

THE LEADERS' REPORT

The evolving future of
government communication

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The ongoing crises of the last half decade have demonstrated the importance of two-way, integrated and citizen-focused government communication. These social, political, and economic emergencies have shown that good government communication – when based on scientific evidence, shaped by audience understanding, developed through behavioural insights, and delivered by an appropriate messenger – can save lives.

However, there has been:

- **A significant and continuing decline in trust in government**
- **An exponential growth in mis-, dis-, and mal-information**
- **The constant atomisation of audiences**
- **Shifting and complex demographics.**

These all make connecting with and supporting citizens more vital – but more challenging – for governments today than ever before.

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

Conducted with the WPP Government & Public Sector Practice's research partner, Kantar Public, the fieldwork for this edition of *The Leaders' Report* spans 19 countries spread across six continents (Asia, Australasia, Central America, Europe, Middle East, and North America). It consists of:

- An online, confidential quantitative survey with more than 150 public communication practitioners
- In-depth qualitative interviews with 37 senior government and multilateral organisation communication leaders from around the world
- A review of relevant innovative and best-in-class communications, experience, commerce, and technology services provided by WPP's leading global agencies.

Full copies of this report are available online at www.govtpracticewpp.com.



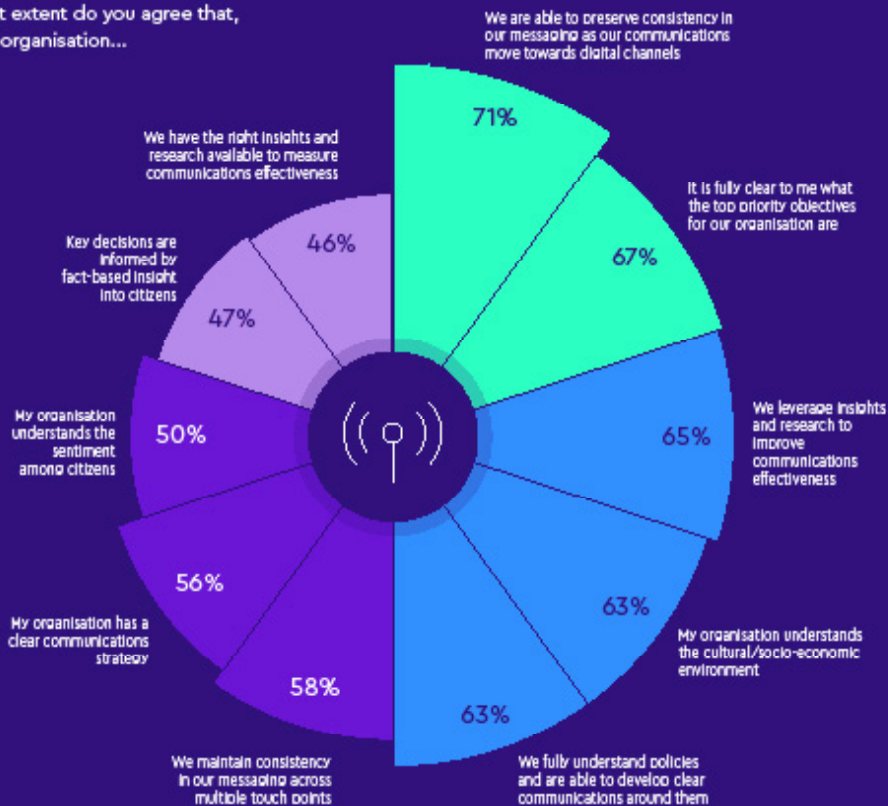
```
def poll(cls, context):  
    return context.active object is not None  
    mirror_mod = Modifier.ob.modifiers.  
  
    # set mirror object to mirror ob  
    mirror_mod.mirror_object = mirror_ob  
  
    if _operation == "MIRROR X":  
        mirror_mod.use_x = True  
        mirror_mod.use_y = False  
        mirror_mod.use_z = False  
    elif _operation == "MIRROR Y":  
        mirror_mod.use_x = False  
        mirror_mod.use_y = True  
        mirror_mod.use_z = False  
    elif _operation == "MIRROR Z":  
        mirror_mod.use_x = False  
        mirror_mod.use_y = False  
        mirror_mod.use_z = True  
  
    #selection at the end -add back the  
    mirror_ob.select = 1  
    modifier_ob.select = 1  
    bpy.context.scene.select  
    print("selected" + str(mirror_ob.select)  
        + mirror_ob.select + str(modifier_ob.select)  
        + bpy.context.scene.select + str(mirror_ob.select)  
        + bpy.context.scene.select)  
    except:
```

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Discussions with a number of the Practice's government clients across the world coalesced around four recurring questions:

1. How effective are government communications?
2. How has the delivery of government communications developed since earlier editions of *The Leaders' Report*?
3. How are traditional approaches to 'hard-to-reach' or 'marginalised' audiences developing?
4. To what degree are government communications supporting social cohesion?

