

# THE LEADERS' REPORT

The evolving future of  
government communication

# CONTENTS

	Page
<b>About this research</b>	3
<b>Executive Summary</b>	6
<b>Findings</b>	8
<b>Four key questions</b>	
1. How effective are government communications?	17
2. How has the delivery of government communication developed since earlier editions of <i>The Leaders' Report</i> ?	28
3. How are traditional approaches to 'hard-to-reach' or 'marginalised' audiences developing?	42
4. To what degree are government communications supporting social cohesion?	50
<b>Conclusions</b>	60
<b>Appendix: <i>The Leaders' Report</i> series</b>	61

# ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

Welcome to *The Leaders' Report: the evolving future of government communication* – the fourth instalment of a biennial research programme looking at the effectiveness of government communication, produced by the WPP Government & Public Sector Practice (the Practice).

At the heart of this research lies the simple recognition that public policy cannot be delivered successfully without effective communication. And yet the Practice's research from 2017 onwards has identified that government communication is undervalued and under-utilised as a tool of policy delivery; that government communicators struggle to combat declining levels of trust in government; and that the structure of the government communication function frequently inhibits its ability to keep pace with how citizens communicate and engage in the 21st century.

The issues covered in this fourth instalment of *The Leaders' Report* programme stem from exploratory discussions with a number of the Practice's government clients around the world. These conversations 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?

## The report is structured as follows:

- Executive summary. If you only have 90 seconds to spare, here is where you'll find the top line analysis and recommendations stemming from this edition of *The Leaders' Report*
- Findings. If you've more time, this is where we set out in additional detail what we have found from our conversations with – and research among – government communicators, including a snapshot of key datapoints
- Viewpoints. Our point of view on a range of the most challenging issues highlighted by the research. These include the need for government communication functions to overcome bureaucracy; to better understand citizens; and to better attribute outcomes to communication activities
- Appendix. A synopsis of key developments in government communications uncovered by earlier editions of *The Leaders' Report*

Conducted with the 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.



## ABOUT OUR SAMPLE

Over half (53%) of respondents to the quantitative survey work in national or federal organisations, with three in ten (31%) working in regional, city or local government bodies.

Around two-fifths (39%) of respondents to the survey work in senior communication leadership roles, 46% in communication middle management roles, and 10% in communication strategy delivery.

All participants in the qualitative element of this research are senior public communication leaders who report to, or engage frequently with, their organisations' board and chief executive, and advise directly government ministers and other political leaders.

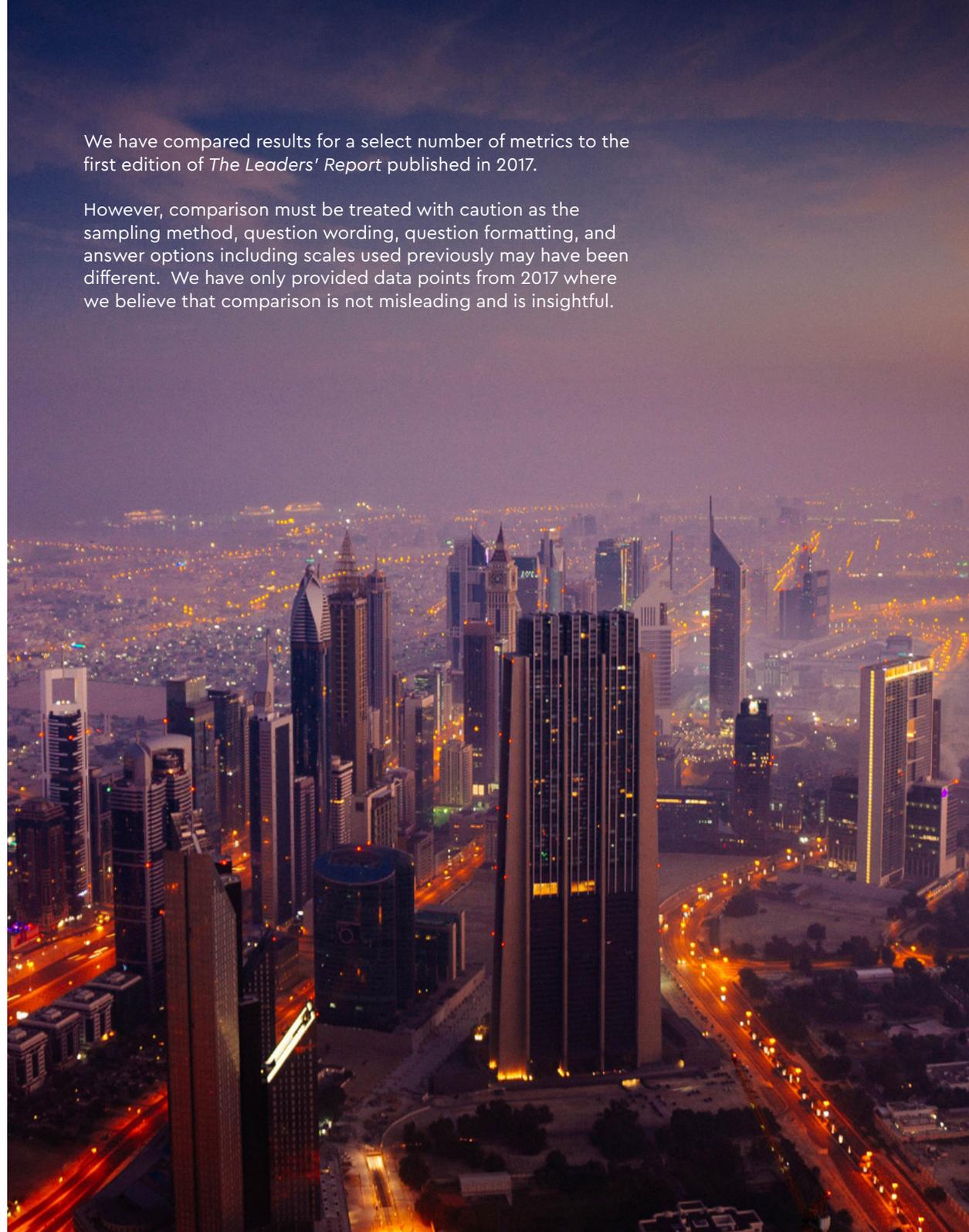
### A WORD ON WORDING

This research looks in part at the challenge of communicating with non-mainstream audiences. Respondents described these audiences using a range of words and phrases including 'marginalised', 'minority', 'hard-to-reach', 'excluded', and 'seldom heard'. While the terms used may vary, they all refer to groups that participate less fully in social, political and/or economic life.

Where practicable, quotes used are reported verbatim. On occasion, however, we have edited quotes to maintain consistency of spelling and clarity of meaning.

We have compared results for a select number of metrics to the first edition of *The Leaders' Report* published in 2017.

However, comparison must be treated with caution as the sampling method, question wording, question formatting, and answer options including scales used previously may have been different. We have only provided data points from 2017 where we believe that comparison is not misleading and is insightful.



## ABOUT US

**WPP** is the creative transformation company and the world's leading global provider of marketing and communications services. WPP creates transformative ideas and outcomes for its clients through an integrated offer of communications, experience, commerce, and technology.

**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.

**Kantar Public** is a world leading independent specialist research, evidence and advisory business providing services to government and the public realm, across all aspects of public policy. Their specialist consultants and researchers are supported by its unique global data ecosystem, advanced technologies and data science, to provide the evidence and advisory services for successful decision-making in government and for other organisations focused on delivering positive societal impact around the world. For more information, please visit [www.kantarpublic.com](http://www.kantarpublic.com).

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](mailto:govtpractice@wpp.com).



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 creatively 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
- Shifting and complex demographics
- The constant atomisation of audiences.

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

## How effective are government communications?

Government communicators across six continents who took part in the WPP Government & Public Sector Practice's latest research say that government communications are improving.

- Two-thirds (69%) say that their organisation's communications are now more effective than they were five years ago
- Eight respondents in ten (78%) believe that their organisation handled the recent health crises very or somewhat well.

But respondents also acknowledge that significant challenges remain.

- Only 18% believe their organisation uses communication to its fullest potential
- Just a fifth (22%) believe that their organisation's communications are more effective than those of the private sector.

## How has the delivery of government communications developed since earlier editions of *The Leaders' Report*?

Despite areas of tactical and executional excellence, overall strategic performance remains patchy – indeed, only 56% of respondents say that their organisation has a clear communication strategy. The delivery of too much government communication remains driven by events rather than by any longer-term strategy or game plan; too distant from and too ignorant of the needs of hard-to-reach audiences; and – many respondents say – too prone to politicisation. This is troubling.

## How are traditional approaches to 'hard-to-reach' or marginalised audiences developing?

Over two thirds (68%) of respondents say that communicating with hard-to-reach audiences has become more important to their organisation since the Covid pandemic, with two in five (40%) saying that engaging with hard-to-reach audiences is now a priority.

However, respondents say that they insufficiently understand and connect with the breadth of minority audiences they need to serve, and that active segmentation beyond ethnicity and language remains limited. Just six in ten respondents (59%) believe their organisation provides hard-to-reach audiences with the information they need.

## To what degree are government communications supporting social cohesion?

Two thirds (64%) of those who took part in the research say that the society or region they work in is less cohesive now than before the Covid-19 pandemic. They believe that government communication has a legitimate role to play in encouraging the respectful sharing of different perspectives; leading more informed and constructive discussion on sensitive issues; and promoting necessary skills such as media literacy. But they are unsure of how to do this proactively in an increasingly politicised environment.

