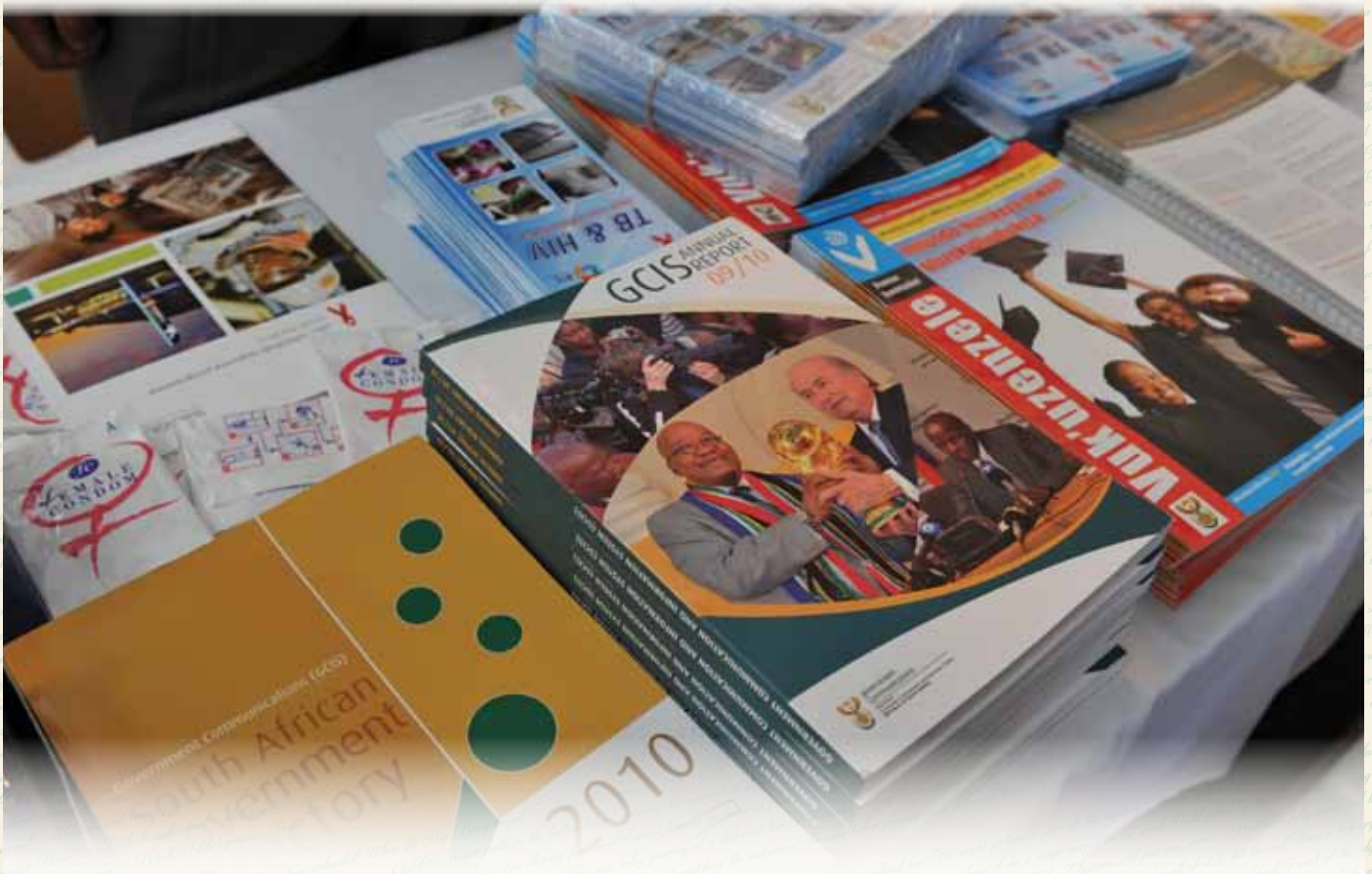




Chapter 10

Government communications – 20 years of empowerment and development



GCIS

The Government Communication and Information System (GCIS) was established in 1998 to actively communicate with the public about government policies, plans, programmes and achievements. This chapter traces its history and reflects on how far the organisation has come. A number of GCIS employees collaborated in the writing of this chapter.

South Africa's historic democratic elections in 1994, and the subsequent ushering in of freedom and democracy, irrevocably changed the landscape of South African society and the economy. In the period building up to the political transition in the early 1990s, shifts in communications were both a cause and result of the profound changes that unfolded. For the apartheid regime, the endgame of what the United Nations had formally classified a crime against humanity saw various challenges to the longstanding communication practices the regime had employed to suppress the liberation struggle and distort the South African reality for national and international audiences.

For decades, the apartheid state's communication culture and machinery had been characterised by censorship; the banning of media channels that aligned themselves with the struggle; physical attacks of terror on progressive media operations; control of the public broadcaster; misinformation campaigns and support from media that were sympathetic to the apartheid cause.

The advent of democracy ushered in a diametrically different government communications dispensation in which the ruling party's commitment (even before the adoption of an interim or permanent Constitution) to human rights, including freedom of speech, shaped South Africa's transformation. The ruling party also advocated for free media and freedom of expression.

The establishment in 1998 of the Government Communication and Information System (GCIS) in the place of the South African Communication Service (SACS) formalised a range of reforms of the communications practices of government that had started in 1994. Under democracy, government communications has been founded on transparency and accountability, creating more platforms for direct engagement between government and citizens, and for media to

connect with government. Mechanisms such as the Promotion of Access to Information Act have deepened the means by which citizens or the media can obtain official information that they believe are in their or in the public interest.

