

4. GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS IN CONTEXT

4.1. Government communications

Government communications is the essential lifeblood and the strategic element in service delivery. Government's ability to deliver optimally transparent, productive, communication and interaction at all levels is key to a nation's future success. As we live in an era of rapid change and great complexity, the challenges facing societies, communities and organisations are complex and difficult, and there is a general need for leadership in communication from government. Government communications has a critical role to play in harnessing goodwill for productive purposes; in helping to shape the national mood and nation-building.

4.1.1. The government communication function

Government has to ensure that all information from government is provided to all people at all times. It needs to be acutely aware of the need to communicate effectively both to influence public opinion and maintain its legitimacy. In this effort, government should also explore a two-way communication approach as this will ensure a closer engagement. The ability to engage in two-way communication with citizens involves a complex set of interlocking structures, processes and practices, which government has already put in place to communicate effectively with the public.

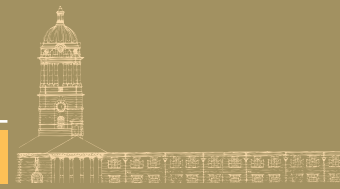
Government should provide information to the public in a coordinated manner. Given the rapidly changing information and communication environments around the world, strengthening government communication capacity should leverage existing and potential convergences in a country's communication space and media mix. New information and communication technologies can help enhance the government efforts to communicate proactively with the public. In planning communication of government messages, a combination of new and traditional information and communication technologies can provide leapfrog opportunities in some contexts.

4.1.2. The focus of government communications

The term 'government communications' embraces both media handling and direct communication with the public, hence the role and scope of government communications is defined to mean a citizen-focused continuous dialogue.

4.1.3. Politics and the government communicator

If there is one area of governance which 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 which reflect their unity



of purpose. It is a government communicator who must package messages in a manner which 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 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: "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".

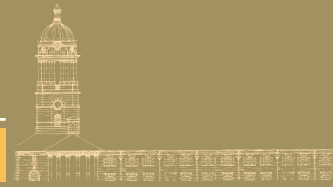
It must also be noted that communication tends to be an embodiment of the politics of a ruling party and government administration with messages emerging from the administrative-political melting pot.

Government communications should provide citizens with information about how they can take part in local, provincial and national discourse so that they influence the direction in which the country is going.

4.1.4. Strategic communication

To drive government to speak in one voice, government has to adopt a strategic communication approach which is more than just getting the right message to the right people. This approach seeks to ensure that communication programmes meet the objectives of both the public and government. Strategic communication is typically supported by a detailed plan in order to meet government's objectives.

Through strategic communication, government will be able to convey deliberate message(s) through the most suitable channels and platforms to the designated audience(s) at the appropriate time to contribute to and achieve the desired long-term effect.



Strategic communication is a:

- way to respond to the ever-changing communication environment regarding the issue at hand.
- practice of systematically applying the processes, strategies and principles of communication to bring about positive social change.
- stakeholder or client-centred approach to promote changes in people's attitudes, knowledge and behaviour to achieve development objectives.
- conceptual umbrella that enables government to integrate their disparate messaging efforts. It allows them to create and distribute messages that, while different in style and purpose, have an inner coherence.

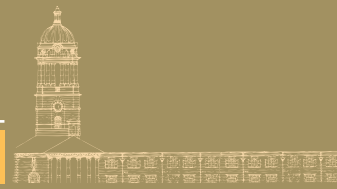
Propaganda versus participation — Government communication should not be framed as propaganda. It is better understood as “information development” with two major dimensions: first, information development is about creating a culture of public disclosure; and, second, it is about developing the capacity to make relevant information available. In South Africa, communication structures and resources available to government are used to ensure an informed and participatory citizenry. Government communicates policies, programmes, decisions and the implementation of the PoA and the provision of services to the people. This information empowers the citizenry to know where to go and what to do to receive assistance from government. This communication, using all communication channels, is supported by two-way communication between citizens and government.

4.1.5. Government communication system

A comprehensive system of government communication ensures coherence in the communication, and that all citizens and communities have access to information that adequately allows them to take advantage of the opportunities to improve their lives and to take part as citizens in public affairs.

The government communication system is the system of communication established in South Africa and encompassing all the three spheres of government. The functioning of the communication system aims to strengthen communication to ensure coherence in communicating government messages.

The communication system is central to participatory democracy and it is a critical pre-activity of developing an informed citizenry in a democracy such as South Africa. In order to meet the system's objectives, structures and processes have been created to achieve coordination of activity and coherence of content within an overarching strategic framework.



The government communication system has not yet yielded maximum impact. Factors such as the lack of knowledge and skills gap within the system are posing a greater challenge to the effective and efficient functioning of the communication system. Lack of content and insufficient knowledge of policies has in some instances compromised communication efforts.

While there are challenges, the government-wide communication system continues to provide a balance between centralised planning and decentralised dissemination of communication. It has engendered a relatively acceptable relationship with the media with minimal confrontation.

4.1.6. How well is coherence promoted?

The extent to which government communication system develops, influences and manages content for communication assist with ensuring a well-functioning communication system. As part of its mandate, the GCIS develops and manages content. By ensuring an effective communication, government communication is able to realise its mandate and this will ensure that all content of government is accurate, factual, credible and verifiable – as well as coherent.

In communication, content becomes a lubricant which continues to oil the communication machinery of government to ensure it is effective. Hence the implementation of the strategies links the cycles for coordinating forums with cycles for assessing the communication environment, planning action and generating content.

4.1.7. How well is the mandate being implemented?

As outlined above, the government-wide communication system is coordinated through various coordinating structures and substructures which were established to ensure that the government communication system functions in an integrated and coordinated manner.

Furthermore, all these fora receive communication guidance from the GCIS continuously, informed by the national communication strategy and the government communication priorities as approved by the Cabinet. This is further informed by the government's PoA and feeds into subsidiary communication strategies of clusters, departments, provinces and local government.

Implementation of the national communication strategy is further coordinated through the development of the GCP (based on the national strategy and government's PoA and during the year coordinates various inputs and resources for campaigns and projects, including strategy and content.



The GCIS also contributes to coherence of content by providing communication products for both transversal campaigns and, working with the relevant departments or clusters, for other campaigns. In either case the GCIS determines or gives advice on content.

The GCIS attempts to monitor implementation of the GCP and advises Cabinet and other government institutions on communication matters. The organisation provides support to Cabinet and departments by managing the development of key messages on communication issues and by coordinating rapid response and proactive action. It takes issues up with departments, clusters and communicators

Through the coordination and systems outlined, the government wide communication system has increased coherence and consistency in messaging and content.

4.1.8. The role of government communicators

The role of the government communicator is underwritten by the Constitution. In terms of Section 16 of the Bill of Rights, people have the right of freedom of speech and should have access to information, it is therefore the mandate of government communicators, working in partnership with the communications industry – including the media – to ensure that all South Africans receive information that will empower them to make informed decisions and choices about their lives.

4.1.9. Identifying communications practitioner roles

A clear and common understanding of what constitutes a communications role within the public sector is considered of fundamental importance for the effective and efficient functioning communication system. The government communications function enables the effective flow of information between government and its internal and external publics, to facilitate participation, service delivery and informed decision-making, and to build accountability and trust in government. This is achieved by developing, delivering and evaluating communications based on good practice communications techniques, supported by the principles and the spirit of the Constitution.