As the Covid-19 pandemic begins to recede from prominence, this research identifies 12 key actions that the Practice believes government communication leaders must now take. These are to:



Develop sustainable data capabilities



Update the tools used to track citizen sentiment



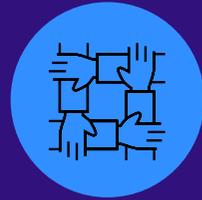
Plan and design communications with inclusivity front of mind



Integrate data, research, and intelligence into reputation management



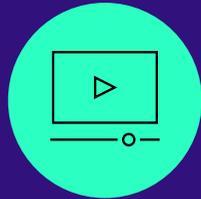
Improve the evaluation and attribution of communication activities



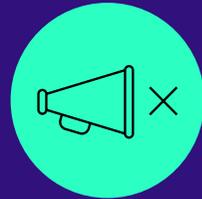
Actively support social cohesion



Reform cumbersome and bureaucratic ways of working



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



Introduce a mixed-effect model for tackling disinformation



Mandate the use of communication strategies



Segment audiences by psychographics as well as demographics



Invest more in listening to citizens

Naturally, we have views on how this could be done. So, accompanying this research summary are the thoughts and ideas of a number of colleagues, drawn from across WPP and our partners at Kantar Public. They offer some suggestions related to each key action – from introducing performance dashboards and developing stronger foresight, to better understanding Centennials and pre-bunking misinformation. We have also added in a bonus 13th key action – on creativity – that we also hope will act as stimulus for inspiration and change within your own organisations.

Every crisis has its reset moment. We hope this is one of them.



# FINDINGS

## INTRODUCTION

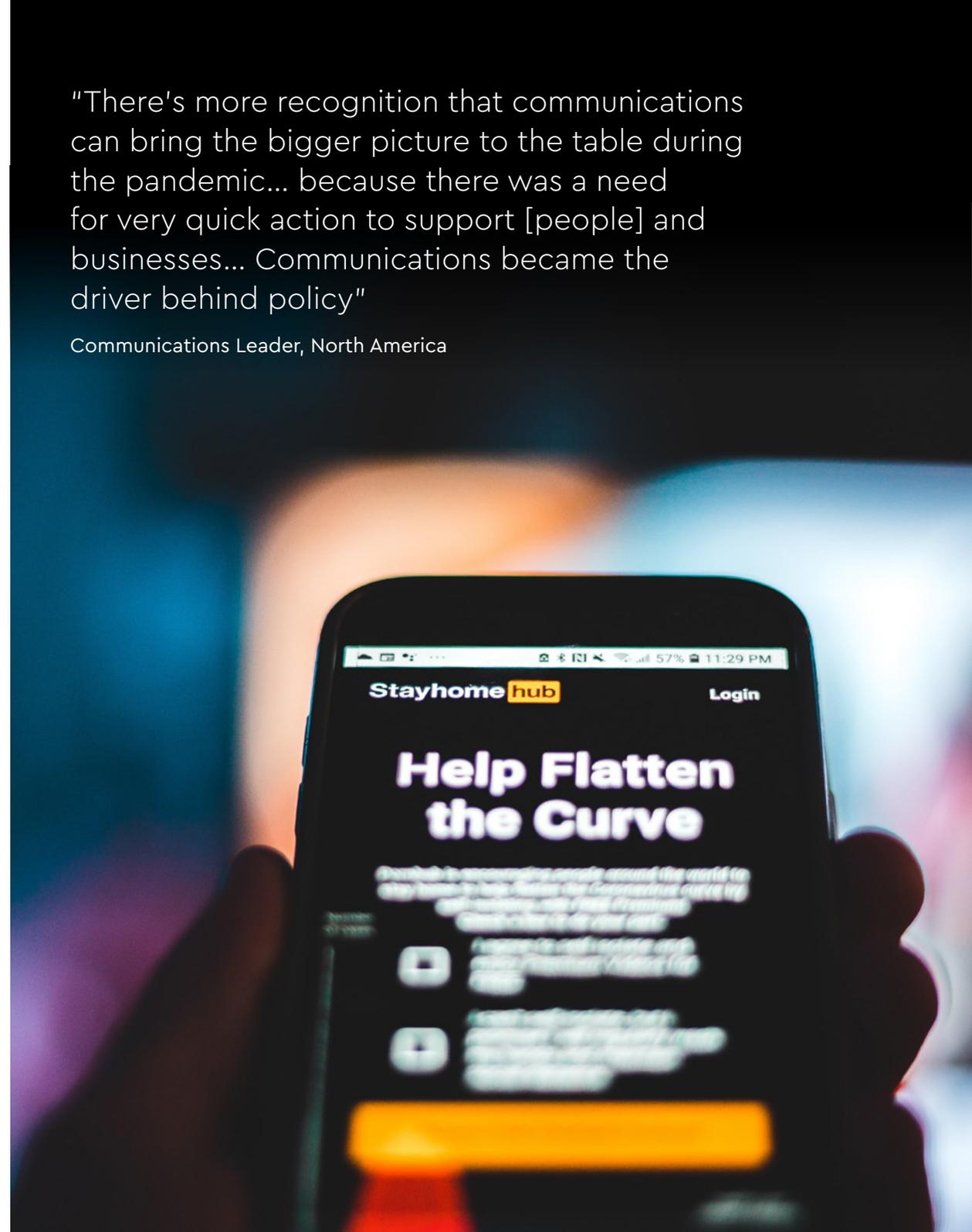
Communication can't magically turn poor policy into good policy. But history is littered with examples of good policies that failed because they were not supported by good communication – or even by any communication at all.

When the WPP Government & Public Sector Practice first began reviewing and assessing the performance of government communication six years ago, we uncovered a cadre of demoralised professionals who felt that the function was misunderstood, underused, and rarely fulfilling its potential; too distant from policy development and delivery; and too focused on short-term media management rather than longer-term behaviour change.

However, the 'perma-crises' of the last half decade have thrust the importance of two-way, integrated and citizen-focused communication centre stage: as a result, the function is now held in considerably higher regard by ministers and senior policymakers. These social, political, and economic emergencies demonstrated that good government communication – when based on scientific evidence, shaped by audience understanding, developed through behavioural insights, and delivered creatively by an appropriate messenger – can save lives.

"There's more recognition that communications can bring the bigger picture to the table during the pandemic... because there was a need for very quick action to support [people] and businesses... Communications became the driver behind policy"

Communications Leader, North America



## THE TOP LINE

### 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.

"We are facing political extremities, but we have a very strong culture and foundations. We have a very transparent ecosystem and... citizens are very well educated to see the nature and intention of communication messages"

Communications Leader, Asia

### Less positively:

- Only 18% of respondents believe their organisation is using communication to its fullest potential, compared to 41% of government communicators who responded to a similar question in 2017
- Just a fifth (22%) believe that their organisation's communications are more effective than those of the private sector. In 2017, when asked a similar question, 44% of respondents said that their organisation's communications compared well with those of business and industry
- Significant concerns remain about the ability of governments to fully understand citizen sentiment and to accurately evaluate and attribute the impact of communications activities. Just 10% of respondents completely agree that their organisation understands the sentiment among citizens
- Only a third (30%) of respondents say that all communications activity is evaluated.

"I think there has been a hiatus in real change over the past couple of years and I think communications has stood still, and when you stand still you go backwards, and I think communications has actually gone backwards. I've seen less and less evidence of any planned communications... there isn't an appetite for what would seem sensible"

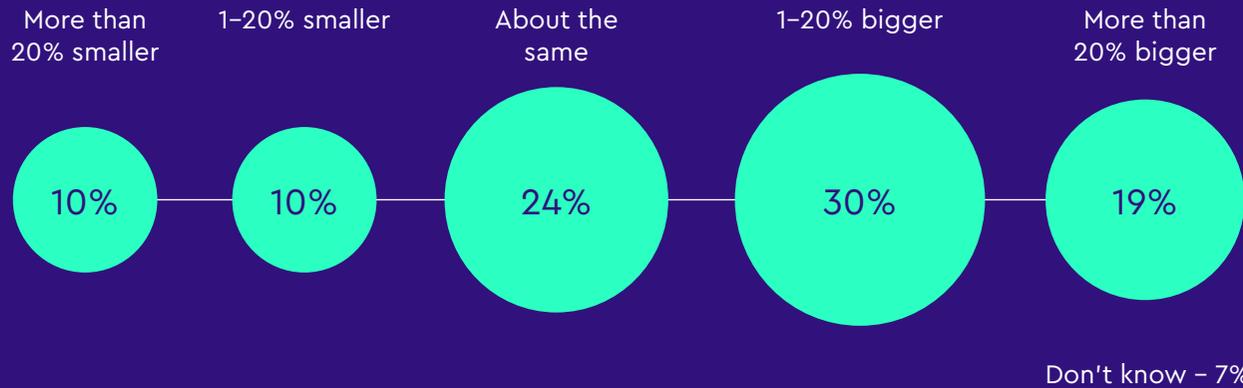
Communications Leader, Europe



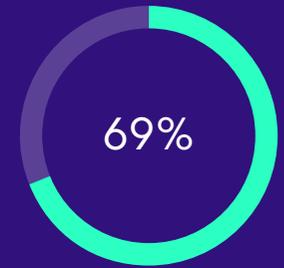
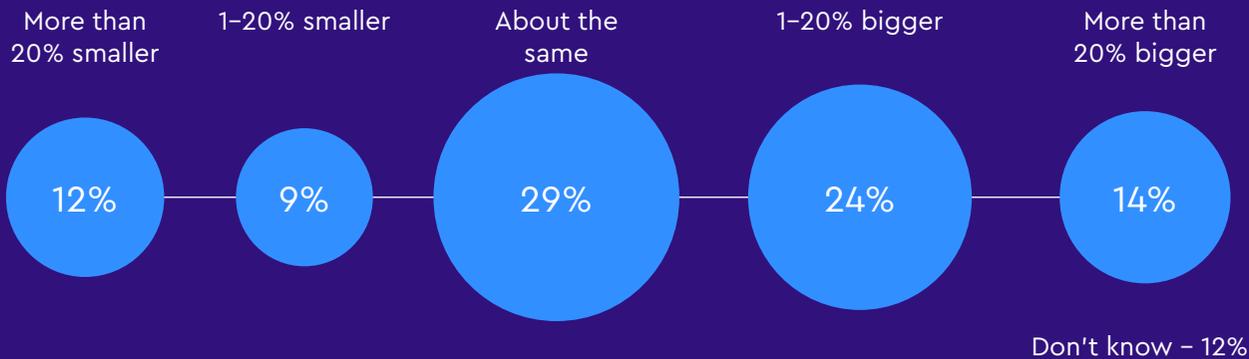
# KEY FINDINGS



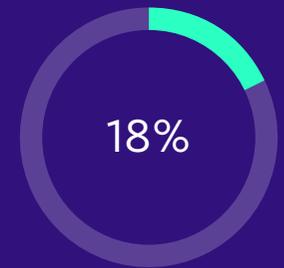
Compared with five years ago, would you say your communications department headcount is bigger or smaller?