To what extent do you agree that, in your organisation...



Positively:

- Two-thirds (69%) of respondents to this research say that their organisation's communications are now more effective than they were five years ago, with 37% saying that their organisation's communications are a lot more effective
- Two thirds (67%) are clear what their organisation's communications priorities are
- Eight respondents in ten (78%) believe that their organisation handled the recent health crises very or somewhat well
- 48% say their organisation has made significant efforts to build greater trust between the state and its citizens.

Less positively:

- A fifth (18%) of respondents believe their organisation is using communication to its fullest potential
- A fifth (22%) believe that their organisation's communications are more effective than those of the private sector
- A third (30%) of respondents say that all communications activity is evaluated.

Participants in this research were asked to select their organisation's top three communication priorities and top three communication challenges.

Priorities	Challenges
54% Protecting and enhancing your organisation's reputation	51% Overcoming organisational bureaucracy
41% Engaging and consulting directly with citizens	47% Lack of budget to deliver the communications my organisation requires
40% Preparing for and managing crises	42% Engaging with hard-to-reach audiences
40% Better engaging with hard-to-reach audiences	33% Accessing and using all the relevant data my organisation has
33% Explaining public policy	33% Overcoming organisational hierarchy

HOW EFFECTIVE ARE GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS?

56%

My organisation has a clear communication strategy

66%

My organisation's communications are primarily one way (from organisation to citizen)

62%

My organisation now pays more attention to quickly changing public behaviours

46%

I have the right insights and research available to measure communications effectiveness

There are signs of growing confidence in the effectiveness of government communication, particularly at the executional level: managing crises; delivering digital services; and engaging via social media. This is encouraging.

However, key weaknesses remain.

Strategic performance is inconsistent. Significant improvement is needed in the development, use, and effectiveness of strategy – the lack of which suggests that many government communication functions remain driven by events rather than by any longer-term game plan. We believe that any public organisation that does not have a communication strategy is failing its audiences and service users.

The use of insight and the ability to affect meaningful behaviour change also requires improvement: only 20% of respondents believe that their organisation has changed behaviour successfully – despite the billions of dollars invested in behaviour change communication during the Covid pandemic. This must act as a clear motivator to improvement.

Ongoing weaknesses in evaluation and attribution mean that too much government communication activity is poorly targeted, and is assessed against communication outputs rather than policy outcomes. As a result, too little government communication is able to demonstrate its value, or its contribution to policy delivery.

There is a split between those who believe the current purpose of their organisation's communications is reputation management, and those who believe it is to help deliver policy. Both are legitimate actions during a time of crisis because institutional standing is an underpinning factor in

citizen's trust during challenging periods. But there is a need to strike a balance between immediate critical needs and longer-term, more strategic (but less urgent) items on the communication agenda.

Government communicators say they are now more likely to have greater access to government ministers and other organisational decision-makers. However, they are concerned about the increased politicisation of government communications and interference in the delivery of communications. We are concerned that continued politicisation of communications may lead governments into a downward spiral of distrust that they will struggle to recover from.



HOW HAS THE DELIVERY OF GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS DEVELOPED SINCE EARLIER EDITIONS OF *THE LEADERS' REPORT*?

71%

My organisation is now better able to maintain message consistency across channels

78%

My organisation has increased efforts to put the citizen at the heart of communications

46%

Key communications decisions are informed by fact-based insights into citizens

49%

My organisation has worked hard to improve digital delivery

Despite an extremely challenging period, respondents report that government communications delivery is continuing to reform and improve in many areas. Efforts to build trust are ongoing, and are essential for the public to understand and appreciate government policies. However, building trust remains hampered by the fact that public organisations rarely take the time to listen to citizens.

Government organisations lack sufficient understanding of citizen sentiment. They need to be more alert and responsive to the needs, aspirations, and fears of the public: that means investing more in understanding socio-cultural issues and trends in technology and economic fluctuations. Existing tools and techniques – such as Boolean and Vector text analytics – can help communicators better understand citizens, but their use by government communicators is not yet widespread.

Strong progress has been made in switching to digital and owned channels, but problems remain with improving media strategy and buying: there is little reported evidence that respondents are making full use of the new channels available to them. And a lack of effective communication strategy makes media planning ad hoc and unnecessarily expensive.

HOW ARE TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO 'HARD-TO-REACH' OR 'MARGINALISED' AUDIENCES DEVELOPING?

