THE LEADERS' REPORT

What government communicators can
learn from the Covid-19 pandemic

Extended executive summary

WPP
GOVERNMENT &
PUBLIC SECTOR
PRACTICE

The Leaders' Report: what government communicators can learn from the Covid-19 pandemic

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic showed that good government communication – when based on scientific evidence, backed by audience understanding, developed through behavioural insights, and delivered by an appropriate messenger – can save lives. But there is much more that governments need to learn about the changes forced by the pandemic in order to support their citizens through recovery and beyond.

Covid-19 altered public attitudes and constrained everyday behaviours, and a complete return of old social patterns is unlikely to occur any time soon. Despite this, significant new models of behaviour have already emerged that will affect the relationship between citizens and the state, and that government communicators need to be ready to adapt to.

Since 2017, WPP's Government & Public Sector Practice has been researching and cataloguing developments in government communication for its research programme, *The Leaders' Report*.   In 2020 we worked with our clients, and with communication specialists in WPP partner agencies around the world, to identify key themes affecting government communication that have become more pronounced during the pandemic, and that will influence how citizens interact with each other, with governments, with sources of information, and with platforms of technology.

Executive summary

Developments 2017 to 2020

In 2017, the first edition of *The Leaders' Report* identified a number of challenges facing government communicators:

1 Declining levels of trust in government

2 A lack of understanding of —and an inability to connect with—increasingly fragmented audiences

3 An over-reliance on one-way 'broadcast' communication

4 A lack of modern— particularly digital— communication skills

5 Inability of government communicators to influence sufficiently within and across their organisation

We concluded that citizens were angrier and more insecure than probably at any time since the end of the Cold War. In particular:
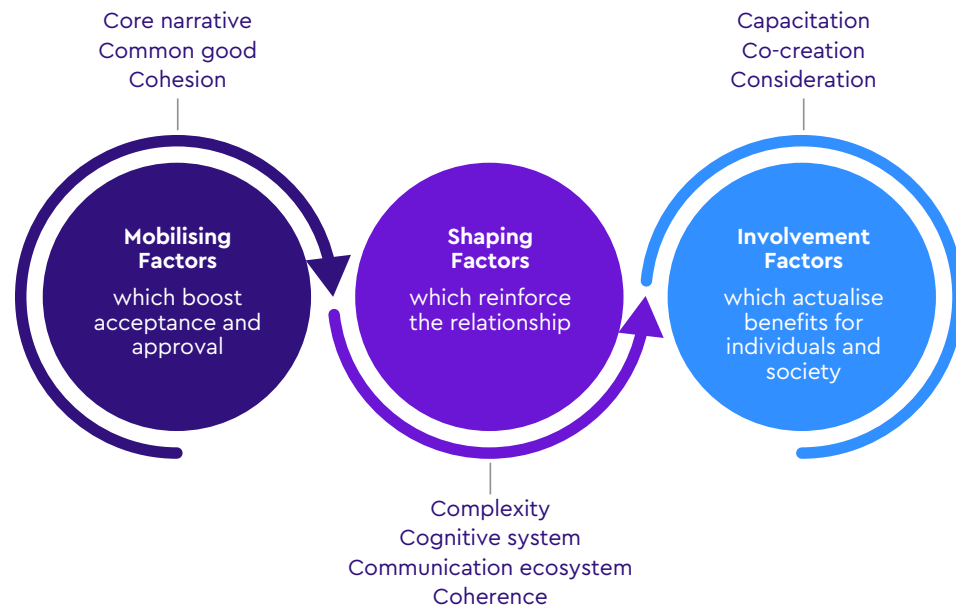
- The porosity of borders, coupled with the permeability of information systems were increasing geopolitical disorder, driving the rise of populist and nationalist movements, enabling more terrorism and more cyberattacks, and increasing environmental problems and economic uncertainty

- Although very difficult circumstances remained (and continue to remain) in many parts of the world, globally poverty was decreasing and access to health and education was increasing. While this is profoundly good for humanity, it created challenges for society by turbo-charging a culture of individualisation and an attitude of 'me before anyone else'

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- An exponential growth of technology was speeding up the pace of change, with the arrival of the 'fourth industrial revolution' producing a state of almost permanent disruption.