Compared with five years ago, would you say your communications department budget is bigger or smaller?



say their organisation's communications are more effective than they were five years ago



say their organisation is using communication to its fullest potential



say their organisation's communications are more effective than private sector communications

# VIEWPOINT

## THE PUBLIC SECTOR NEEDS TO DEVELOP STRONGER DATA STRATEGIES



**Di Mayze**

Global Head of Data & Artificial Intelligence  
WPP



Government communicators tell us that – despite improvements – they fear their work is falling behind the best of the private sector. Part of this is to do with data. No organisation – public or private – can thrive without understanding the data it needs to collect; how it will store and use it; and what it tells them about the services they need to deliver and the audiences they need to engage. Yet too many respondents work without an overarching communication strategy – and without the data they need to better understand audiences.

Despite the disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic, the commercial sector kept a resolute focus on data. As a result, there are now clearer trajectories around data volume, variety, and value. The role that data plays in business growth has been identified. There is a greater understanding of how comfortable the public is about the ways in which 'their' data is collected and processed, and the skills that businesses need to optimise it.

No organisation has all the data it needs. But those that will thrive most over the next decade are the ones that build sustainable data capabilities. In the private sector, many have already invested in data literacy and culture-building programmes. They have implemented a privacy-by-design approach to its collection and use. They know that investment in data infrastructure is a long-term mission, and that the opportunity costs of failing to progress their data maturity are high.

The public sector needs to catch up by developing stronger data strategies and answering some key decisions, such as: should data collection be minimised, or should the sector collect as much as it can? Should data be centralised or decentralised? Should first-party data be kept for competitive advantage, monetised, or shared with like-minded partners? What are the unintended

consequences of driving particular KPIs? And what role will AI play in the future collection and use of data across the sector?

We're already seeing a 'data for good' movement emerging. We've seen the growth of data unions where individuals agree to share their data with organisations that match their values. And in the USA, we've seen discussions about charging externality taxes for data storage. Whether this comes to fruition or not is irrelevant: just imagine you're charged a tax on the data you hold. Suddenly it's easier to focus on what data is creating and adding value. There's no going back to the wild west of hoarding as much personal data as possible. The future is not about the volume of data but about the skills, creativity, and thought applied to using it.

The public sector must embrace the fact that data will play an increasingly positive role in creating sustainable organisations, a more diverse workforce, and a fairer society.

Over the next ten years, data will become synonymous with innovation and creativity. And it will be at the heart of an increasingly humanised relationship between citizens and the state. Without more action on data now, the public sector risks being further left behind.

*From ethics to culture, see WPP's latest thinking on how organisations can most effectively and responsibly use data and AI at [www.wpp.com/wpp-iq/2022/data-and-ai](http://www.wpp.com/wpp-iq/2022/data-and-ai)*

## PRIORITIES

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

2023	2017
<b>54%</b> Protecting and enhancing your organisation's reputation	<b>51%</b> Protecting and enhancing your organisation's reputation
<b>41%</b> Engaging and consulting directly with citizens	<b>36%</b> Explaining public policy
<b>40%</b> Preparing for and managing crises	<b>31%</b> Engaging and consulting directly with citizens
<b>40%</b> Better engaging with hard-to-reach audiences	<b>22%</b> Ensuring public support for the government
<b>33%</b> Explaining public policy	<b>21%</b> Preparing for and managing crises

The top communication priority cited by respondents at middle manager level is to protect and enhance their organisation's reputation – this was also the highest priority when we asked this question in 2017. They report that the requirement for short-term and tactical media management frequently eclipses the need to effect long-term strategic behaviour change.

"The appointment to senior roles of people who are more political has meant there is more of an emphasis on political management, rather than on good system-based communications"

Communications Leader, Australasia

Senior communication leaders were more likely to say that their organisation's top communications priority is to explain and help deliver policies, initiatives, and programmes to the public. The WPP Government & Public Sector Practice is concerned that this disconnect indicates tension within communication functions about its legitimate role.

The second highest priority cited by respondents at middle manager level was engaging with and consulting directly with citizens, with the third a tie between preparing for and managing crises, and better engaging with 'hard-to-reach' audiences. Only 33% of middle managers say that explaining public policy is a top priority. This suggests that one of the biggest concerns identified by them in 2017 – that communication was under-utilised as a tool of, and too detached from, policy delivery – persists.

"[We] lack clear objectives, lack a link between policy and communication. We have a weak strategic communications function [and are] unwilling to invest in getting and retaining proper strategic thinkers"

Communications Manager, Europe



# VIEWPOINT

## DATA, RESEARCH, AND INTELLIGENCE ARE ALL CENTRAL TO YOUR REPUTATION



**John McTernan**

Senior Adviser  
BCW Global



I once worked on a project with a government investigating their horizon scanning capacity. Senior bureaucrats, advisers and Cabinet members were interviewed about what they spent the most time on and what they were most worried about. Invariably, they said that most of their time was spent on the pressing issues of the present, but their greatest concerns were about the challenges of the future: technology, climate change, and demography.

Pressures like these, where the daily grind drives out everything else, are a common experience of leaders in all fields – and led management guru Peter Drucker to coin the aphorism: “Culture eats strategy for breakfast”. Everyone who has taken out a gym membership in January only to slump back onto the couch in March knows exactly what he meant.

Businesses and organisations invest a lot of time and money in strategies to protect their reputation, only to find themselves in danger of being driven off course by the day to day. What is the best way to stay the course? Smart use of data and research. And that use should be active not passive.

A dashboard is helpful – it shows you whether you are going too slow or too fast, and red lights can warn of danger. But the danger is it is only a mirror reflecting what is going on when what you need is a lamp that illuminates the complexities and possibilities of challenges.

The best research gives that rich reputational picture to leaders. In politics, for example, the headline quantitative polls tell you where the public is, while the qualitative research of focus groups tells you what lines and messages can persuade voters to move from where they are to where politicians would like them to be.

In the end, just as every conversation is a focus group of one if you listen hard enough, so many data points may be relevant. It's a key skill of modern leaders to the teams and partnerships that bring them data, research and intelligence and a strategy that generates insights – and acts on them.

## CHALLENGES

Participants were asked to select their organisation's top three communication challenges.

2023	2017
<b>51%</b> Overcoming organisational bureaucracy	<b>54%</b> Overcoming organisational bureaucracy
<b>47%</b> Lack of budget to deliver the communications my organisation requires	<b>37%</b> Lack of budget to deliver the communications my organisation requires
<b>42%</b> Engaging with hard-to-reach audiences	<b>31%</b> Collaborating with other parts of my organisation
<b>33%</b> Accessing and using all the relevant data my organisation has	<b>30%</b> Overcoming organisational hierarchy
<b>33%</b> Overcoming organisational hierarchy	<b>25%</b> Lack of required skills and ability in communications staff

In 2017, 54% of respondents said that overcoming red tape, rules, and regulations was the biggest challenge they faced – with outdated hierarchies, overly-bureaucratic ways of working, and a lack of risk taking inhibiting their freedom to be creative, innovate and improve.

A similar percentage of respondents – 51% – continue to cite the need to overcome bureaucracy as their biggest challenge. They say that rigid structural silos, a lack of defined processes and protocols, and multiple layers of sign off are significant inhibitors to progress.

"Bureaucracy and outdated processes. Senior officials [do] not understand how the world now communicates – they are too detached from our audiences"

Communications Leader, North America

Lack of budget was cited as the second biggest challenge faced by government communicators, and engaging with hard-to-reach audiences the third.

When asked in 2017, 20% of respondents said that they expected their organisation's communications function to be bigger in terms of headcount in five years' time. Four in ten (40%) predicted a larger budget.

Nearly half (49%) of this year's respondents report a larger headcount compared to five years ago, and 38% report a larger budget. This increase is most frequently attributed to the unprecedented demand that the Covid-19 pandemic placed upon public communication.

However, respondents argue that this bolstered capacity and investment is insufficient to meet the enhanced requirement to respond at pace to crises; to tackle growing public distrust in official channels; and to counter the rapid growth of dis-, mis-, and mal-information since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.

"Resources and funding is always a challenge. We have no shortage of programmes; we have great programmes [...] but all those programmes cost money. If we had unlimited resources, we could do all kinds of incredible things"

Communications Leader, North America

## AN ORGANISATIONAL WHOLE-OF-SYSTEM APPROACH TO ADDRESS CHALLENGING BUREAUCRATIC WAYS OF WORKING



**Khairul Hilmi Bin Mohd Khair**

Senior Consultant  
(Change Management)  
Kantar Public, Singapore

**KANTAR PUBLIC**

Balancing the tension between protecting and enhancing an organisation's reputation may result in increased bureaucracy as a way of "coping" with the competing needs. Bureaucracy "safeguards" typically appear as rigid and controlled ways of working where public officers may feel limited in their autonomy at work. Further, organisational hierarchies with multiple layers of approvals can slow down the decision-making process, while poor information cascading can result in a lack of clarity of public officers' role and purpose.

While bureaucratic processes stem from the need to control and gatekeep, they are associated with numerous negative outcomes, including slow progress; delays in decision-making and approvals; lack of innovation and creativity; and a disengaged workforce. Moreover, organisations spend more time resolving internal issues, including differences and disputes, competition for resources, lack of coordination and collaboration.

To successfully address an organisation's communication challenges requires a whole-of-system approach rather than siloed working. It requires us to question the alignment of our work to the organisation's mission and goals; the capabilities our organisation has to achieve these goals; the manner we organise ourselves at work that impacts the layers of authority; and the distribution of work. These are in addition to the type of organisational policies and processes, behaviours, and achievements we reward our employees; and the capability and mindset of the employees we attract, select, and retain.

From an organisational design perspective, public service leaders should consider the following factors to navigate and find the balance between bureaucracy at the

workplace, adopting a more public consultative approach, and an engaged workforce:

### Structure:

- How is power being distributed in your organisational structure?
- Are the layers in the structure designed to achieve your strategy and goals?
- Are employees reporting to the appropriate supervisors who can manage their performance and development?
- How many levels of approval/sign off are required before work can be completed? Is there a way to streamline the levels to make decision-making more efficient?
- Are different levels in the organisation clear about their accountability and decision-making authority?