Given the range and pecking order of national transformation priorities, government communications has not always been allocated the budget required for greater effectiveness. Nevertheless, GCIS, working with departments, provinces and municipalities, has sought to diversify government communication platforms and innovate the communications practice.

For the past 20 years, a system of intensive face-to-face engagement with communities in all corners of the country, the creation of various publications, the provision of services and information at walk-in centres and media services at seminal events – such as the 2010 FIFA World Cup or the state funeral of former President Nelson Mandela – have charted the evolution of government communications. At the heart of this is government's belief in the provision of information and the value of interaction as part of empowering citizens and communities to participate in the national effort to create a better life for all South Africans and to build national unity and social cohesion.

Government's creation of its own communication platforms is born out of the realisation that while public media play an important role in the life of the nation and in public discourse, such media are not responsible for providing essential and routine information to citizens.

Beyond its own communication objectives, government has urged the transformation of the media sector, so that this influential industry will reflect diversity in ownership, professional practice and voice. This is essential, given the history of exclusion of black South Africans

GCIS, working with departments, provinces and municipalities, has sought to diversify government communication platforms and innovate the communications practice.

from participation in all sectors of the economy. In the light of South Africa's role and place in Africa and the international arena, government communications has, in the past 20 years, deliberately incorporated an international approach to brand South Africa positively, so as to attract trade and tourism. Government communications has also profiled the country in line with its strategic role internationally as a voice of reason and reconciliation, which has helped to assert South Africa's position as a champion of reform of international governance.

This chapter takes a brief look at government communications during the apartheid era. It will consider the narrowly focused communication approach of the SACS of that time, and contrast it with the GCIS.

THE HISTORY OF COMMUNICATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

The history of government communication in South Africa largely mirrors our journey from apartheid to democracy. Under the apartheid government, communication was used as a tool to enforce white supremacy. There was no free flow of information, but instead a steady stream of propaganda aimed at upholding the *status quo* was fed to the public.

In its desperation to cling to power, the apartheid government turned to every dirty trick in the book. In the early 1970s, it felt under increasing pressure and, convinced that English-language newspapers such as the *Rand Daily Mail*¹⁴⁵ were on a 'hate South African' crusade,¹⁴⁶ began looking for a way to influence international and local opinion. The regime believed that newspapers were spreading bad news about South Africa – and that the state needed its own propaganda to counterbalance this. To this end, R65 million was shifted from the defence budget to enable the government to bribe international news agencies, purchase the *Washington Star* and establish a government-controlled newspaper, *The Citizen*.

The plan failed when the *Rand Daily Mail* exposed this propaganda war. The Muldergate¹⁴⁷ scandal (as it came to be known) opened up the opportunity for PW Botha to pursue his political ambitions and become prime minister in 1977. In the 1980s, conditions worsened, with increasing detentions and bans. As local and international pressure grew on the apartheid government, they reached out to right-wing groups all over the world to bolster their cause and to manufacture a sense of legitimacy.

Apartheid Dead, French Group Finds July 13, 1987 | From Reuters

Nine conservative members of the French Parliament ended a two-week visit to South Africa on Sunday, declaring that apartheid is dead and labelling international sanctions against the Pretoria government a serious political error. The nine were visiting the country at the invitation of the white government. They said that South Africa is on the road to genuine democracy and called for supportive measures from the West to permit this to be achieved without further human suffering.

Just as the National Party used propaganda in an effort to uphold the system, it also used censorship to control what the media published. Journalists were not free to report the facts of a story. Foreign and domestic journalists working in South Africa had to operate within the constraints of legislation, such the National Defence Act 44 of 1957 which stated that no-one could publish information on the South African Defence Force that could embarrass or prejudice the government in its foreign relations. Fines, banning and even imprisonment awaited journalists who dared to break or challenge these laws.

The Publications Act of 1974 gave the government the power to censor movies, plays, books and other entertainment, and the right to decide what South Africans could or could not view. Books critical of apartheid or racial discrimination were routinely banned. Movies showing interracial relationships were barred. The government mouthpiece, the SABC, only aired programmes and news which supported the apartheid



government and reinforced white supremacy. In spite of these restrictions, media continued to report on the horrors of apartheid, often at great cost. Apartheid was one of the major

The history of government communication in South Africa largely mirrors our journey from apartheid to democracy

worldwide stories during the 1980s and 1990s. Many American newspapers, including the *New York Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Washington Post*, had correspondents permanently stationed in South Africa. The major American television networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) also had correspondents stationed in South Africa or in nearby countries. Many British and European newsgroups had a strong presence.

Time and *Newsweek* were sold locally. South Africans could listen to news broadcasts from the Voice of America, the British Broadcasting Corporation and other Western shortwave radio outlets.

Apartheid 'War' Will Intensify, Tambo Warns February 3, 1987 | Leonard Greenwood, Times Staff Writer

The armed struggle of blacks for freedom in South Africa will increase and intensify because people in that country have become used to violence, Oliver Tambo, leader of South Africa's outlawed African National Congress, said in Los Angeles on Monday. 'It's a war – a low-key war, but a war all the same,' Tambo said. 'People are dying in that situation.'

For Schools, Apartheid Takes Toll October 28, 1989 | William Maclean, Reuters

Every weekday morning, thousands of Johannesburg's black children climb into buses and taxis to go to segregated schools in black townships up to 40 miles away. Under South Africa's apartheid race policies, the children are not allowed to attend the 'whites-only' schools of Johannesburg, which, like other South African cities, has no state-run schools for the country's black majority. Strictly speaking, the pupils are not even supposed to live in Johannesburg.