Geopolitical disorder	Economic growth	Exponential growth of technology
Uncertainty	Individualisation	Permanent disruption

In 2019, we stress-tested government communication further. Qualitative research with over 9,000 citizens in nine diverse countries identified 10 requirements for effective government communication that we believe form the bedrock of more effective and emotionally-driven engagement with citizens. These are:

Core narrative
Common good
Cohesion

Capacitation
Co-creation
Consideration

Mobilising Factors
which boost acceptance and approval

Shaping Factors
which reinforce the relationship

Involvement Factors
which actualise benefits for individuals and society

Complexity
Cognitive system
Communication ecosystem
Coherence

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- **Core narrative:** citizens need a shared positive vision and motivation to participate, particularly during times of challenge

- **Common good:** citizens expect their government to find common ground and solutions that serve everyone's interests – in effect, to exercise power for the public good rather than self interest

- **Cohesion:** people are more positively drawn to actions they perceive to reinforce equality and inclusion across communities – crucial to creating a sense of unity when asking citizens to accept restrictions on their freedoms

- **Complexity:** governments need to explain the challenges and trade-offs that lie in balancing the complicated interests of diverse and divergent groups

- **Cognitive system:** governments need to better understand why citizens behave in the ways that they do, and anticipate the inherent tensions that emerge when seeking to change their behaviour

- **Communication ecosystem:** citizens expect governments to reach out and connect with them on the channels they use and at a time that's convenient for them

- **Coherence:** public leaders need to maintain consistency between what they say and what they do, and consistency of message across ministries and departments

- **Capacitation:** citizens need support and skills transfer to help them engage effectively with government as equals

- **Co-creation:** involving citizens in the decision-making process, and being receptive to their input, can generate stronger public support for difficult policy decisions

- **Consideration:** having their input and effort recognised produces a more positive reaction among the public, and can provide them with further motivation to connect and conform.

By the time the global crisis hit in early 2020, we had identified five further challenges:

| Enhanced polarisation | Atypical interpretation of facts and figures | Ongoing shift to digital | Changes in civic responsibility | Transformation in media consumption |

- **Enhanced polarisation of opinions.** With a shrinking of the centre ground, different groups with different opinions were accessing different sources of news. Polarisation was making people care more about issues and more likely to act (even if that action was limited to online activity), but also less likely to listen to opposing views

- **Atypical interpretation of facts and figures.** Disinformation was happening at scale. Statistics seemed to be losing their power. In many parts of the world, emotions appeared to be beating evidence as a source of truth

- **Ongoing shift to digital.** Social media had created an echo-chamber that reinforced for citizens their existing beliefs and judgements: differing opinions had all but disappeared from news and social media feeds. The increasing curation and personalisation of content appeared to have signalled the end of mass 'water-cooler' conversations as widely-shared social experiences began to recede

- **Changing concepts of civic responsibility.** The notion of 'community' as a geographic entity was giving way to a more emotionally-driven concept of communities of interest. People now have more empathy with those they share a perceived bond with, and less with those they simply share a space with

- **Transformations in media consumption.** A collapse in local media, independent journalism and media literacy was happening at the same time as rises in user opinion, user-generated content and communication inequality were affecting increasing numbers of communities.

Then Covid-19 hit.
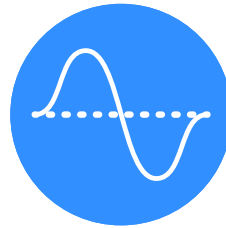
Developments since the Covid-19 pandemic

Our experience since the start of the crisis in 2020 suggests that the pandemic has accelerated many of the issues we catalogued since 2017, and also created a raft of new pressures which pose additional challenges for government communication. These include:

| Societies fracturing | Behaviours changing | Trends fluctuating | Media shifting | Dependencies emerging |

Societies fracturing

The unity of purpose that tackling the virus created has failed to reverse the polarisation of societies: only for a short time did it stall the social atomisation that the social media age has introduced. In many parts of the world, the pandemic led to a revived sense of national identity that reflected off of the shared effort of conquering Covid. This has had both positive and negative implications – boosting morale among some audiences but exacerbating feelings of exclusion in others.

Behaviours changing

As the pandemic developed, people were generous with their trust in politicians and public officials, and they demonstrated high levels of compliance in the behavioural restrictions placed upon everyday life. However, belief in political leaders and their ability to deliver remains volatile and has impacted on a range of other behaviours that governments need to understand.