### Processes:

- Are your organisational processes enabling or constraining collaboration between the different teams and with citizens?
- Have you considered eliminating or redesigning processes that requires employees to work in silos?
- Are you certain of the specific activities in your processes that require inputs from your employees or citizens?

Considering these questions – along with those relating to strategy, capabilities, rewards, and people – will address the systemic organisational issues. In doing so, we may be able to reduce bureaucracy, increase productivity, and improve engagement

## FOUR KEY QUESTIONS

The following pages look more closely at these and wider issues, in particular by asking the following questions raised by the Practice's government partners:

1

How effective are government communications?

2

How has the delivery of government communication developed since earlier editions of *The Leaders' Report*?

3

How are traditional approaches of 'hard-to-reach' or 'marginalised' audiences developing?

4

To what degree are government communications supporting social cohesion?



# HOW EFFECTIVE ARE GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS?

In 2017, the first edition of *The Leaders' Report* found clear shortcomings in the effectiveness of government communications. Just half of respondents (51%) said their organisation had a clear communication strategy, for example. And just over one in seven had never received any form of training in communication or marketing.

Two years later in 2019, we found that there remained a clear absence of strategy and frameworks to help governments rebuild trust effectively with citizens; and that government communicators lacked the skills and confidence to engage effectively and creatively with citizens. Citizens' disappointment with government transparency and delivery was undermining the efficacy of public communication and engagement. And a lack of evaluation beyond communication outputs made the effectiveness of government communications difficult to gauge.

So how has the effectiveness of government communications changed since then?



## MAKING BEST USE OF A CRISIS

Despite the last half decade being defined by ongoing crises, the majority (69%) of respondents believe that their organisation's communications are now more effective than they were five years ago:

- 78% of respondents say that since the start of the pandemic their organisation's communications have helped manage public health crises well
- 59% of respondents say that since the start of the pandemic their organisation's communications have provided hard-to-reach audiences with the information they need
- 65% of respondents say that since the start of the pandemic their organisation's communications have supported social cohesion well.

Overall, respondents believe that their organisations' communications function has performed most effectively in the following areas:

- Handling crises
- Providing accessible information
- Delivering digital services
- Managing social media.

This is perhaps unsurprising: the pandemic provided a singular policy and narrative focus to communication strategy and delivery that had seldom existed previously. And it required population-level engagement at speed – most frequently through online channels.

"I think we thought five years ago we were working well across government, but with Covid, with floods, with bushfires, really through crises, those silos have been broken down much more... we have a common purpose, more frequently we have a really authentic coming together and coordinated delivery of services which is what customers expect government to do"

Communications Leader, Australasia



## THE NEED FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

However, just 22% of respondents believe that their organisation's communications are more effective than those of the private sector. And they remain particularly critical of communications effectiveness with regard to:

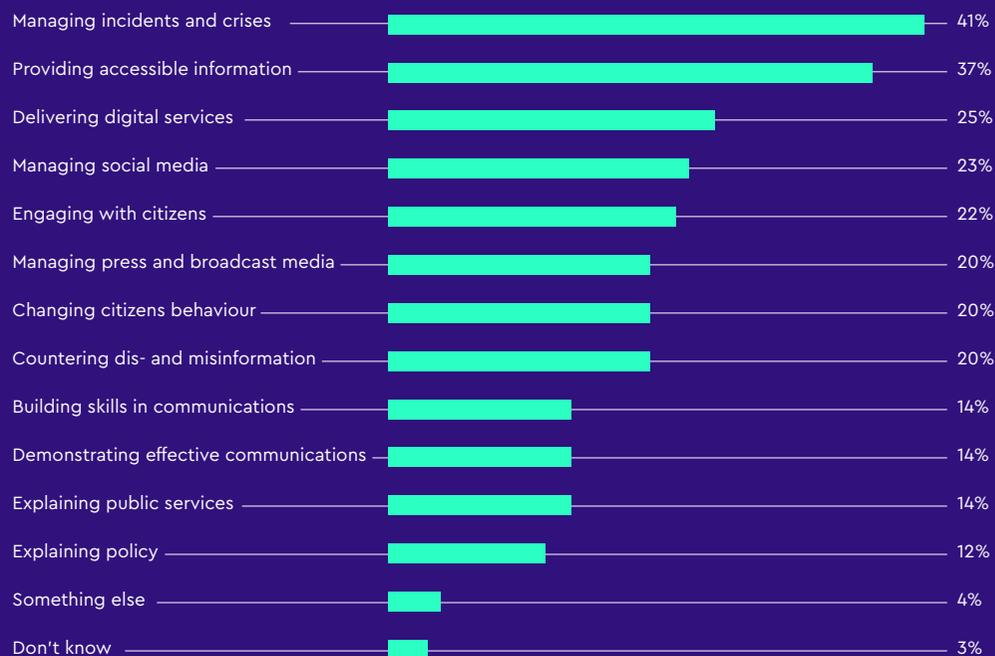
- Explaining public policy
- Improving access to public services
- Demonstrating the efficacy of communications
- The ability to change public behaviours
- Building skills within the communication function.

Senior communication leaders argue that performance continues to be limited by a lack of investment and skills in key areas including digital, data, and evaluation; that – beyond media management – politicians and senior policymakers often fail to use communication strategically; and that when longer-term strategies are developed, political interference can weaken their delivery.

"Communications are still seen as an overhead and thought of primarily by ministers in terms of their media profile, reputation of government, and their kind of social media presence. [We] are not instinctively thought of as an operational lever to deliver policy outcomes"

Communications Leader, Europe

Since the start of the Covid pandemic (March 2020), which of the following areas of communications do you think your organisation has performed most successfully in?



How would you best describe communications currently between your organisation and the public?



## STRATEGIC WEAKNESSES

Half (56%) of respondents say that their organisation has a clear communication strategy – an increase of just 5 percentage points on 2017. And while two thirds (67%) say they know what the top priority communications objectives are for their organisation, this is down 4 percentage points from our findings in 2017. This is disappointing to report.

"Having communications at the end of the line doesn't work. How do you align communications, align engagement, align strategic thinking, to enable the end point to be much more effective? How do we figure out a way to not only fix that process, but to take people on a journey as to why we're fixing that process? What benefit do they get in dealing with a strategic communications person?"

Communications Leader, Australasia

Two thirds (66%) describe their organisation's communications as primarily one way (top down, from the organisation to citizen), with only a quarter (27%) describing their organisations' communications as two way.

Again, this suggests a decline in effectiveness: when asked a similar question in 2017, 66% of respondents said their organisation's communications were one way; 34% said their communications were two way.

"80–90% of communication budgets are spent on talking...I'd like to see better use of the tools that are now available and we've got better tools than ever before with some of the machine analysis things we can do...I'd like to see that inform policy...not only will it make better policy, but it will make more acceptable policy because if people get a say in policy they're more inclined to go along with it"

Communications Leader, Australasia





**Matt Kemp**

Strategy Director  
VMLY&R, UK



Given the extraordinary pressures faced by government communicators in recent years, it is no surprise that over half of respondents in our research said their organisation lacks a proper communication strategy. In times of pressing need, the space to define a strategy may be considered a luxury. It is, of course, a necessity.

A proper strategy grounds communications within the policy mix. It acts as a north star within the organisation, helping guide practitioners on the actions to take in order to achieve their policy goals through communication. Just as importantly, strategies help understand what actions not to take, filtering out fewer effective options in order to focus on what will make a disproportionate difference. Being precise and deliberate about how the communication will work supports the mitigation of unintended negative consequences, as communication is being developed.

To achieve this, your strategy should use all available data to deeply understand the behavioural problem to solve, the factors influencing the behaviour, and the most powerful ways of using communication to change them. At their best, communication strategies combine a logical, rigorous, and evidence-led approach to understanding behaviour with the ability to view a problem from an as-yet-unseen perspective; the combination of which creates motivating, effective communication.

But the value of strategy comes not only from clear guidance before communications activity is undertaken; a thorough strategy will continue to add value long after the activity has ended.

Strong strategic foundations are a vital part of monitoring, optimising, and evaluating activity. Precisely understanding the intended effect of a piece of communication gives clear guidance to practitioners on how it should be measured. Understanding measurement allows for accurate optimisation if the results are not as expected. Most importantly, a proper communication strategy creates the foundations for evaluation. It helps practitioners understand how, when, where and, critically, why communications have been effective, together with the value they have created for the public purse.

Taking a robust approach to evaluation has a compounding effect; changing behaviour is rarely a one-off process, and an evidence-based build from a clear strategic framework can inform decision-making for years to come. No matter how situations and behaviours change, a deep understanding of where you've been is the best starting point to understand where you need to go next.

When done well, a strategy is compelling yet deceptively simple. It will express months of thinking and be the starting point for years' worth of communications activity in a few short sentences. Starting can be daunting, and the temptation to make strategy a process of constant addition is ever-present.

However, time spent making clear decisions, articulating them precisely, and steadfastly removing the superfluous means they are much more likely to galvanise your organisation into action. Strategy is worth little unless it is acted upon. It's high time more government communication departments got in on the act.

## CHALLENGING BEHAVIOURS

62% of respondents say their organisation has paid more attention to quickly changing public behaviours – one of the key objectives of pandemic communication. But just one in five (20%) believe that their organisation has changed behaviour successfully.

"There is a lack of behavioural expertise to really encourage people [what] to 'do'. We often ask ourselves the question: for what purpose do we communicate?"

Communications Leader, Europe

Respondents highlight problems with short-term and often politicised responses to the pandemic; a reliance upon simplistic nudges that fail to deliver longer-term population-level change; a lack of understanding of citizen sentiment and behaviours; and the public's lack of trust in politicians to "make the right calls".