Samaranch: Apartheid to Keep IOC Ban in Effect February 21, 1990

Juan Antonio Samaranch, president of the International Olympic Committee, Tuesday dismissed reforms in South Africa as superficial and said a sports ban against the country will not be relaxed. 'The ingredients for eradicating apartheid have not been lifted, therefore the international sanctions should be maintained to pressure South Africa to lift its policy of apartheid,' Samaranch said at a meeting of a United Nations anti-apartheid commission in Kuwait.

At the same time, the ANC and its allies were broadcasting messages into South Africa via Radio Freedom, which was started in 1963. Radio Freedom, the oldest liberation radio station in Africa, operated until the early 1990s. The broadcasts were initially from South Africa, but later broadcasts were made from various radio stations in countries such as Tanzania, Zambia, Angola, Ethiopia and Madagascar. Listening to these broadcasts was illegal but many tuned in to them.

Increasingly, the resistance movement, internally and abroad, began to apply pressure. Demonstrations, confrontations and boycotts by the majority of South Africans were commonplace during the 1990s. South Africa also experienced immense economic pressure to end apartheid. Banks and investment firms withdrew, indicating that they would not invest

until apartheid was ended. Many churches also applied pressure. In 1994, after a negotiated settlement, South Africa held its first democratic election and a new government was introduced.

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND OF THE GCIS

In 1994, the apartheid communication apparatus, the SACS, was responsible for coordinating government communications and was required to project a positive image of the nationalist government against increasing resistance, locally and internationally. During the State of Emergency in the late 1980s it was the only institution that was able to report on the unrest – newspapers were censored and journalists harassed.

Essentially, the SACS operated as the arm of the State Security Council.¹⁴⁸ This meant that it catered for only one section of the populace and was largely geared to reinforce the apartheid system. While the SACS had a strategic communications branch, Stratkom, that focused on setting up agents within the mass media, the SACS continued to monitor the domestic and international press daily to identify issues that would require a response from government.

In the early 1990s, when change was imminent, the SACS tried to reinvent itself and develop closer links with citizens, assisted by the Department of Planning and Provincial Affairs transferring the 'responsibility for the promotion of inter-community relations ... to SACS.'¹⁴⁹ The SACS vision and mission reflected how this was perceived:

Vision: informed and committed communities for the sake of peace and prosperity

Mission: To render a cost effective, coordinated and specialised government information service to the population in order to inform and involve them, as well as to render such a service to foreigners on request.

After 1994, the new government was called upon to honour the constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression and the media. The public's right to information also guaranteed a new, open and accountable style of government. For the first time in South Africa, the government became fully accountable to all its citizens. The new freedoms were seen as important because:

"Without such freedom, without the means to access information and to communicate their own activities, ideas and opinions, citizens shall be hapless observers in the process of change. Indeed, the content of that change and its pace will be severely distorted, if not totally undermined." (*Essop Pahad, Minister in The Presidency, 1998 Communication Budget Vote*)

At this time there was recognition, too, that due to the history, organisational culture and structural framework of the SACS it lacked legitimacy, and its personnel were not trained to serve a democratic society. The SACS was in many respects an organisation without a clear mandate, and very much a collection of undirected components. Departments worked in silos and it was not structured to offer integrated campaign planning advice to government.

At the same time, the SACS staff suffered from low morale and a large number of senior personnel (approximately 160) had applied for retrenchment packages. It also had little or no contact with national and provincial departments (two thirds of departments, ministries and provinces had contact from 'time to time' and a further 17 per cent 'not often'¹⁵⁰) as it was never structured to be the overall communication vehicle of government. One of critical issues addressed by the new government after 1994 was the complete overhaul of the SACS to fulfil the requirements of the new constitutional framework and build a communication system that would allow people to be part of determining their destiny. The democratic government also understood the importance of communication in achieving the vision of a nonracial, nonsexist and prosperous society. The new system had to ensure the free flow of information; would need to inform

and educate; and would espouse the values of transparency and accountability while serving all South Africans. At the same time it had to change the way that South Africa was perceived internationally.

A Communication Task Team (Comtask) was appointed in 1995 by the then deputy president, Thabo Mbeki. The brief of the Task Team was to review government communications at the local, provincial, national and international level, and recommend how they should be restructured in line with the constitutional principles of freedom of expression, transparency and openness.

The Comtask Report

The Comtask team consulted with a broad range of stakeholders including academics, the media, civil society organisations and advertisers. Members studied the best international approaches to learn more about systems that encourage good communication flow between government and its citizens. The team established a policy framework to guide its deliberations and recommendations, with guiding principles such as the emphasis on law that 'shall guarantee to all their right

The framework considered the need for:

- A culture of accountability and the right to know. Knowledge and openness was seen as essential. Communication could no longer be one sided and top down; government communication would need to empower citizens better to understand their rights.
- Leaner administration, more particularly a streamlined, efficient and transparent public service.
- Coordination within government recognising the interdependence of the different government departments and the balance between the three tiers.
- Affirmative action and empowerment of all disadvantaged by apartheid, which would happen on three levels – for the communicator, the producer of materials and information and the public.
- Ownership and control of the media – a move away from the monopoly of the press and foreign ownership so that a plurality of voices and media diversity would become a reality.

Comtask also considered the political and social imperatives of an open and accountable society. They reiterated that it was necessary to have an efficient public sector based more broadly on the demographics of the population and committed to serving the citizenry. This would require the budget to change, as a broader population was to be served, with a wider diversity of language over a greater geographical space. The task team felt that annual planning, monitoring and evaluation to ensure adequate budgeting was needed in order to ensure effective service delivery.

Comtask also researched international perceptions of South Africa and considered ways in which the country could be more positively marketed and promoted. Finally, Comtask addressed pluralism in the media space, and strategies to open this sector to all.



