of the different media types

Part of the professional standards required from government communicators is that they need to know the different platforms they can harness to deliver a message.

Understand the importance of journalists' deadlines

Be accommodating and assist in meeting the deadlines. Understand the immediacy of daily newspaper, radio and television news deadlines.

Be accessible

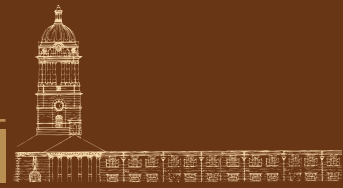
Government communicators have to be accessible to the media to share information and for them to meet their deadlines. Ministers and decision-makers should be more available to the media.

Consistent professional standards

Government communicators should consistently reflect professional standards in their work.

Don't be “over-bureaucratized”

Government communicators should try to “de-bureaucratise” the process through frequent and structured interactions between their principals and the media.



Government spokespersons are not bodyguards

It is not the job of government communicators to protect their principals but to rather be their “voice”.

Media are not a “loudhailer/echo” for government

Government communicators need to understand that the media are not loudhailers or there to echo government messages. They are also not “vultures waiting to disseminate negative news”.

Contact and recognition

The media wants more contact and recognition at the senior level of government.

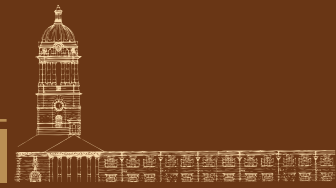
Truthful vs economical

Government communication is not seen as untruthful but rather “economical” with the relevant information

8.2. What must a government communicator do?

Government communicators can contribute to the building of healthy government-media relationships in the following ways:

- Know the policy positions of your department.
- Bear in mind that South Africa is a democracy. This means that the public’s access to government information through the mass media is an important right.
- Be professional, efficient and enthusiastic.
- Know the journalists who work in your field and avoid limiting your relationship to that of a voice over the telephone.
- Develop an understanding of the different kinds of media and customise your service to journalists to suit each medium.
- Make time to visit newsrooms to understand the news process and how decisions about what is newsworthy are made.
- Find out about deadlines since each newspaper, radio station or television station has its own deadlines. As a general rule, print media will have longer deadlines than broadcast and online media. This means that a radio journalist will be working on hourly or even half-hourly deadlines compared with the print journalist who may have a day or longer to write an article.



A journalist's nightmare

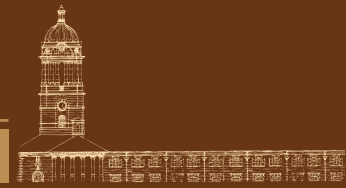
What government communicators must **not** do:

- be unaware of what your department is doing
- lie to the media
- make promises you know you cannot keep
- be pompous and rude with journalists
- show a lack of respect for media deadlines
- make sexual advances towards journalists
- do not alert the journalist about a press release you have sent, especially if it was via e-mail
- keep sending long press statements and treat the media as the PR wing of your department
- be constantly unavailable
- send inaccurate information
- make inconsistent statements.

8.3. A guide to media and communication engagement

8.3.1. Questions that may be helpful when approached for a media interview:

- Would it help the journalist if your department sent through some background material ahead of the interview?
- Can you call the journalist back in a few minutes? Buy yourself some time to collect your thoughts and review your tone and key messages.
- What is the preferred location for the interview – their studio, your offices or another venue?
- When do they want to do the interview? Preferably do a taped TV interview early in the day if intended for broadcast in the evening – that will leave more time for quality editing.
- How long will they need you for? This will help shape the depth of your messaging.
- Is it live, live-down-the-line (live remote, where you are in a different location to the actual interviewer) or recorded?
- Who will be the interviewer and how does that impact on the tone and direction of the interview?
- Will you be interviewed alone or with others, and who are the other participants? Will there be a studio audience?
- Do you want to be part of this mix – if the interview is refused, give a credible reason, offer to be interviewed another time, make it clear that “the refusal” is not government policy and suggest other issues that you’d be happy to comment on.

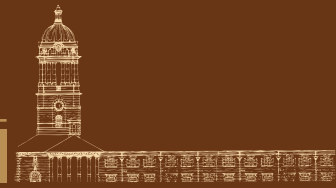


8.3.2. General interview principles

While the following practical pointers are presented as a set of media interview guidelines, the majority of the principles apply to any communication encounter – be it a media interview, community public participation, a presentation to a group of international investors or an informal conversation at a formal dinner. Please consider how the principle may be relevant to the context of your many different communication engagements.

