



CHAPTER

2:

The Context for Government Communications: Framework and Constraints

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In May 1994, the Government of National Unity ushered in a new spirit of freedom of expression. "Government in the sunshine" was embraced by an information-hungry society. Under National Party rule, a culture of secrecy, disinformation, and restrictions on press freedom had infused government thinking. Almost overnight, the introduction of constitutional guarantees in respect of freedom of the media and the public's right to information promises a new, open and accountable style of government.

With media restrictions during the past 45 years, there was limited exposure of government mismanagement and disinformation. This changed from April 1994, when government in all its shapes and forms was exposed to the full force of a free and independent media.

Although there has been some irritation and sensitivity by government in response to sometimes unfair and harsh stories in the media, the GNU has remained true to its constitutional commitment to freedom of expression, information and a free media.

Government has recognised freedom of expression as an entrenched tenet of our new democratic society, but it has done so within the context of a society with an inheritance of severe deprivation in regard to information and dialogue with government. It has also had to operate within an organisational culture and structural framework insufficiently geared to modern systems of communication and information delivery.

This is the environment in which the Task Group conducted its work. In doing so, it has sought at all times to act within the framework of current and related policy trends effected and envisaged by government. At the same time, it has drawn on the best and most appropriate international practice. The objective of the Task Group has been to address its terms of reference and to produce a set of policy and other proposals designed to cohere with broad government policy, and to do so within a political environment in which all of society is committed to addressing the legacy of the past.

2.2 THE POLICY FRAMEWORK

2.2.1 Constitutional Requirements

The first departure point is the constitutional requirement for freedom of information. This has been strengthened by the practice of the present government which has, in Parliament, in the civil service and in the political arena, worked hard to open up the channels of communication and transparency. The Constitution makes provision for freedom of expression and of the media and also for freedom and access to information and the only time this can be circumscribed is when the country is at war or in a state of serious internal turmoil. There are impressive safeguards within the Constitution to ensure that these limitations are applied only as a last resort. The Constitutional Court has been established to protect these rights and has already demonstrated its ability to act firmly in defence of the Constitution. In addition, there are important new instruments which guarantee public accountability, such as the Public Protector, the Independent Broadcasting Authority and the planned Open Democracy Act (ODA) which supplement existing institutions such as the auditor-general's office..

At the highest level, the ODA will give practical effect to the provisions of the Constitution, by placing the final "brick in the wall" of transparent government. At the same time, it is clear that the issue of government communication and information needs to be addressed at more basic levels to ensure that key government information reaches the people as a whole.

2.2.2 Culture of Accountability and the Right to Know

The right to know is also an important part of the commitment to the policy of unearthing the political crimes of the past. The Act which established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has seen the birth of an extraordinary process. The TRC has provided genuine avenues for reconciliation for all those who were involved in the political and military struggle which occurred in South Africa in the second half of the 20th Century. At the same time, it has entrenched the principle of knowledge and openness as essential requirements for the functioning of a democratic society, and fostering a culture of accountability.

2.2.3 Leaner Administration

A third policy context is the government's commitment to a streamlined, efficient and transparent public service. This policy is beginning to be reflected in the new style of budgetary management by the Treasury. Zero-based budgeting allows for new criteria to be entered into the budgeting process and includes multi-year planning, as opposed to the incremental budgeting system we have at present - essentially a bargaining exercise in which the allocation made in the previous year has an inordinate weight in determining current allocations. The new model will require departments of state to comply with stated objectives, resulting in a performance and objectives-linked allocation of funding to the different ministries and departments of state.

Our review of government communications has, therefore, been conducted with a view to setting management by objectives, as well as towards leaner and more efficient structures. This is practically expressed in the need carefully to consider outsourcing and the creation of a highly professional and well-trained corps of communicators.

2.2.4 Co-ordination within government

Another important policy strand relates to the recognition of the interdependence of government departments and the carefully conceived balance between its three tiers. The policy and practice of the new government needs to recognise the importance of the communication and information function within every department of state and within all

three tiers of government. This policy has informed our approach to the question of how and where the communication function should relate to, and co-ordinate with, the structures of democratic government.