The Comtask Report reiterated that government communication would have to be consultative and empower citizens to better understand their rights and responsibilities. This has informed government practices of taking outreach programmes to the public.

to speak, to organise, to meet together, to publish, to preach, to worship and to educate their children' extrapolated from the Freedom Charter. The constitutional principles of freedom of expression and the media, as well as freedom of information, were also encapsulated.

Jane Duncan, the Highway Africa Chair of Media and Information Society in the School of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University, told the *Daily Maverick* in 2013:

In principle what Comtask did was to reject the view of government as a strong controller of media, or an owner of media in its own right. The idea was to establish a Ministry of Communications rather than a Ministry of Information, because the old information ministry was really all about one-way communication from government to the people, where the state told people what to think.

The Comtask team delivered its final report to the then Deputy President Mbeki, in October 1996. The report included 83 recommendations dealing with the structure of government communication, media diversity and access to information legislation.

The report had foreseen the following:

1. A government communications and information system would be established to coordinate all government communication. GCIS would be structured so as to build partnerships between government and civil society. The head of GCIS would be responsible for reports to The Presidency.
2. The GCIS would serve as a secretariat in The Presidency responsible for determining communication strategy, advising and acting on behalf of the president and Cabinet, and coordinating the different communication structures.
3. The development of a professional communications unit within each ministry and the different spheres of government responsible for delivering the communication strategy.
4. A centralised Communications Service Agency (CSA) responsible for coordinating bulk-buying of media and research into media needs and trends as well as assisting in developing content.

5. The need to embark on initiatives that would ensure media diversity. This would require a focus on the subsidy and support mechanisms and an exploration of possible partnerships at community level. Government was called upon to set up a statutory media development agency that would dispense subsidies to the community media sector.
6. A conscious focus on development communication aimed at communication to empower citizens. The GCIS was encouraged to support the multi-purpose information centres that had already been initiated as these were important for information dissemination and presented an opportunity for the two-way flow of communication with government.
7. The establishment of a legislative environment to support the principles of the democratic government, including the citizens' right of access to government information and the removal of censorship legislation.
8. The referral of print media industry monopolies to the Competition Commission.
9. Direct and unmediated communication with South Africans.
10. The development and coordination of ongoing training in government communication.

Once the bare framework of the new system was in place government realised the need for an implementation committee to oversee the transformation of government communications as recommended by the Comtask report. The role of this committee was to assist with transformation of the old SACS.

The committee also led the restructuring of communications across government departments and levels. Ministries would become directly responsible for the communications functions of their respective departments.

LAUNCH OF THE GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION SYSTEM

In May 1998, the GCIS was launched during the Communication Budget Vote in Parliament by Essop Pahad, Deputy Minister in the Office of The Presidency:

"This day ... marks one of the most prominent milestones on the road to a new South African communications order.

The road we hope to travel is ripe with promise; it is so full of hope because we are convinced that our country has a team of communicators who share a common passion for the profession – individual citizens in the public, private and community sectors who wish to see our country succeed.

Today, government sets out on that road as a partner in the communications industry, so that our society in all its ramifications can truly have the freedom of speech and the right to be heard."

The GCIS was formally established in terms of Section 7 (subsection 2 and 3) of the Public Service Act, 1994 as a strategic unit located in The Presidency. Its mandate was to

coordinate, guide and advise on government communication (including media liaison, development communication and marketing).

At the first Government Communicators' Consultative Conference, Dr Pahad explained GCIS's role:

"Our task, hand in hand with partners in the communication industry, including the media, is to ensure that this right is indeed realised in practical life.

It is to see to it that all South Africans receive comment and information that enable them to make rational choices about their lives. It is to see to it that they themselves can pass on information and views about their activities as they change their lives for the better. They have got the right to know, and to be heard."

The core vision was to achieve integrated, coordinated and clear communication between government and citizens to enable the latter to be involved in the country's transformation.

REFLECTIONS ON 20 YEARS OF COMMUNICATION

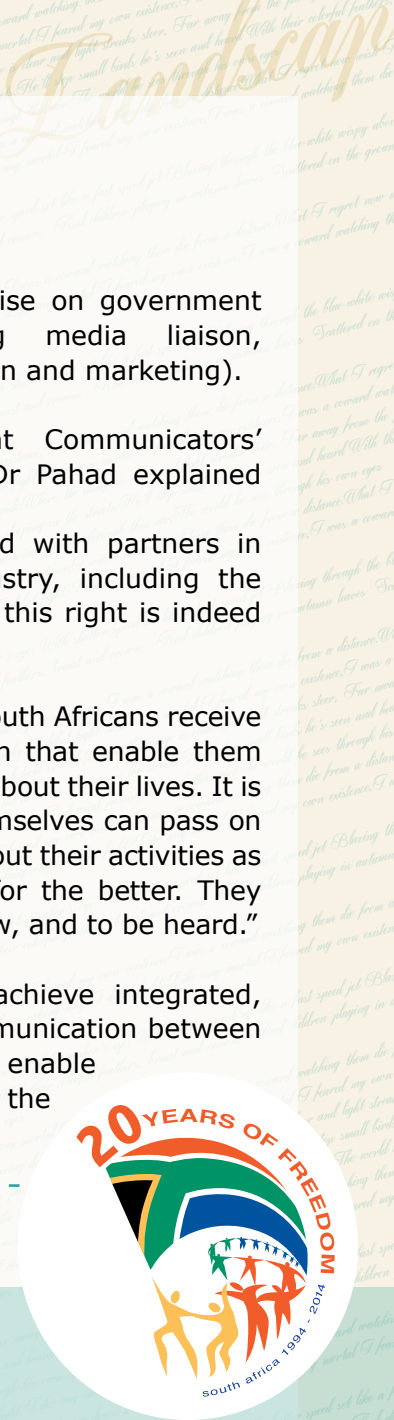
In 1996, as Comtask assessed the old SACS machinery, the task team described government communication as a demoralised, ineffective bureaucracy that needed to become more streamlined and effective. The GCIS came to replace the SACS in 1998 and set about providing leadership for, and implementing, a developmental communication system that would better serve all South Africans.