Trends fluctuating

Despite a strong sense of liberty and individualism, citizens prioritised the health of their families and their communities above everything else. As consumers, they are now more mindful of how and where their money is spent, more likely to spend locally on essentials, and more likely to adopt a self-sufficient mindset. The expansion of e-commerce has disrupted profoundly a range of industries including entertainment, healthcare, retail, sport, transportation and travel.

Media shifting

The accelerated shift to digital has seen people rely on the internet and streaming services for new ways to keep connected, informed and entertained during the pandemic and its associated lockdowns. Government communicators were forced to adapt quickly to swings in media consumption during the pandemic. Social media, messaging and video services saw significant growth in subscriptions and usage. The more time people spend online, the higher the risks of further societal polarisation. And the more fractured the audience, the more difficult it is for governments to engage them.

Dependencies emerging

An evolving reliance upon government has changed how citizens and the state interact. The pandemic forced a dramatic increase in the number of people seeking – often unwillingly – government support. It required public service providers to treat communication as a more strategic management function. It broadened the need for effective, behaviourally-focused, engagement. And it necessitated a more empathetic and personal tone of delivery.

What do citizens now need from government communication?

While there is a yearning to get life going again, there is also recognition that many of the communities most adversely affected by the pandemic were not victims of a random act, but affected disproportionately by existing social and economic disparities. They will need continued support. As a result, there is little sign that citizens are willing to revert back to the more frustrating and inequitable parts of their pre-Covid existence.

Citizens will need support during the transition to a post-pandemic state, particularly as what that post-pandemic state looks like is still unknown. They will also need support in building individual and community resilience to guard against future crises.

As a result, citizens need communication that:

- **Makes sense of their situation.** They need facts and a sense of security: this requires governments to think longer term in their messaging strategy and avoid running behind the news cycle

- **Provides both emotional and technical support.** The public do not yet have a sense of what the 'new normal' might look like – and they must be able to cope with difficulties that may emerge along the way. Messages must be framed in a way that instils confidence that government knows what it is doing

- **Offers reassurance.** Citizens were disappointed by governments that under-delivered, and they still have concerns around personal and vaccine safety. While there have been clear winners and losers during the crisis, there has been no clear moment of victory to provide comfort

- **Reasserts their independence.** After more than a year of being treated like children and told what they can and cannot do, citizens want to be treated like adults once again

- **Protects them from new challenges and dangers.** On- and offline behaviours have changed. For their own safety, citizens need communication that helps address key vulnerabilities and builds their media literacy, understanding of cyber security, and support for civic responsibility.

What should government communicators do now?

In order to deliver what citizens need, we believe there are nine actions that government communicators must take to navigate through the difficult waters of the recovery period and beyond. These are:

Build trust

Government stimulus spending will come eventually at a cost to taxpayers. Governments need to prepare now for the bailout backlash.

- Embrace narrative transformation – tell human stories and improve creative testing
- When facts change, explain clearly the impact on policy and consequences for citizens
- Set expectations and be honest in documenting achievements
- Treat underserved communities fairly; lean harder towards population groups that feel left behind.

Integrate strategy and campaign planning

Integration is always important to government communication – but never more so than in the current and post-Covid-19 environment. Surprisingly it is often not done. Government communication budgets need to invest most heavily in engaging vulnerable communities, and those less likely to proactively seek out information, in a targeted way. By definition that means spending less heavily on mass communication.

- Develop a fuller overview of policy priorities, requirements, campaigns and budget setting
- Better integrate communication with policy and behavioural insights functions
- Centralise across government the planning of cross-cutting and priority campaigns
- Increase campaign delivery and communication through vetted partners, businesses and influencers.

Focus on the citizen, not the policy

Governments need to be more alert and responsive to the needs, aspirations and fears of citizens. That means investing more in understanding socio-cultural issues and trends in technology and economic fluctuations.

- Enhance audience planning by consolidating all government data points

- Create a single source of citizens' view using data and insights

- Deliver stronger analytics, measurement and evaluation

- Invest in whole-of-government marketing technology and advertising technology.

Build resilience and rapid response capability

Governments will be tempted to see 2020 as a blip, but for citizens it represented something more profound. Governments need to help citizens and business communities to be more self-sufficient and self-supporting, and more capable of quickly responding to and recovering from crises.

- Ensure citizens and businesses can anticipate, respond to and recover from a range of crises

- Provide audiences with the knowledge and means to minimise risk – to themselves and to their community

- Develop the ability to activate communications instantaneously, beating the news cycle and misinformation

- Contextual interventions close to the moment where actions need to be taken.