"If you've got good policies, unless you're telling people about them [...] then that naturally leads to a distrust in government [...] and that does isolate people. You can sense a growing frustration among young people [...] they're trying to find someone who will listen to them"

Communications Leader, Europe

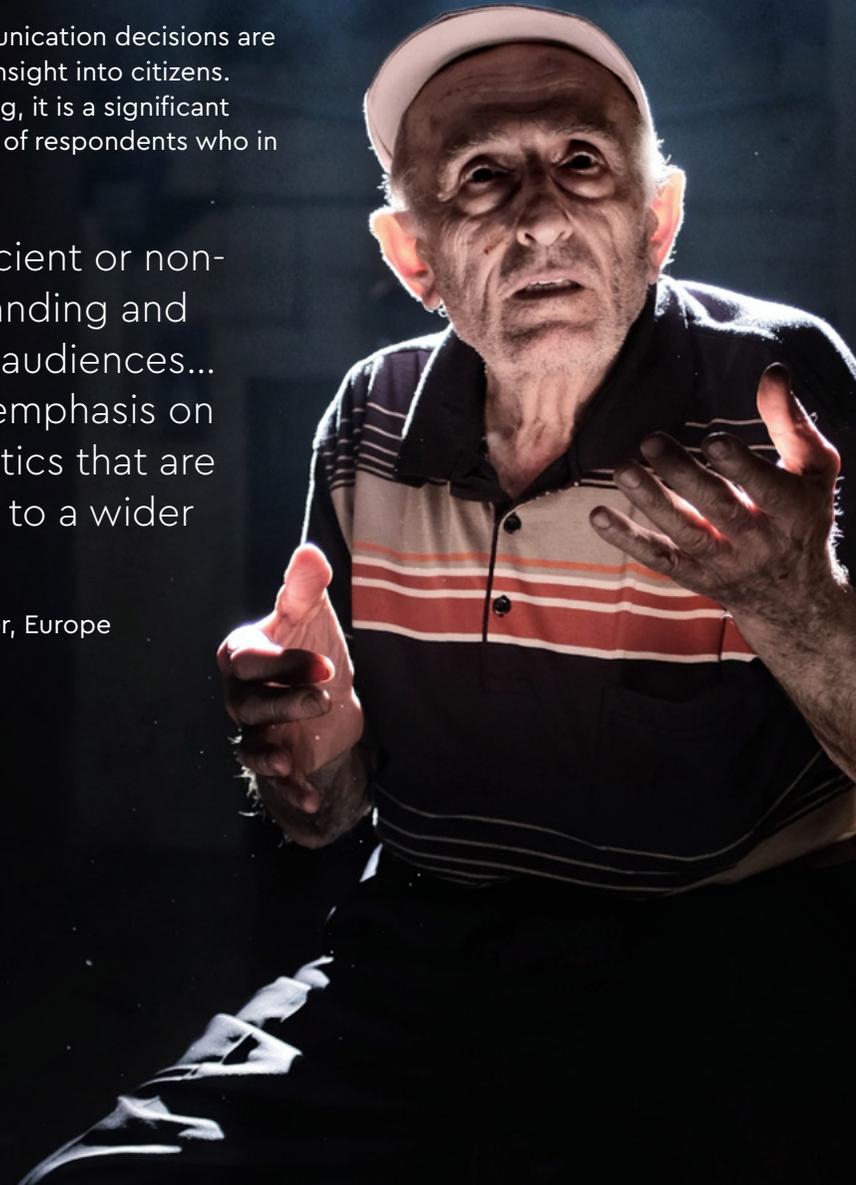
## UNDERSTANDING AUDIENCES

Only half of respondents (50%) believe that their organisation understands sentiment among citizens – this is exactly the same percentage as in 2017, and shows that no sustained improvement in this area has been made.

Only 47% say that communication decisions are informed by fact-based insight into citizens. While this is disappointing, it is a significant improvement on the 31% of respondents who in 2017 said the same.

"[We have] inefficient or non-existent understanding and differentiation of audiences... with an abiding emphasis on figures and statistics that are of limited appeal to a wider audience"

Communications Manager, Europe



## CITIZEN SENTIMENT: SETTING THE FOUNDATION OF A COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY



**Per Söderpalm**

Head of Media Analysis  
Kantar Public, Nordic region



**Ulla von Lochow**

Media Analysis System and  
Process Manager  
Kantar Public, Nordic region

Just 10% of respondents completely agree their organisation understands the sentiment among citizens. Undoubtedly many are making communications decisions without sufficient knowledge of public opinions on key topics and, as a result, risk investment in wasted efforts.

Citizen sentiment can be difficult to synthesize, and at times confronting for stakeholders to hear. However, developing an ongoing practice of listening and understanding can ensure campaign efforts are grounded in strategies that are set up to succeed. Based on decades of experience in supporting public sector organisations, we recommend the following disciplined approach.

### **Sentiment tracking – explore not just opinions, but how they are being shaped**

Understanding citizen sentiment requires evidence from three dimensions of the topic or issue to get a comprehensive understanding. Opinion polling alone does not provide enough context for where sentiment is moving, how it's being influenced, nor indicators for future message strategy.

#### **1. Public opinion**

First, you need a robust understanding of how the public thinks about a topic. What is the awareness around the topic? How important is it to them? Is there public support for your position on a topic or issue? What arguments are considered strong? And weak?

#### **2. Media agenda**

Second, the public opinion about a topic is often formed by how it's portrayed in media, the main source of news. How large is the debate? What is the tonality towards your position? What arguments have been used? Which players are most active in the debate? What is the gap between the media and public agenda?

#### **3. Trust and Reputation**

Finally, the reputation of your organisation will affect your ability to get the message across. If citizens don't trust you, they won't listen to what you have to say. What is your reputation among the public? How strong is the trust for you related to the topic or issue?

It's not enough to know what the public thinks, the media agenda and your reputation are other key factors to take into consideration. It is by approaching topics and the forming of public opinion in this holistic way that public sector communicators have the best chance to be successful.

For more on efficient approaches to analysing and tracking citizen sentiment over time, learn more about Kantar Public's work at: <https://www.kantarpublic.com/our-work/sentiment>.

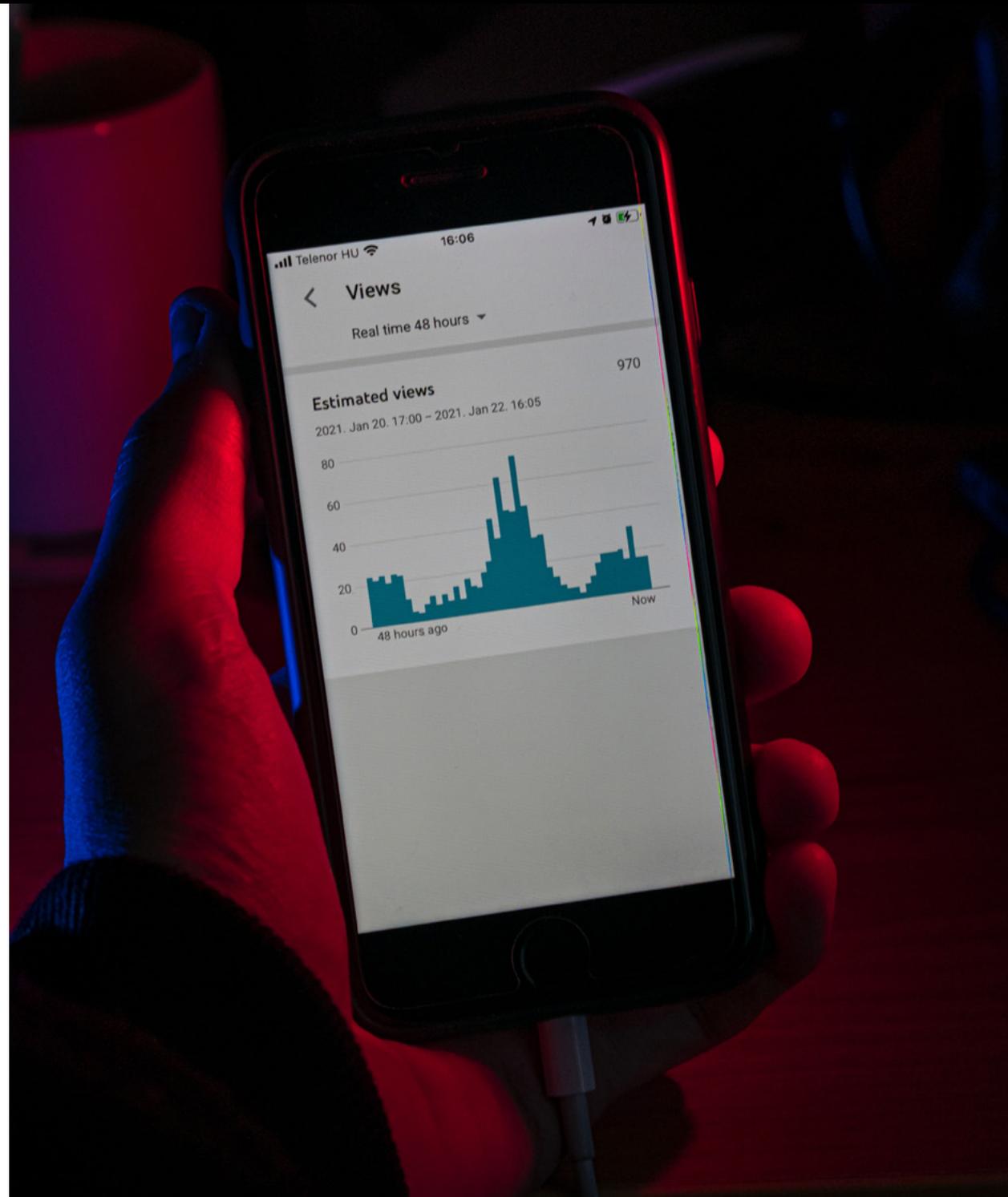
## OUTPUTS OR OUTCOMES?

Just 30% of respondents say that all of their organisation's communications activity is evaluated. Less than half (46%) say they have the right insights and research available to measure communications effectiveness.

When evaluation of communications activity is done, only 41% say that their organisation uses the most appropriate metrics. Half (50%) say that communications are generally evaluated against communication outputs rather than policy outcomes. Just four in ten (40%) say that evaluation of communications activity is holistic (that it integrates findings and draws conclusions from a range of data points).