Following its establishment, the GCIS focused on six priority areas:

- Establishing a coherent government information system;
- Building a development information network to service grassroots needs;

- Developing an information strategy for Thusong Service Centres;
- Building relations with the media as communication partners;
- Encouraging media diversity;
- Improving the competencies of government communicators.

Sixteen years on, the GCIS has gone through two reviews (2008 and 2014) and while it is clear that the country has come a long way since the days of apartheid propaganda, there is still a long way to go before it can claim that all the initial objectives have been achieved. Although communication mediums have been



put in place and structures set up, a lot still needs to be done on the quantity and quality of communication initiatives so that the impact and reach is felt throughout the length and breadth of South Africa.

This section reviews what has been achieved in the 20 years of government communication, considered against the six priority areas the GCIS identified at its establishment.

Establishing a coherent and integrated government communication system

Cohesive and coordinated communication was very early on considered as vital for the success of democratic government. Government needed to speak with one voice – across departments, at local, provincial, national and international level.

With the establishment of the GCIS in 1998 the CEO became the spokesperson for Cabinet and government as a way of ensuring clarity of issues reported into Cabinet and clear messages emerging into the public sphere. 'Current Affairs', a document submitted to Cabinet every two weeks and detailing evident or potential issues also provided an opportunity for Cabinet to deliberate on matters and consolidate government messaging for opinion makers, foreign missions and government communicators.

On the international front, the democratic government had also early on realised that it had to change how South Africa was perceived internationally if it was to attract trade and tourism – crucial ingredients for the country's development. The International Marketing Council (IMC) was initially established to market and build a South African brand. Campaigns such as the National Pride Campaign and the securing of Brand Champions were examples of this. In 2011, the IMC was reconfigured as Brand South Africa (BrandSA), moved into the Presidency and was mandated to continue to create a positive and compelling brand image for South Africa.

Increasingly, government departments also began employing communicators at senior level after realising how good communication could contribute towards the achievement of objectives. The GCIS was expected to provide strategic leadership and guide departments on organisational mechanisms that would enhance communication and to ensure that the public was informed and had access to the programmes that would benefit them.

A National Strategic Framework for communication, communication policy guidelines and a scorecard to standardise and improve communications developed by the GCIS was adopted by Cabinet. Government communicators have initiated and are now participating in a range of forums: Government Communicators' Forum, the cluster system, Provincial Government Communicators' Forum, District Government Communicators' Forum, and the Forum for Ministerial Liaison Officers. These forums provide opportunities for the development of a greater understanding of the communication environment to enhance communication planning and to synergise messaging. Information sharing has also enabled communicators to be proactive in setting the government agenda and to adopt a more strategic approach to achieve better

The GCIS has played a leadership role in supporting the development of communication strategies, key messages, and the production of communication material.

messaging. Since 2000 heightened efforts have been made to strengthen intergovernmental communication. Initially, there were concerns that the established forums were not being taken seriously and that senior staff were sending in juniors to represent them. This hampered decision making and required a review of the

structures to strengthen them, and a focus on content and message coordination to improve coherence. At the same time, communication forums and institutions in municipalities and provinces were being built to ensure effective communication at all levels. This reflected a major shift from the past as the communications capacity became more decentralised.

The improved and centralised communication initiatives have yielded positive results although difficulties remain. As the GCIS delivered quality and professional work so departments, provinces and local government have begun to rely more heavily on it for guidance and support in implementing their communication functions. The GCIS has played a leadership role in supporting the development of communication strategies, key messages, and the production of communication material. However, the authority of the GCIS remains at issue as the organisation can *coordinate* but not *enforce* any decisions taken (this problem was identified in the 2008 Comtask review).

The GCIS has increasingly adopted approaches to make government messages available to the public. The post-SoNA ministerial media briefings, implemented by the GCIS annually, is one way this is done. Here, government departments present and create media publicity for their respective programmes of action. The GCIS hosts the ministerial cluster media briefings regularly throughout the year, rather than annually, so that citizens are provided with up to date information.

The year in which 20 Years of Freedom is being celebrated provides a perfect opportunity to reflect on whether the GCIS has indeed fully achieved its mandate to strategise, coordinate and advise the public sector on communications as a whole. This is done against the background of the reconfiguration taking place leading to a DoC.



Izimbizos provide a two-way communication channel between government and its citizens to improve service delivery.

Building a development information network to service grassroots needs

Since 1998, government communications has recorded significant advances, especially in keeping the rural poor, youth and women up to date with government initiatives and opportunities. Close to two million monthly newspapers are distributed, community radio stations broadcast news nationally, and a government website containing a repository of all government information receives close to five million hits annually. Every year, about 21 million South Africans are reached through the communication projects undertaken by the GCIS in partnership with lead government departments.

Back in 2000, government began placing greater emphasis on unmediated contact between political principals and communities. The GCIS launched the Izimbizo programme to allow political principals to meet communities to explain programmes, hear views, complaints and compliments, and enhance transparent, accountable government. The Imbizo programme was led by the president, who travelled widely in the country to interact with the public.

“This (*izimbizo*) is a marvellous idea. It is a clear indication that the people are governing. It is the first time in history that government comes down to its people.”

“The president takes time off to talk to the people; governance is from bottom to top.”