68%

Communicating with hard-to-reach audiences has become more important to my organisation

30%

Hard-to-reach audiences are a mandatory part of communication and campaign development

47%

Hard-to-reach audiences are reflected realistically in my organisation's communications

42%

Technologically-excluded communities and people with a mental disability are the audiences that my organisation communicates least effectively with

Engaging with minority groups is recognised as an increasing priority. Government communicators realise that groups such as the technologically excluded and those with mental disability need significantly greater support from public communications. But respondents also acknowledge that their understanding of other hard-to-reach audiences (such as ethnic and linguistic minorities, LGBTQIA+ groups, low-income groups, and rural communities) remains limited. To date, most actions to engage with them have been 'easy wins' such as using simpler language and community influencers. These are likely to have only limited ongoing impact.

Respondents acknowledge that connecting effectively with non-mainstream audiences requires listening, skills, money, and senior-level buy in. All to varying degrees are absent. As such, government communication teams lack the capacity to innovate in this area; while an understanding of the complexity of marginalised audiences is growing, the research suggests there is still a long way to go before these groups are communicated with effectively.

We are concerned that a number of respondents said efforts to improve engagement with hard-to-reach audiences are deliberately stymied at a senior organisational level.

TO WHAT DEGREE ARE GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS SUPPORTING SOCIAL COHESION?

64%

Society in my country/
region is now less cohesive

16%

My organisation's
communications always try to
improve community cohesion

16%

Social cohesion is a priority
issue for my organisation

78%

My organisation tries hard
to counter disinformation

The majority of respondents say that the society or region they work in is less cohesive now than before the Covid-19 pandemic – and that politicians have played a role in its disintegration. However, there is little evidence that government communications are actively fostering greater public unity.

Respondents believe that it is a legitimate role for government to encourage the respectful sharing of different perspectives; to lead more informed and constructive discussion on key topics; and to promote related issues such as media literacy. And they acknowledge that a more proactive approach to improving government communication – including better targeting of disadvantaged groups through more diverse partnerships and trusted sources – could help minimise distrust and division.

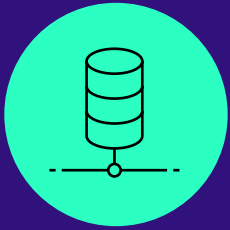
However, they are unsure whether it is a legitimate function of government communications to proactively support social cohesion. We believe strongly that this uncertainty and confusion should be addressed.

Respondents also question how effective their organisation's current approaches to tackling dis-, mis-, and mal-information are likely to be in the long term: they believe that attempts to clarify mistruths often succeed in merely amplifying them. This is dangerous and must be tackled swiftly.

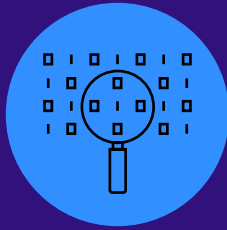


12 AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Our research identified 12 important actions for government communications functions to take. These are:



Develop sustainable data capabilities



Integrate data, research, and intelligence into reputation management



Reform cumbersome and bureaucratic ways of working



Mandate the use of communication strategies



Update the tools used to track citizen sentiment



Improve the evaluation and attribution of communication activities



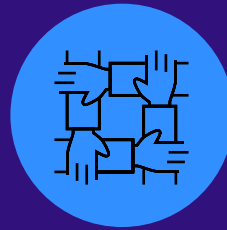
Create paid-for media strategies that are strategic, agile, and distinctive



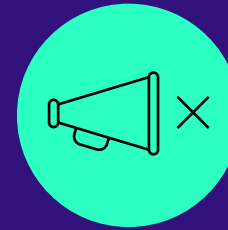
Segment audiences by psychographics as well as demographics



Plan and design communications with inclusivity front of mind



Actively support social cohesion



Introduce a mixed-effect model for tackling disinformation



Invest more in listening to citizens

More detail on all of these actions can be found in the full report, available online at www.govtpracticewpp.com.

WPP GOVERNMENT & PUBLIC SECTOR PRACTICE

The WPP Government & Public Sector Practice helps governments achieve better policy outcomes by advising policymakers and public-sector communication leaders on strategy, innovation, capability development, and global best practice. Its team of senior consultants connect public-sector clients with the best ideas and expertise in WPP's global network.

The Practice invests continuously to advance its thinking and evidence on the strategic use of communication. It partners with government organisations in over 80 countries on the policy challenges where communication can have the greatest impact on achieving policy goals, such as behaviour change, digital government, place marketing, engagement and participation, and public services recruitment.

To discuss a strategic communication challenge, improve the performance of a public-sector communication function, or to find the right team or skillset for a specific brief from within WPP's network of agencies, contact the WPP Government & Public Sector Practice at govtpractice@wpp.com.

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