2.2.5 Affirmative Action & Empowerment

Another crucial policy framework relates to the implementation of affirmative action for all groups disadvantaged by apartheid. In communications, this requires examination at three levels: the communicator, the producer of materials and information, and the public audience.

Throughout our report, we have taken into account the commitment of the GNU to the empowerment of historically disadvantaged communities. It is now generally accepted that such communities in South Africa include blacks, women, disabled persons and people living in rural areas. The principle of empowerment includes affirmative action for such historically and currently disadvantaged communities.⁷ These principles affect a range of issues from media diversity and control, to training and capacity building, the development of communication networks, and outsourcing.

2.2.6 Ownership & Control of the Media

Concentration of ownership and control is a matter of concern for all governments. In the case of the media, there is an additional concern: lack of diversity allows for control of information and opinion. Media diversity is thus vital to democracy.

In addition to urging that this matter be dealt with by recommending that issues of monopoly be considered as part of competition policy and that distribution networks should become common carriers, we have approached our work from the perspective that government should assist the development of a plurality of voices, and encourage media diversity. This goal can be advanced in a variety of ways other than through competitions policy per se. Examples include affirmative action strategies, support for community media and the public broadcaster administered through an independent body, and more transparent criteria for selecting and awarding contracts, in order to promote empowerment.

We have approached the problem of foreign ownership of the media from the point of view that forcing unbundling into South African hands could result in the closing of titles and thus a reduction in media diversity because of the cross-media subsidisation and shared resource policies adopted by the groups. Instead our approach has been to bring pressure on foreign owners to expand ownership structures to include more South African interests.

2.3 CURRENT CONSTRAINTS

Throughout our consultation and research, we have been struck by the significant constraints upon government in the field of information and communication. Although we are firmly of the belief that, given government policy objectives, many of these constraints will ease and indeed disappear in the longer term, they form the backdrop against which we worked.

2.3.1 Cultural Background

The first major constraint is the difference in culture between the old administration and the new. This expresses itself most graphically between the ministries which often have

⁷ We believe that a set of 'qualifiers' should be developed as a framework for affirmative action. This policy should be developed within the context of acknowledging and attempting to address issues of redressing the inequality of disadvantaged groups including blacks, women, old people, people with disabilities, people who cannot read or write, people living in rural and remote areas. Additional qualifiers would include the need to develop the small and medium enterprise sector, empower business in disadvantaged sectors and so on.

completely different attitudes to communication and information to those of departments. We have, indeed, seen little evidence of effective co-operation between ministerial liaison officers and departmental communicators, although there are exceptions. We have also noted that, because of the way communications is structured, ministers have little direct involvement in the broad communication functions (beyond media liaison) of their departments. Yet the political role of ministers requires them to be in the forefront and taking responsibility for explaining, motivating and defending government policy: this is where communications capacity should be located.

Related to this problem is a style of administration which is steeply hierarchical and strangled by red tape, with long reporting lines and top-heavy management. This is particularly unsuited to efficient communications delivery which requires creative space, speed and flexibility.

It is generally clear that government at all three levels has committed itself to a new policy which recognises its rights and obligations to provide information about its operations, plans and projects. Some ministries, departments, provincial authorities and local authorities are better at this than others. Thus, although in general we detected an underlying commitment to the policy of providing information and communicating with the public and stakeholders, delivery is uneven, generally inadequate and still impeded by an inability completely to shrug off a culture of secrecy.

2.3.2 Low Status of Communications

The status of communications and its practitioners is also an inhibiting factor. There is poor recognition of the need for a professional government communication and information service in South Africa. Rather, there are disparate communication and information officials with widely varying backgrounds, seniority and training. In order to eliminate this constraint, we believe that the status of the profession within government needs to be raised.

Related to the above is what we perceive to be a poor understanding of the role of communications and its function in government. This, it must be said, is a fault discernible both in the old administration and the new. It is reflected in the nature of appointments made and, as noted above, in the status and training of communications professionals.

In addition, although those who hail from the liberation movements have been exposed to a strong consultative approach which was effected through alternative methods of communication and information delivery, this style of public consultation has not yet been incorporated into the thinking and practice of the new government.