And:

“The government imbizo is an excellent idea. It gives government an opportunity to interact with communities. It gives communities an opportunity to question and make recommendations in the running of government” (GCIS Presidential Imbizo Research conducted by African Response).

Besides face-to-face communication, the GCIS has developed a number of communication platforms to extend reach. *Vuk'uzenzele*, a monthly newspaper and *SANews*, an online news agency, as well as the twice-daily GCIS radio bulletins, available online and to community radio stations for broadcasting, are some of the services that have become increasingly available.

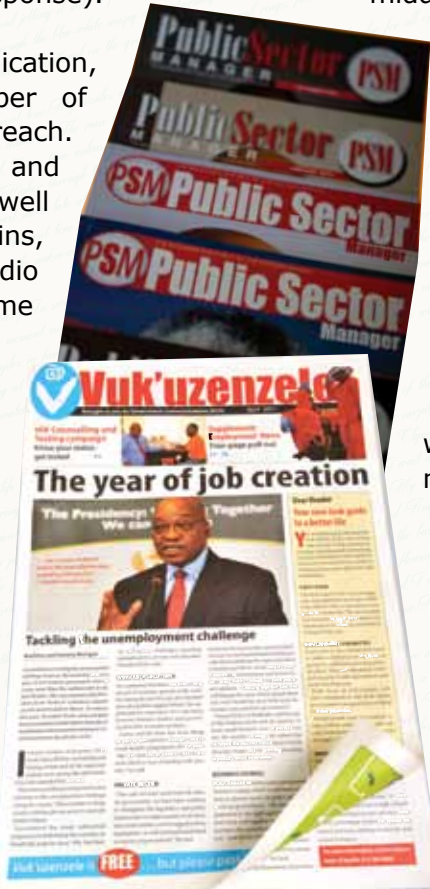
Vuk'uzenzele focuses on news and information about government's programmes relating to its five key priorities: health; education; job creation; rural development; and safety and security. In addition, it provides advice on available socioeconomic opportunities – issues of particular interest for the target audience and that address the gaps in information about government services, especially among people in the LSM 1 – 5 brackets.

Printing and distribution has increased steadily over the years as demand for the publication grows. In 2014, there were 1.7 million copies in all languages in circulation, with eight people on average reading each copy. Despite some distribution challenges, the publication is well received. The *Vuk'uzenzele: Assessment of the Magazine*¹⁵⁷ *Citizen Surveys 2007* found that for citizens *Vuk'uzenzele* is:

'... for us to be knowledgeable about different skills, so that we can create a better life for ourselves.'

'... an eye-opener because it shows a lot of things we were not aware of.'

Public Sector Manager (PSM) magazine, targeting middle and senior public sector managers, took a different approach. It was introduced in 2012 to educate public sector cadres and build a broad understanding of key government policies and programmes amongst those officials responsible for delivery. The idea was that if public servants were kept up to date they would be better able to take up workplace challenges and maintain and defend the reputation of government in their life at work and at home. The magazine has attracted favourable reviews and there have been some requests for the content to be expanded to include wide-ranging issues of implementation.



'What I like most is that it is very informative – all the new stuff that's happening in the public sector. It

gives me some insight into other public service managers: the profiles, the challenges they face, and issues that they are addressing.'
(Director, National Government)

'I would be more interested in the state of implementation of government programmes, progress in terms of how we are doing since the State of the Nation Address. I want to know

... for us to be knowledgeable about different skills, so that we can create a better life for ourselves.



what
h a s
happened and
what the challenges
are ...'

(Acting Director General,
National Government)

(Assessment of the Public Sector Manager
Magazine Qualitative Research Report April
2012 Citizen Surveys).

The GCIS has also expanded its communication platforms into the Internet and social media space as new technologies have emerged. Through the gov.za domain, the GCIS ensures that all current government information is posted. SANews produces hard news and human-interest features, carries pictures, video content on YouTube, and is also available on Facebook and Twitter. The agency attracts about half a million hits a month from domestic and international users.

Despite more people gaining access to government information through these products and platforms, penetration is still low and maximum impact has not been achieved. There is still a lot to be done to reach the target markets so that government's commitment to being fully accountable to all citizens is realised.

At a Cluster Media Briefing in June 2014, the minister of communications, Faith Muthambi, summed up how poor information dissemination leads to and perpetuates inequality:

'Over the last 20 years government has created numerous opportunities for people to get out of poverty. A number of these opportunities have passed many communities by. The reason? Poor information accessibility especially to rural communities ... Schemes for supporting up and coming farmers were put in place for

communities to take advantage of – research shows that half of these were either not taken up or neglected for the simple reason that their existence did not fall on the right ears. This must change as one of the basic things to accelerate the reversal of poverty in our communities.'

During South Africa's first 20 years of freedom, rapid growth has been seen in the number and types of platforms available for people to engage and express their views freely. This development has created space for the media, analysts, commentators, civil society and political parties to compete in public discourse. At the same time, government has been compelled to become more innovative and effective in this space by strengthening its own products and platforms and working in partnership with the media.

Encouraging media diversity

Many challenges still remain in terms of achieving diversity in content and ownership. The Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) was set up in 2002 and with its vision 'Access to diversified media for all' it has, in the last decade, supported 570 media projects with grants worth R275 million; contributed to growing the community broadcast sector so that today it commands more than 25 per cent of radio listenership; seen community TV licensed in more than four provinces; and has ensured that the readership of community and small commercial newspapers increased to more than three million (these achievements are covered more extensively in the chapter on the MDDA that looks at media diversity in detail and considers how far we have come in this regard).

Building relations with the media

The Constitution, the cornerstone of the country's democracy, protects the freedom of

the media, freedom of expression and access to information, and is also supported by a legislative framework. In a press release on Media Freedom Day 2013, the acting GCIS CEO, Phumla Williams, said:

'South African media have been free from state and government control since the attainment of democracy.'