"Lack of clear objectives, lack of clarity on success metrics or what good looks like, lack of interest from implementing teams in actually defining what success would be and measuring performance against it"

Communications Manager, Europe



# HOW EFFECTIVE ARE GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS?

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

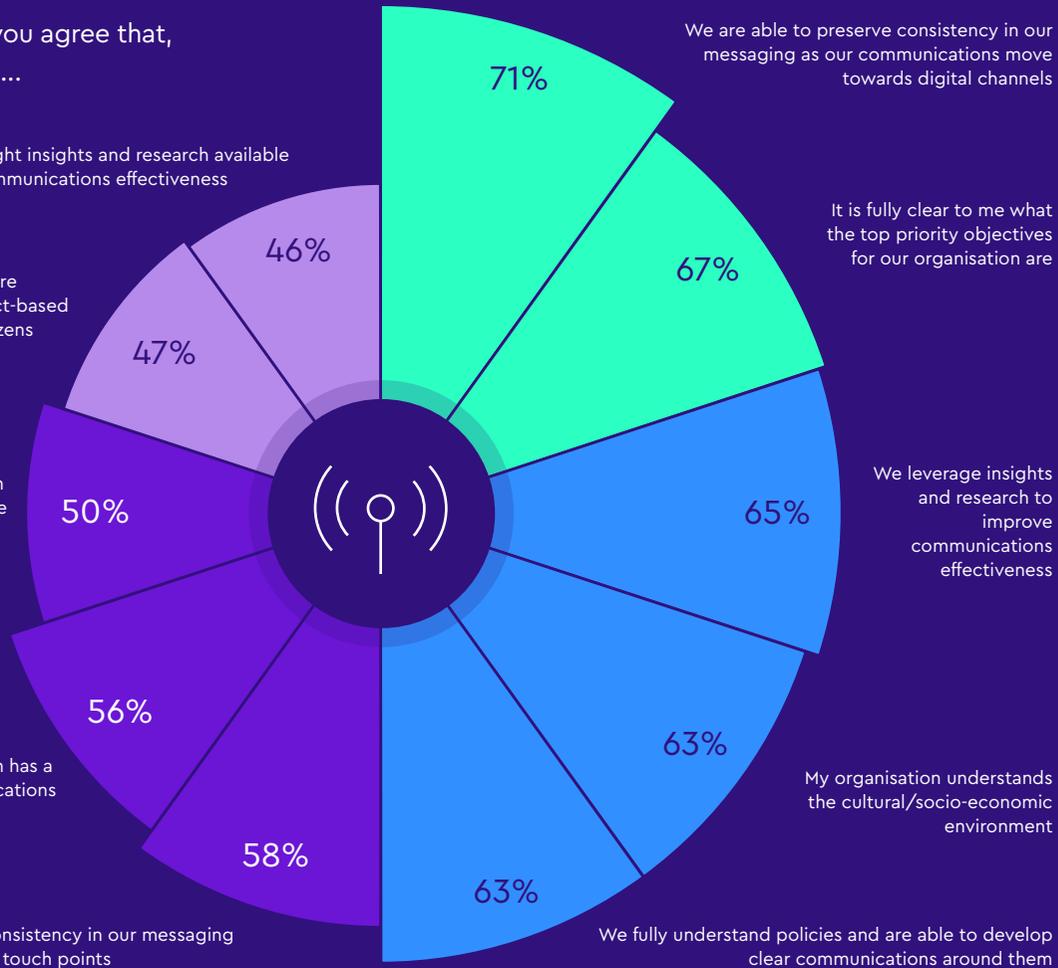
We have the right insights and research available to measure communications effectiveness

Key decisions are informed by fact-based insight into citizens

My organisation understands the sentiment among citizens

My organisation has a clear communications strategy

We maintain consistency in our messaging across multiple touch points



We are able to preserve consistency in our messaging as our communications move towards digital channels

It is fully clear to me what the top priority objectives for our organisation are

We leverage insights and research to improve communications effectiveness

My organisation understands the cultural/socio-economic environment

We fully understand policies and are able to develop clear communications around them

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

My organisation should put more effort into evaluating the effectiveness of its communications activities

All communications activity has clear objectives and a shared understanding of what success looks like

My organisation knows what good communications look like, and we have benchmarks for this

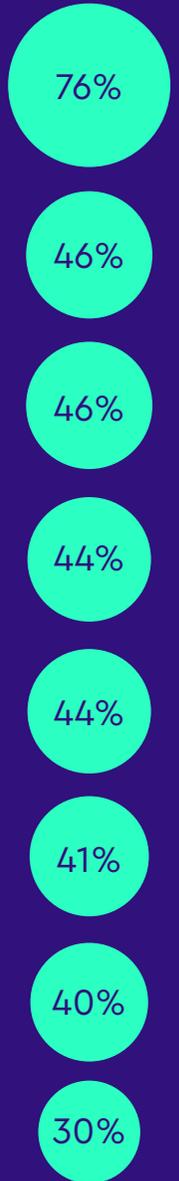
Learnings from evaluation of past communications activity always feeds into future communications activities

Evaluation of communications activity is conducted by experts in evaluation

Evaluation of communications activity uses the most appropriate metrics

Evaluation of communications activity is holistic, by which we mean that it integrates findings and draws conclusions from a range of data sources

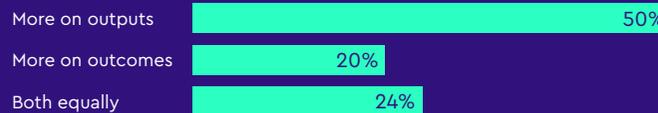
All communications activity is evaluated



To what extent do you agree or disagree that, in your organisation all communications activity is evaluated?



Does the evaluation of your communications activities focus more on outputs, or on outcomes?





**Shawn O'Neal**

North American CEO  
Gain Theory



Why would any politician or policymaker make decisions based on insufficient knowledge and data? Like their counterparts in the private sector, they wouldn't. Yet too many government marketing campaigns are still launched without analysing the past to inform the future, and without any real attempt at attribution.

Planning for future uncertainty is a hot topic. It's especially true now as we continue to deal with the fallouts from the Covid-19 pandemic: dramatic changes in citizen, consumer and employee behaviour, shifting media consumption, supply chain challenges, and economic upheaval.

History shows that organisational resilience depends on adaptability and decisiveness in disruptive times – so using the right data and evidence are crucial. Yet many organisations base decision-making on hindsight (understanding what happened) and insight (understanding why it happened.)

Today, hindsight and insight are no longer sufficient to ensure you make the best decisions – particularly when it comes to marketing. You also need foresight, which takes uncertainty and turns it into manageable risk. For example, it considers what is most and least likely to happen, and reveals the signposts and probabilities of them happening.

### Diagnosis before cure

First, however, good decision-making requires an understanding of the types of challenges you're likely to face. Before you can cure, you must first diagnose.

Is your organisation or policy area facing uncertainty caused by fake news? Is there volatility resulting from an unpredictable supply chain? Are regulatory changes making things more complex operationally? Knowing the type of challenge, or combination of challenges, you face is the essential first step.

You then need access to faster and smarter insights that are unified into a single version of the truth to overcome these challenges. In other words, you need to understand what has happened, why it happened, and what to do next. Hand on heart, is this what you do in your organisation?

### The importance of foresight

Foresight is key to a unified version of the truth as it enables decision-makers to war-game and simulate, scenario plan and optimise, identify and track leading indicators, and understand the risk and impact of "wild card" events. Here at Gain Theory, for example, we have a rich arsenal of foresight techniques:

- Future Back Thinking
- Delphi Method
- War Gaming Simulations
- Forecasting
- Lead Indicators
- Scenario Planning
- Trend Analysis.

We fuse these foresight techniques with hindsight and insight across all sources and levers of performance to accelerate growth or effectiveness for our clients. By identifying long-term strategic opportunities and answering near-term tactical performance questions as part of a single measurement system, we help organisations to put data-informed insights at the heart of every investment decision.

This approach enables organisations to gain confidence in making decisions that are based on more accurate assumptions, improving their ability to navigate uncertainty, and setting a path to more sustainable – and long term – delivery.



## SUMMARY: HOW EFFECTIVE ARE GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS?

The Practice is pleased to see that 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, of course, encouraging. However, key weaknesses remain.

Strategic performance remains patchy. Significant improvement is needed around 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. Our view is 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: the fact that only 20% of respondents believe that their organisation has changed behaviour successfully – despite the billions of dollars invested in behaviour change communication during the pandemic – should act as a clear motivator to creativity and efficacy.

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

Communicators say they are now more likely to be seated at, or have greater access to, the top table and organisational decision-makers. However, they are concerned about the increased politicisation of government communications and interference in the execution of communications. The Practice is concerned that continued politicisation of communications may lead governments into a doom loop of distrust that they will struggle to recover from.