2.3.3 Lack of Communication and Information Policy

There is no clear policy in relation to government communication and information in South Africa. It is hoped our report will go some way towards assisting in the establishment of such a policy. The lack of policy in this area puts South Africa out of step with many countries in the developing world which recognise that one of the key requirements for government is to develop and maintain a dynamic and effective information and communication strategy.

The new government has not been able to forge a national information policy. Although the RDP office initiated a study on national information policy more than a year ago, from which some valuable reports have emanated, it appears to have made insufficient progress. At the level of pure information policy, government needs to conclude the process that was commenced in the RDP office, and adopt uniform standards for information storage and dissemination.

A strong government communication and information service can coexist with a culture

that embraces freedom of expression and information. The recommendations contained in our report will, we believe, go a long way towards providing for a productive coexistence of these two essential components of a democratic society. The information society is about the right to know and choose. It is also the driving engine for economies into the next millennium.

2.3.4 Patterns of Ownership and Control

South African democracy inherited a concentrated media. Over the past two years this has been mitigated by the development, for the first time, of a true national public broadcaster, by the recent empowerment takeovers, and by the continuing efforts of the community media sector. As already stated, concentration of media ownership is a danger in democracy. It raises the likelihood that opinion and information may be controlled by one sector of society to the disadvantage of others. For this reason, we believe a greater diversity of media in South Africa would improve the quality and range of information flow generally, and facilitate effective government communication and information.

2.3.5 Media Professionalism

The apartheid years also damaged the profession of journalism. Attrition drove many talented journalists out of the profession or out of the country. It impoverished standards. We have, in this regard, identified a relative lack of professionalism in South African media. Like media professionals in government, extensive training and retraining is required if this constraint is to be eliminated. In this regard, too, we make certain observations about the performance of the press which we hope may have some influence on the direction in which the media restructures itself.

2.3.6 Relationships between Press and Government

An uneasy relationship exists between press and government. On the one hand, government complains that its message, its perspectives and its concrete decisions and actions do not receive adequate media coverage. Reports are often superficial, incomplete and distorted. Important government communication is often selectively ignored.

On the other hand, the media alleges that the government's communication efforts are too often incomplete, opaque, and superficial, and that the way in which the government releases its news is unprofessional. There are too many delays in news releases and an unwillingness or clumsiness in providing in-depth and background information on government decisions and policy.

Both points of view can be substantiated and have some merit. In private, we found leaders in both the media and government willing to accept the shortcomings of their own institutions quite readily. The consistent repression of the truth by the previous government in South Africa and the subsequent entrenchment of freedom of information and expression in our Constitution has resulted in a media which, quite correctly, guards its newly won freedoms jealously. But, while we believe tension between government and the press is healthy, and indeed inevitable, there is scope for both sides to listen to the other's critiques and for joint efforts to improve respective standards.

2.3.7 Obsolete Legislation

Restrictive laws still exist under which the media operate and which obstruct its efforts. These need to be removed from the statute book. They are anachronistic and need to be repealed in a systematic way.⁸

2.3.8 Inadequate Infrastructure

We note a critical problem which severely constrains the capacity of government to inform the population: inadequate communications infrastructure. This reveals itself in our telecommunications systems, our broadcasting infrastructure and the poverty of our information technology. The result is the extreme isolation experienced by communities disadvantaged by remoteness, illiteracy, poverty and social circumstance. Addressing this problem - literally, bringing the benefits of an information society to the majority of South Africans - will require the mobilisation of capital and skills beyond the means of the government. New partnerships with the private sector, as well as the necessary legislation and public policy to enable this, are urgently needed to provide telephone lines, communication technologies and delivery capacity.

2.3.9 Communications and the Role of government

The final problem relates to budget and resources. The public budget is under severe pressure with many demands placed upon it. The development of a more effective government communication system will have to be financed in part from savings and reduction of waste and duplication. Other resources can be obtained by more effective partnerships with communities, the private sector and better working methods between levels of government.

However, it is abundantly clear that many poor and rural people - the majority - lack access to information about national developments. This is partly because the infrastructure is not available, nor the funding in place, to produce the necessary material. It is unlikely that private sector or community resources can generate the funds needed to fill all these gaps. The public broadcaster and the community media sector will need support from the national purse if these gaps are to be filled in the short to medium term. The alternative will be an information community which includes only those who can afford it.