The role of media in society is imperative as it informs and empowers all members of society, and enhances democratic values.

Since 1994, relations with the press have improved substantially. Media freedom has been guaranteed and asserted. Since 2001, Cabinet has held meetings with the media (through the South African National Editors' Forum (Sanef)) to discuss matters of common interest and expectations of one another, bearing in mind the constitutional provisions.

Challenges between the government and the media have arisen from time to time though. For example, the media has strongly opposed the introduction of the Protection of State Information Bill. Sanef has also called on government to repeal or amend apartheid-era laws, such as the National Keypoints Act, 1980 (Act 102 of 1980) and the Criminal Procedure Act, 1977 (Act 51 of 1977) that are still in force

and which, in Sanef's view, unjustifiably restrict the free flow of information. The Cabinet indicated that work in this regard had already started and both parties are committed to expediting the process.

While there is agreement that it is not the role of the media to do the government's public relations, the media has a crucial role to play in engaging the public about the aims and achievements of government – both positive and negative. At the Nat Nakasa Awards Dinner hosted by Sanef in 2014, Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa summed this up. He called for more balanced coverage, however, and indicated that the media should criticise key delivery failures but also include how the lives of many South Africans have been changing for the better, including how the government had managed to deliver services for millions.

'In a word, continue to be critical, speak your minds to the extent that it balances the story of hope, progress and missed opportunities. Empower us to understand our world and our own deficiencies.'

'But also write of the experience of the woman who has been freed from the burden of collecting firewood because she now has electricity, of the one who no longer has to walk to the river to draw water because she now has running water at home. Tell us how this has enabled them to go out to find work, and how their lives have improved.'



In the 2008 Comtask review, journalists raised a number of their own concerns relating to media liaison. Firstly, they considered that the communication they receive from government is reactive rather than proactive. Some of the more general problems identified included a general lack of understanding of the role of the media and what defined a good story. There was also concern that there was often an overly bureaucratic response to requests, or communicators acting very defensively when providing responses.

The GCIS has since put in place, through the rapid response system, a means of ensuring that government is more proactive in communicating policies responding quickly.

Developing an information strategy for multipurpose community centres, now Thusong service centres

The Thusong service centres, established in 1998, were one of the first ways in which government attempted to address the historical, social and economic imbalances that had limited citizens' access to information, services and participation. The Thusong service centres were set up to provide opportunities for people to access information, developmental opportunities and government services that would help them to develop and improve their lives. This has been especially important for those living in outlying, rural areas who remain the most marginalised and vulnerable groups. Thusong service centres coordinate programmes that encourage self-sufficiency and sustainability. Business opportunities are promoted, as well as skills development and training for young South Africans. These centres have also been active in fighting for a green society and in promoting active and responsible citizenship.

"We really thank the Hibiscus Coast Municipality and the municipal official from the Bhomela Thusong Service Centre for teaching us skills to start

More regular media briefings are conducted and government communicators participate in shaping the content of these briefings as well as drawing up statements.

Despite these improvements media engagement needs to be strengthened. Communicators should explore more effective ways to engage media outside formal structures and governments' voice needs to be heard in talk shows, articles and through statements. The time has come for greater engagement with media owners and journalists so that discussions on vital issues are elevated and stories that are covered in the media happen from a more informed perspective.

our own business and be able to take income home."

Simile Sewing Project (Thusong Service Centre: Success Stories: GCIS Booklet, September 2014 p. 9)

"The Bhomela Thusong Service Centre helped us so much by offering the computer training. They helped to bridge the skills gap by affording us an opportunity to learn basic



The Thusong service centres (TSCs) were established to bring government services closer to the public and over 180 are operating throughout the country.

computer literacy. I am now able to do my own CV. I do not have to ask people to help me with it any more.” Siboniso Zungu (*Thusong Service Centre: Success Stories* pg 10).

Providing services and information to historically underdeveloped communities has remained an ongoing priority of government, and 183 Thusong Service Centres are operating today, working in partnership with other government departments. The initial target was to establish one Thusong Service Centre per municipality – 278 in total – so there is still some way to go. However, there are 114 mobile units countrywide that are operational. These allow people to register for social grants and to apply for IDs and certificates through the Department of Home Affairs within their localities. These initiatives are positively viewed by community members:

“I think bringing service here is a good idea and hope it could be done regularly.” (Kgomotso Khoarane and Nompumelelo Mdluli after applying for an ID for the first time at the Faranani Thusong Service Centre in July 2012).

“We thank government for creating platforms such as Thusong Service Centres where we are able to receive skills development and run projects that support the government’s priorities. Today we are proud and are always looking forward to go to work. Through our business we change the lives of the community by providing affordable services and renewing their furniture.” (Johannes Abraham and Gurshin Linders).

Thusong Service Centre: Success Stories: GCIS Booklet, September 2014 pg 40).

Budgeting for communications

Initially the low status afforded communications was reflected in the budgets allocated to this function. From the outset the GCIS worked with a budget approved for the SACS. Minor adjustments were made over time – but there have been no substantial increases over the years despite the fact that all South Africans are now serviced. This has been recognised as a problem and greater funds will have to be provided in future.

Improving the competencies of government communicators

Over the years there have been some attempts to host workshops and develop qualifications to build the capacity of government communicators. The GCIS had adopted a developmental approach, seeing communications as linked to the country’s transformation. This has required a specific form of training for government communicators that was not being delivered in the mainstream training previously taking place.