PLEASE REMEMBER:

- You are always potentially “on record” – whether it be on camera or linked to a microphone, or if someone else is talking. This also applies to print interviews and stakeholder meetings.
- The interview lasts as long as a reporter is there. Maintain your interview mode until the conclusion of the engagement, not just during the formal interview process.
- Find out in advance who your audience will be, and structure the content and tone of your messages appropriately.
- Use terms and language understood by your audience. If you have to use technical jargon, ensure that you are able to define/explain the term succinctly and memorably.
- Project enthusiasm for your messages. This attitude is contagious. Enthusiasm – I am happy to be here. Concern – My subject is important to me and to you/the audience.
- Authority – I know what I’m talking about.
- Plan and prepare for the five worst questions you could be asked – questions that may not be related to the event you are attending or the issue you were invited to discuss.
- Role play repeatedly, anticipating the tough and/or frequent questions and current news issues.
- Get familiar with the publication/programme and the reporter’s style and approach before the interview. Besides giving you a clue as to how he/she will approach your subject, the fact that you are familiar with his/her work will help build rapport with him/her.
- Listen and hear the entire question from the interviewer/audience before answering.
- Seek clarification if the question is ambiguous or unclear, or restate the question (to your advantage) in your answer.
- Use the ABC approach – Answer the question, Bridge to your key messages and lay out the facts and Conclude by telling us what those facts mean.
- Use concrete facts wherever possible – even better, use word pictures or tell a memorable human interest story that illustrates issues such as service delivery and the positive difference that the Government makes in people’s lives.
- It’s your answers, rather than the questions, that are the most memorable (or in the case of print, the only) parts of the story.
- Talk through the interviewer to the audience – treat your host as you would an intelligent guest at a dinner party in your own home.
- Treat every question seriously – what may be funny to some people can damage your reputation once shared with a wider audience.
- Say the most important thing first, rather than first providing the rationale for the most important thing.



- Answer with positive statements and replace objectionable words used by the interviewer or audience member with more acceptable terms.
- Please avoid speculating on other public- or private-sector organisations – overt criticism of other players often can come back to haunt you as the media returns to focus on any gaps between what you say and what you do in your department.
- Mention the name of your department, rather than saying “we” or “us” – but use the name in moderation.
- Use modest hand movements only.
- Remain calm and polite with the interviewer – it is your role as spokesperson to make a friend, not an enemy, of the media.
- Look down as you consider a response, not up towards the sky, which can create an impression that your response is not authentic.
- Keep away from any alcohol – as a relaxant – before the interview. Also, avoid such things as cola drinks, chocolates and milk and milk products. It takes several hours to “uncoat” your throat from these products.
- Have a system for ensuring that the journalist/audience member receives everything they want after an interview or meeting and that all follow-ups are actioned by someone in your department.
- Be conscious of journalists’ news cycles and deadlines.
- If the reporter asks for information that is already a matter of public record, seriously consider making it available to the reporter. Withholding such information will only force the reporter to develop other sources and will undermine the relationship with the reporter.
- BE YOURSELF! When your responses in an interview sound as if they were written by a PR specialist, approved by your legal department, and then memorised verbatim, you lose your credibility.

8.3.3. Broadcast interview guidelines

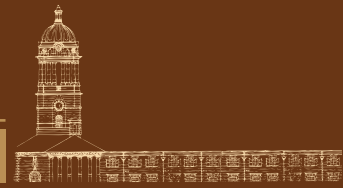
Communication is received and interpreted by one’s audience on three levels: visual (body language), vocal (the tone of your voice) and verbal (the messages and words you use). Of these three levels, your verbal content is by far the least impactful with your audience, with typical audience recall levels for verbal content being as low as 7% to 15%, while the visual element can make up to 55% of your message.

So, it makes sense to focus on a handful of core messages that you want your audience to remember, and to transition (bridge) to your core messages regardless of the question asked during a media interview.

Select two or three key messages targeted at your specific audience, taking into account that you should:

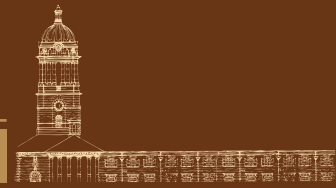
- Identify the issues that journalists and their readers/viewers/ listeners are interested in.
- Make your messages snappy and memorable – messages for broadcast media average between five and 20 seconds, and the average “soundbite” is nine seconds.

CHAPTER 8



PLEASE AVOID:

- Speaking off the record, or not for attribution. The golden rule is that if you would not be comfortable seeing a comment on the front page of the newspaper tomorrow, then don't make the comment.
- Losing your composure and, for example, walking out on a TV interview – the world could see the re-runs of the incident in the traditional media and millions of times on social media such as YouTube.
- Speculating on an issue or being drawn beyond your specialisation area, or responding to hypothetical questions.
- Answering difficult questions with “no comment” – if you cannot give the interviewer an answer, say why you cannot, and then provide them with other information they could use. Most people interpret a “no comment” response as a signal that the interviewee has something to hide and that the allegation is true.
- Over-answering a question. Short answers are better than long. Keep your responses snappy. Don't use three words when one or two will do. Long responses are difficult to edit.
- Being afraid to admit that you don't know the answer to a question. Instead, offer to find the answer and get back to the reporter before the deadline.
- Trying to use government advertising pressure to influence editorial coverage or to hit back at a journalist or editor.
- Falling for the surprise last question or being misled by an apparent end to the interview e.g. the journalist closing her notebook or starting to chat about something else, giving the appearance that the interview is over.
- Responding to questions based on unfamiliar information presented as “facts” by the interviewer.
- Succumbing to the “pregnant pause” tactic where the interviewer allows you to answer a question and then withholds comment or a further question in the hope that you will be drawn into embellishing your response – the onus is on the interviewer to keep things flowing and fill dead air, so never keep talking to fill the vacuum.
- Dropping the endings of your words or let your voice trail off at the end of sentences – lost words are lost causes.
- Referring to notes other than for complex figures or quotations – use them openly, then put them aside. Never read your responses.
- Creating an editing challenge by referring to calendar days and terms such as “firstly” and “secondly” in a recorded interview for editing.
- Repeating the question verbatim if it contains a negative word or phrase.
- Feeling you have to answer every part of a multiple question – rather say something along the lines of: “You've raised a number of issues there. For us, the most important right now is ...” and address the one aspect of the multiple question you'd prefer to talk about.
- Asking the reporter if you can review the story before it's published. If the story is highly controversial, you may ask the reporter during the interview to read back your quotes to confirm accuracy.