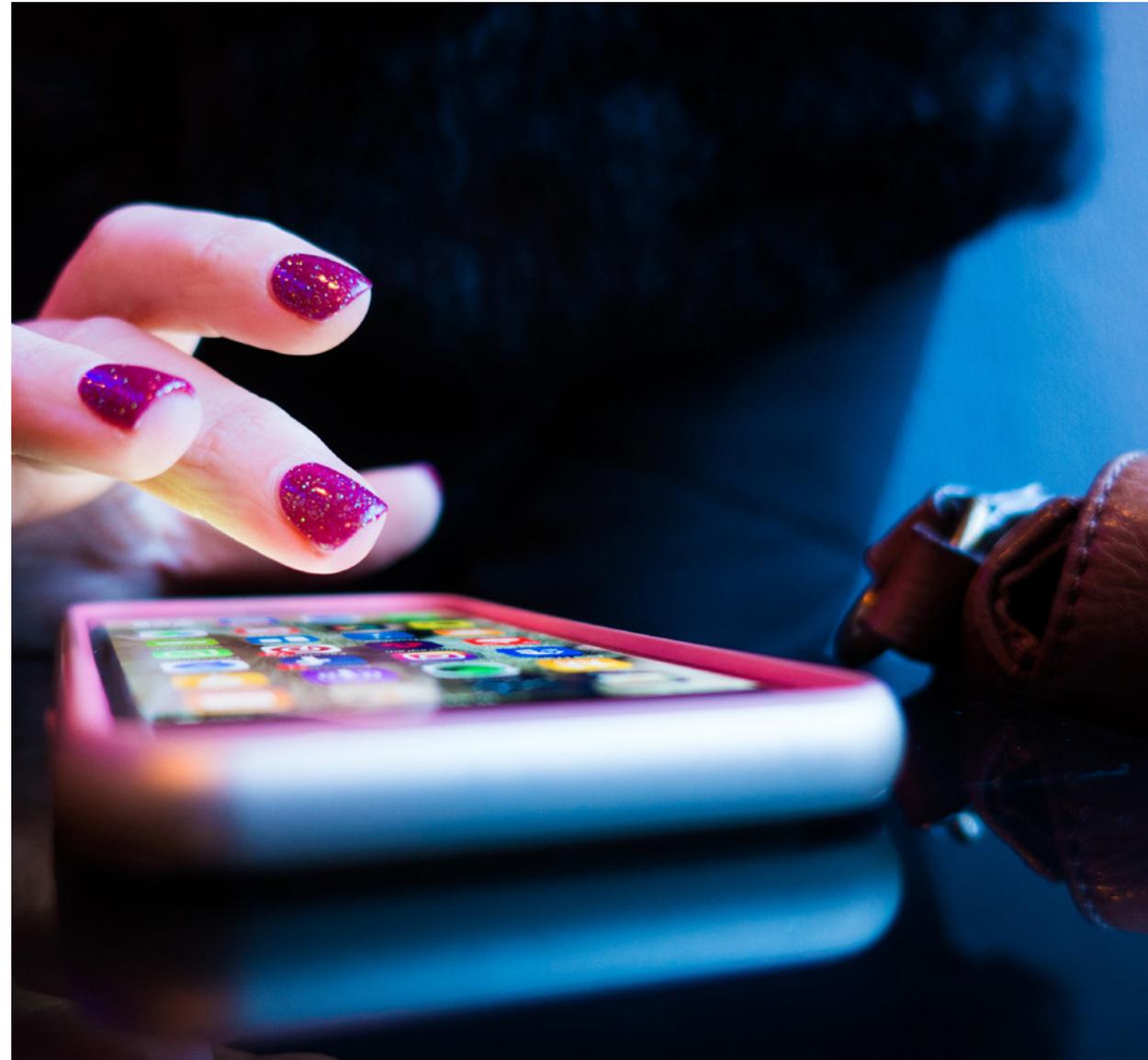
# HOW HAS THE DELIVERY OF GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION DEVELOPED SINCE EARLIER EDITIONS OF *THE LEADERS' REPORT*?

Although the Covid pandemic improved their access to senior politicians and public-service leaders, respondents say that their organisation's marketing and communication function is still too distant from policy development and delivery, and that much of their communications output is still too broadcast in approach.

Two years ago, we identified:

- Nine key emerging social issues that we believed governments and public-sector bodies needed to address in their communications and marketing activities
- Nine areas of communications delivery that they needed to improve on.

So, to what degree has the delivery of government communications developed since then?



## EMERGING SOCIAL ISSUES

The nine emerging issues we identified in the 2019 version of *The Leaders' Report* were:

- Growing divisions within society
- Public distrust of official facts and figures
- Changing citizen attitudes towards the concept of community
- The accelerated shift of citizens to more diverse digital channels
- Changing patterns of media consumption
- The need to rapidly change public behaviours
- The need to understand rapidly changing public attitudes
- Citizens' increased dependency upon the state
- The need to better counter dis-, mis- and mal-information

Since the start of the Covid pandemic in March 2020, respondents report that their organisations have paid more attention to the shift to digital channels; to changing public behaviours; to quickly understanding changing public attitudes; and to countering dis-, mis- and mal-information.

"You have to start looking for more efficient ways of reaching your customers, rather than saying like 'oh it's alright we'll just rely on people seeing it at their bus stops when they're travelling to work'"

Communications Leader, Europe

However, less attention has been paid to tackling emerging divisions within society and, post-Covid, the increased dependency of citizens upon the state. Both of these issues threaten to further diminish levels of confidence and trust in government and public bodies as disaffected and disappointed citizens turn to non-government (and possibly inaccurate) sources of information.

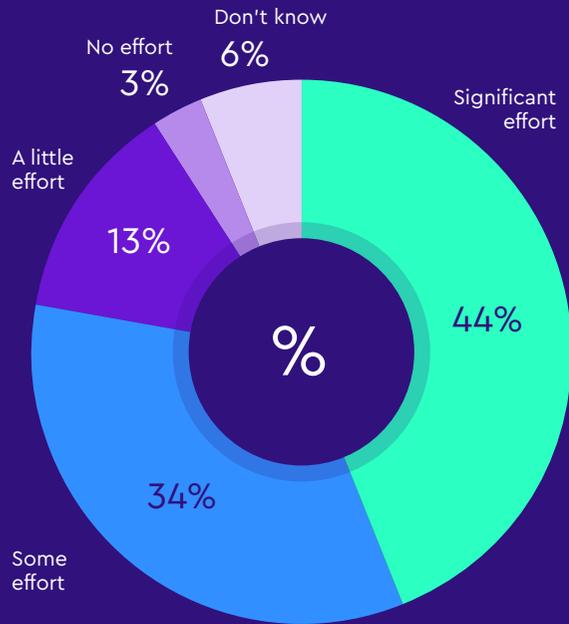
"Populism is a massive driver of [division]. Social media doesn't help. Something I'm very careful of these days is not ignoring the conversations in the social media spaces of my own personal social media because then you get caught in that trap of thinking people think like you"

Communications Leader, North America

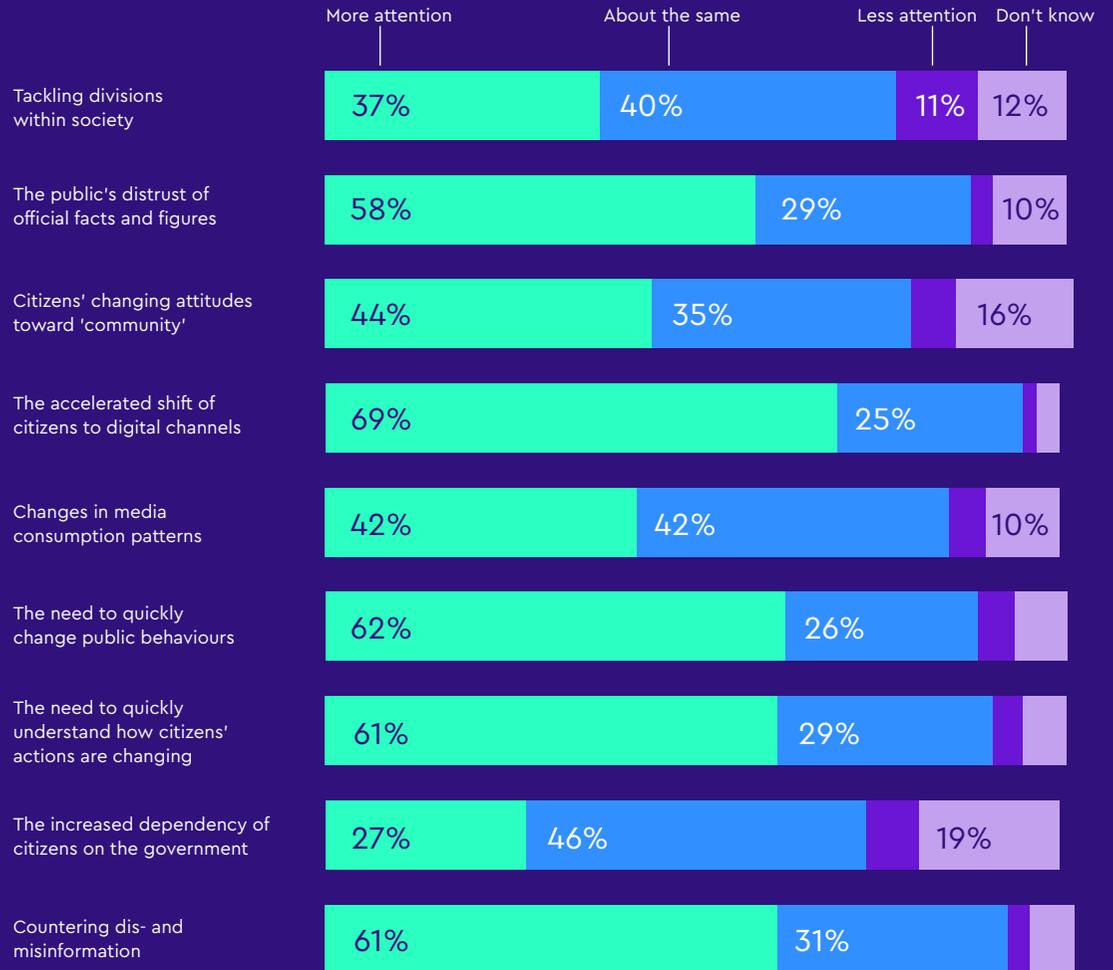


# HOW HAS THE DELIVERY OF GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION DEVELOPED SINCE EARLIER EDITIONS OF *THE LEADERS' REPORT*?

Since the start of the Covid pandemic (March 2020), how much effort, if any, has your organisation made to counter dis- and mis-information



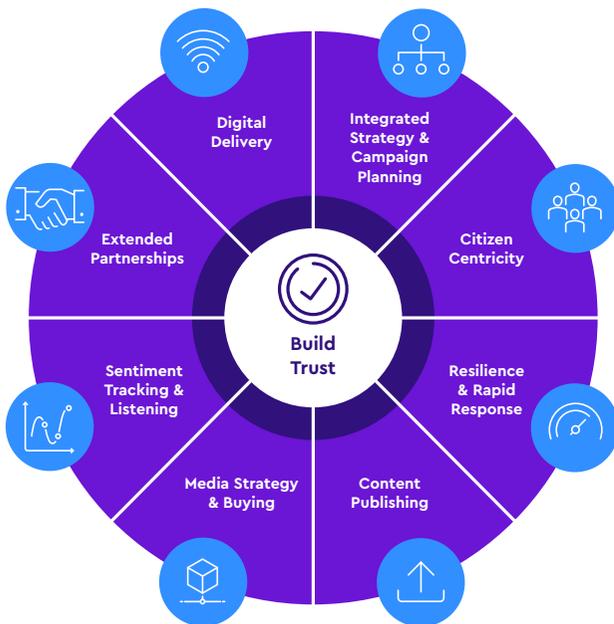
Since the start of the Covid pandemic (March 2020), have your organisation's communications activities devoted more or less attention to the following issues?