In 2003, the Academy of Government Communication had already been established and was offering a professional certificate in government communication and marketing. The course focused on the functions and performance of government in formulating and implementing policy, the skills required to manage the civil service, and the ethics and values that would guide the conduct of public affairs. There were also additional joint training interventions at local level – Department of Provincial and Local Government, South African Local Government Association and the GCIS – to develop the capacity of municipal communicators. Despite these, the 2008 Comtask review emphasised building the capacity of government communicators and professionalising communication at all levels of government. There was also recognition of the need for relations to be improved between politicians and the communicators throughout.

Six years on there remain varying degrees of competence among communicators. The GCIS and School of Government at the University of Pretoria have forged a partnership and developed a qualification and curriculum for communications training. This programme will be offered through the National School of Government, and the GCIS believes that it should be compulsory for all government communicators who – especially at the local sphere – require capacity building better to understand communications planning.

Political principals also need to work with communicators in order to professionalise the service – more especially in their interactions with

the media. At times, politicians are not aware of the role of communicators whereas communicators are unsure of what messaging they should deliver. Inductions and close collaboration will assist – as will communication policy guidelines that should be enforceable throughout the public service.

Conclusion

2014 is a milestone year as South Africa marks 20 Years of Freedom. Elections have been held and new ministries have been created. A Ministry of Communications, responsible for overarching communication policy and strategy, information dissemination and publicity, as well as branding the country internationally, has been established – and signifies the important role that government attaches to communications. The National Communication Strategy Framework (NCSF) for 2014-2019 has been adopted. This framework addresses some of the challenges of the last 20 years – but also presents ways to build on the strengths. Communication is seen to be vital for effective delivery and keeping citizens informed – and this is demonstrated in the approach. The DoC has been given the central role of providing direction on government communication instead of playing a coordinating role with no authority. This direction would need to happen at national, provincial and local level. Successful publications such as *Vukuzenzele* are to be further supported and expanded, in keeping with the communication vision of an informed citizenry, aware of government programmes and able to access the information they need to take up opportunities to improve their lives.

The content of the NCSF (2014-2019) presents a government communication environment is fundamentally different from what existed in 1994. The GCIS's role is setting systems in place, creating government platforms for the dissemination of information and getting government communication to the point that it can be built on and taken forward.

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The GCIS journey

1998 - 2014

1998

The **GCIS CEO** is appointed as the Cabinet spokesperson.

GCIS radio unit is established.

South Africa Government Online - the official government website is launched along with the government news agency BuaNews.

1999

The first **Thusong Service Centres** are launched countrywide.

2000

A **Presidential Imbizo** to the Northern Province signifies the start of the Imbizo programme.

The **International Marketing Council (IMC)** is established under the executive authority of the GCIS. By 2011 the IMC becomes known as Brand South Africa is mandated to help create a positive and compelling brand image for South Africa.

2001

The **Government Communicators' Forum (GCF)** is consolidated and remains the premier platform where government communicators engage.

GCIS, as directed by Cabinet, begins submitting a **Current Affairs** document.

2002

The **Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) Act, 2002 (Act 14 of 2002)**, is passed and the first Board is appointed.

GCIS, the South African Local Government Association and the then Department of Provincial and Local Government host the **first national conference on communication in municipalities**.

2003

The **Academy of Government Communication** is established, offering a professional certificate in Government Communication and Marketing.

2004

GCIS takes over the South African government online website (www.gov.za) that provides a one stop portal for all government information and services. The service is used by academics, students, public servants and citizens.

2005

Vuk'uzenzele magazine is launched. In 2007, 1 million copies of Vuk'uzenzele are in circulation, and by 2014, this has increased to 1.7 million.



2005

The Municipal Imbizo Programme is integrated into the broad izimbizo communication campaign.

2006

A national forum of local government communicators meets and adopts a **five year communication plan**. A final set of guidelines for communication in municipalities is developed and approved by the President's Coordinating Council.

2007

The **annual mass campaign to popularise Government's Programme of Action (PoA)** using all official languages and Braille includes a photo story placed in publications with wide circulation and targets the poor, Radio dramas in all official languages except English form part of this campaign. The PoA is also placed on the government website to allow for public scrutiny.

2008

A **Government-wide Communication System Review** as part of a 10-year evaluation of the system takes place.

2009

Government's PoA (2009 – 2014) is available online so that citizens would be able to hold government accountable. It addresses the ten priority areas for government will tackle in the medium term.

2010/11

The **GCIS Opsroom** bring together role players from various government departments to allow for greater coordination of resources and to ensure consistent leadership, clearer messaging and better communication support to political officials. The Opsroom is used to great effect during the 2010 FIFA World Cup, COP 17, the African Cup of Nations, the African Nations Championship and more recently in co-ordinating the communication arrangements for the funeral of former President Nelson Mandela.

About 21 million South Africans are reached through the **3 200 communication projects** undertaken by GCIS in partnership with lead government departments. These projects are aligned to the National Communication Strategy and relate to the priorities of government's Programme of Action. GCIS district communication officials conduct 4 516 community and stakeholder visits in support of these projects.

2012

Public Sector Manager (PSM) magazine is launched.

My District Today, a weekly electronic newsletter provides a snapshot of government progress in implementing its five priorities. The focus is on key projects, service delivery initiatives – at district level. Currently over 500 key stakeholders from within and outside government (NGOs, Community Media etc) receive this product and over a hundred issues have been released online since 2012.

The **South African Government News Agency**, formerly known as BuaNews, repositions itself as SANews.gov.za.

2013/14

A total of **R227 340 470.94 is spent on advertising** across government departments and the recorded savings due to bulk buying is R29,409,059.98.

A **web streaming facility** is introduced to enable all media briefings to be accessed online. This has been done in tandem with the use of social networks to further ensure that government information reaches as many media people and citizens as possible.