Publish more content

In an age of disinformation and diminished levels of trust, governments need to deliver messages to the public using more direct and unmediated routes.

- Move from broadcasting through campaigns to publishing and syndicating information

- Create direct government-to-citizen channels and bypass traditional media

- Build better online distribution networks, including though regional and local government

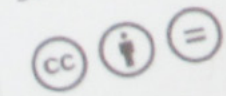- Build better in-house content development knowledge and skills in using newer platforms such as Tiktok.
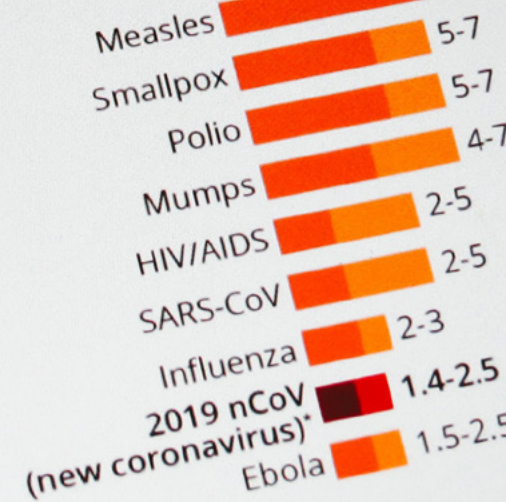
Develop smarter media strategies

The pandemic didn't start the great digital migration, but it did accelerate it. The breadth of user platforms is expanding and niche channels are widening their audiences, making citizens harder for governments to reach.

- Understand post-pandemic media consumption patterns
- Modernise media buying, enhance scale, and develop data partnerships for greater planning and buying efficiencies
- Learn from the explosion in e-commerce and conversational commerce
- Identify the benefits of BVOD, Connected TV, OTT and CTV.

Track and listen to sentiment

Atomised publics and fractured audiences require governments to tap into wider sources of public sentiment through natural language processing, text analysis, computational linguistics and biometrics.

- Identify, extract and quantify social issues and opinion
- Listen to, monitor and respond to on- and offline conversations
- Anticipate and tackle mis-, mal-, and disinformation online
- Create rapid response and rolling capability based on audience needs.

Broaden partnership and engagement activities

Despite physical and social distancing, citizens are still seeking out social communities and the opinions of key influencers. Governments must bridge the gap between communities and governance.

- Foster and connect with communities, civic groups and not-for-profits
- Develop more conversational ways of engaging with communities
- Integrate listening into public policy development
- Organise and empower like-minded groups.

Further develop digital delivery

Citizens are signalling for improvements to be made in design, relevance, and relationships online as well as for greater consideration to protecting citizen data while still providing more efficient solutions online.

- Embrace digital and technological advances
- Improve digital government experiences and user journeys for all key audience segments
- Assess capabilities such as AI and Voice in the delivery of both services and communications
- Provide reassurance on Personal Identifiable Information (PII) protections.

Key questions to ask

The experience of Covid-19 brings an opportunity for communicators to step back, recalibrate and accelerate change to build trust and bring government and citizens closer together. Given the recent evidence of government communication quickly changing behaviours and saving lives during the crisis, it offers a chance to ask and answer a series of key questions in concert with their policy colleagues before developing future communication strategies. These are:

- **Control** – who is controlling the narrative and channels from within government, and how?

- **Collaboration** – how effectively are you working across sectors and across government agencies?

- **Consensus** – is there general agreement between government and public that what needs to be done is the right thing?

- **Co-creation** – how are you feeding citizen insight and feedback into your plans?

- **Civics** – how are you building community engagement and action?

- **Conduct** – have you clarified the behavioural response required from your audiences?

- **Co-ordination** – how are you delivering through different agencies across central, regional and local government?

- **Crisis planning** – how are your actions helping internal and external partners – and citizens – to develop pre-crisis, crisis response and post crisis capabilities?

- **Capability** – how are you improving internal capability by upskilling staff to meet changing needs?

WPP Government & Public Sector Practice

WPP's Government & Public Sector Practice helps governments achieve better policy outcomes, build resilience and improve citizens' lives by advising policymakers and public sector communication leaders on strategy, innovation, capability development and global best practice.

Contact us to discuss a strategic communication challenge, improve the performance of a public sector communication team, or find the right skills within WPP's agencies for a specific brief.

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