- Make them positive – avoid using the word NOT in front of a negative term when discussing your department, as it is the negative term that will often stick in the audience's mind and continue to be associated with the department. For example, avoid saying “We are NOT corrupt” (where the word “corrupt” is remembered – rather say something meaning the same thing but with positive phrasing, for example” “Our corporate governance standards are excellent”.
- Personalise and internalise your core messages, rather than memorising them.
- Avoid clichés and puffery.
- Back them up with facts, statistics and evidence.
- Emphasise messages based on benefits to the audience and the impact on their lives.
- Revise them on a regular basis, and consider publicising them internally to promote more consistent external messages.
- Remember that the more points you make, the more chance that the media will select the less important points for their story.

8.4. Message presentation strategies

REMEMBER

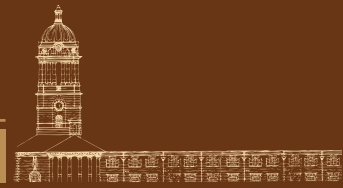
Government communication exists to ensure that the public is constantly informed about service delivery and the challenges facing government. In the process, government communicators are delivering a service that is as important as the delivery of houses, water or electricity. It is therefore important that government messages are constructed in a way that would capture the public's attention. A badly constructed message can be as bad as denying citizens their right to information.

8.4.1. How can I avoid badly constructed messages?

- Organise a brainstorming session with the communication team and relevant officials.
- Identify key messages.
- Identify target audiences.
- Identify appropriate media and journalists.

8.5. Other options to respond

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:



8.5.1. Letters to the editor

This could appear on the letters' page in the name of the political principal, senior official 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.

8.5.2. 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 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.

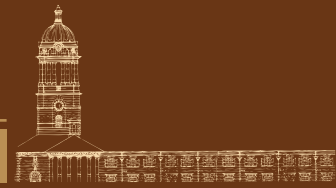
Communicators can invoke a media convention known as the "right to reply" to ensure publication of such a piece. On the other hand, if media made unsuccessful attempts to elicit government response because of a slowness to respond to media queries or evasiveness on the part of the communicator, the likelihood of such a piece being placed diminishes.

8.5.3. Paid media coverage

Government departments should not pay the media for any form of editorial coverage. We should achieve reputation-enhancing, earned media coverage through the newsworthiness of activities and announcements.

8.5.4. 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 broadcast 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 when 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.

8.5.5. Advertorials

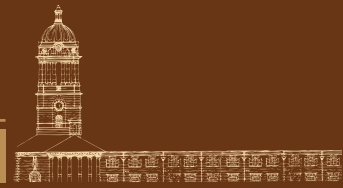
Like an advertisement, an advertorial (advertisement + editorial = advertorial) is a paid-for media space. The difference, however, is that it appears to the reader as news copy, although branded as “advertorial”. Although creating the effect of greater credibility, advertorials still carry a high cost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

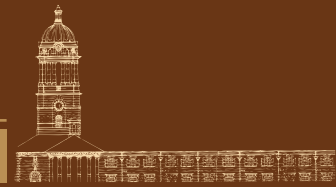
8.5.6. Direct contact

- **One-on-one briefings with journalists:** These often arise as a result of requests from the media, but can be effectively used for proactive communication. As the media is driven by the psychology of the scoop or the exclusive story, this can be very effective in 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 media briefings 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 uninformed 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, during the parliamentary media briefing weeks following the Opening of Parliament and cluster media briefings.

CHAPTER 8



- **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 Correspondents' Association (FCA) briefings:** Some foreign correspondents based in South Africa are members of the FCA. Through the 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 all foreign media working in South Africa.
- **Formats for briefings:** Briefings of the kind described above can take many formats. Communicators need to decide on the format in consultation with the principals 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 briefings 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 it. This format need not be announced in advisories to the media as it is generally assumed that briefings are on record.
 - **On-the-record, but not for attribution:** This is a trickier briefing to conduct and manage. The media needs 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. 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 record but not have a principal quoted by name. The media should be given an indication of 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 Tourism” or “a representative from the Ministry of Health”, speaking on condition of anonymity lends 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 the media and sometimes leads to the 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 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 communicators to establish the preference of their principals and the specifics of the content on which media are to be briefed.