## DELIVERY IMPROVEMENTS

In 2021, we concluded that, if government communication was to fulfil its potential, the profession needed to make significant improvements in nine key areas of delivery. These recommendations were based on our analysis of the performance of government communications during the early months of the Covid pandemic.

Encouragingly, the majority of respondents say that their organisation has made significant effort to improve in all of these areas, despite the continued demand for crisis delivery and for rapid response.



## TRUST

Every previous edition of *The Leaders' Report* identified re-building trust as the most important issue facing government communicators. Over three quarters (77%) of respondents say that their organisation has made at least some effort to build more trust between government and citizens since the pandemic – but they believe that considerably more remains to be done.

But respondents also say that there is increasing confusion between what is political and what is public communication, and that politicisation is contributing to further reducing the confidence and trust that many – particularly marginalised audiences – have in government communication.

"[Communication] has become more politicised because there is an absence of policy. By default, it has become politicised and [this] is what I am really struggling with. Whether it is a conscious choice or is literally driven by the absence of policy, I don't know"

Communications Leader, Europe



## INTEGRATING STRATEGY AND CAMPAIGN PLANNING

Surprisingly, given the pace and scale of the Covid-19 pandemic, progress on better integrating the communication and marketing function with policy and behavioural insights functions appears to have taken place: three quarters (76%) of respondents say that their organisation has made at least some efforts to better integrate strategy and campaign planning.

This is encouraging and accounts, perhaps, for why 71% of respondents say they are now able to better preserve consistency in messaging across multiple touchpoints and channels – an increase of 11 percentage points on 2017.

"I think the value is integration. I think the value is on making sure that any communications that do go out, that we've connected with the reality of the centre, that we've connected with the reality of multiple departments, because communications departments tended to run in a vacuum"

Communications Leader, Australasia

## CITIZEN CENTRICITY

The majority of respondents (78%) say that their organisation has increased efforts to put the citizen at the heart of communications. However, only four in ten (40%) say that their organisation's communications are citizen focused, and just a quarter (26%) say that the voice of the citizen is considered.

"You can sense a growing frustration among people [...] they're trying to find someone who will listen to them"

Communications Leader, Europe

Most respondents (66%) report that their organisation's communications remain skewed towards one-way (organisation to public) messaging, with only three in ten (36%) saying that their organisation's communications are balanced. The fact that these figures are virtually unchanged since 2017 is perhaps to be expected, given the top-down nature of the majority of government pandemic communications – but this will need addressing as the pandemic fades into the background.



## RESILIENCE AND RAPID RESPONSE

Nearly eight respondents in ten (78%) say that their organisation has made at least some effort to build greater resilience and rapid response capabilities within the communications function.

They cite improvements in their organisation's ability to help citizens and businesses anticipate, respond to, and recover from crises; provide audiences with the knowledge and means to minimise risk; and activate communications instantaneously, beating the news cycle and misinformation.

"That fast, reactive pace has really increased, and that sense of crisis readiness is absolutely at the forefront of everything we do"

Communications Leader, Australasia

## CONTENT PUBLISHING

Just 2% of respondents say that their organisation has made no effort since the pandemic to publish more of its own content, with 51% saying that their organisation has made significant effort, including syndicating information and creating direct government-to-citizen channels that bypass traditional media.

Respondents say the biggest increases in self-publishing have been via online events (79% saying they have used this more since the start of the pandemic); unpaid social media posts (71%); their organisation's website (68%); and paid social media posts (61%). Consequently, respondents report that since the pandemic, their organisations use considerably less of media channels that have traditionally required longer lead times for publication – such as magazines (29%) and outdoor (22%).

"The results are good: 200% increase in attendance at our events, quadruple the number of followers on LinkedIn, double the number of subscribers to e-newsletters, and we have moved the organisation from being a little-known entity to now being on people's radar"

Communications Manager, Australasia

STO  
THE SPRE  
OF CORONAV

PROTECT YOUR  
AND OTHERS AROUND



## SENTIMENT TRACKING AND LISTENING

Less than half (46%) of respondents say that key communications decisions in their organisation are informed by fact-based insights into citizens; indeed, a quarter (26%) say that their organisation doesn't understand sentiment among the public.

This means that governments are failing to identify, extract, and quantify social issues and opinion; they are struggling to listen to, monitor, and respond to on- and offline conversations; and they are finding it difficult to tackle effectively mis-, mal-, and disinformation online.

"We're seeing a lot of bad actors out there, we're seeing Iran, Russia, China, Afghanistan, mobilising [...] and putting out misinformation, and misinformation finds its way into mainstream democratic environments and that is a tough one to get around. [It] can get quite messy"

Communications Leader, North America

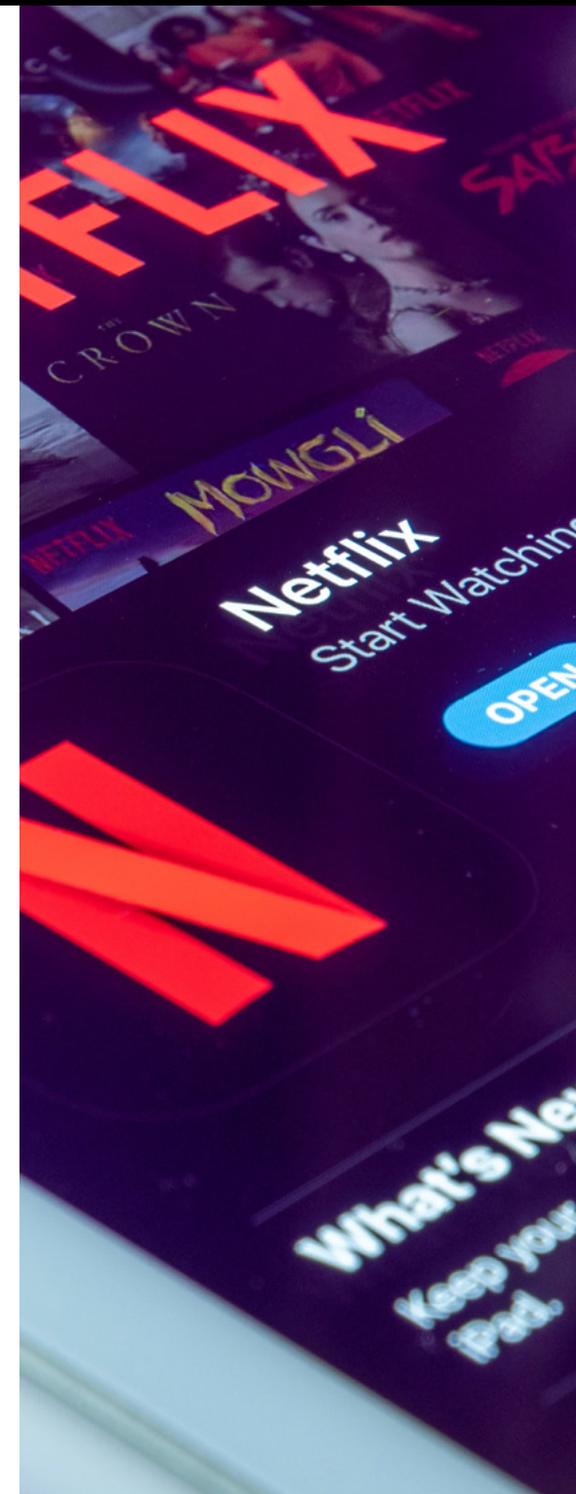
## MEDIA STRATEGY AND BUYING

55% of respondents say that their organisation has made some effort to improve media buying and strategy; only 30% say that their organisation has made no effort to improve.

However, there is little evidence yet that post-pandemic media consumption patterns are well understood, or that media buying has been modernised: few respondents report efforts to increase data partnerships, improve planning and buying efficiencies, or make better use of newer channels such as BVOD, Connected TV, OTT, and CTV.

"If we had a longer lead time, we'd be able to come up with more creative solutions, buy media more cost efficiently, you'd be able to really integrate results [and] build partnerships. Ultimately, if you need to turn something around in two weeks, you do what you can"

Communications Leader, Australasia





**Andy Braunston**

Chief Strategy Officer  
Wavemaker, Canada

**Wavemaker**

Media planning and strategy is the proverbial yo-yo discussion: long vs. short, micro vs. macro, purpose vs. price. The recent pandemic created behaviour and cultural shifts that we are all still coming to terms with. Together, they reinforce the continued need for a strong strategic foundation for media planning and buying. So, when activating campaigns, here are three things that government communicators need to consider as part of any healthy dialogue with their media partners.

### 1. Strategic scale

Scale is the most obvious: more reach + more eyeballs = more impact. However, there is nuance to this, and government communicators should strive for more of a middle ground. Scaling campaigns as wide and as far as possible is critical to ensuring that a central message or theme can reach a mass audience and affect change or opinion. But not all audiences may be receptive to the same message in the same way. So, add in an element of cohorting, segmentation and personalisation. One-to-one marketing is neither realistic nor palatable, so by meeting audiences where they are in their decision journeys and moving beyond campaign hierarchies built on simple demographics or racial backgrounds, allows for both better delivery and receipt of government messages. At Wavemaker, we have developed tools, like Project Builder and the AI-powered Architect, that help scenario plan simultaneously for effectiveness against multiple audiences whilst also considering important efficiencies to amplify finite public campaign budgets.

### 2. Agility

We have to recognise that media is absolutely not a set-and-forget process: the ability to be flexible and agile in both process and execution is key. Government communicators should expect their agency partners to truly consider how teams are orchestrated to be able to adapt and pivot to market or media conditions in (relative) real time. In turn, agencies should be clear with their expectation management, and the roles they play, or not, in both establishing and fulfilling upon OKRs and KPIs to ensure proficient operations. Channel choices with connectivity to a broader ecosystem mean we can leverage addressability to manage messaging changes, and common audience targeting allows for shifts from one area of a plan to another with no loss in continuity or performance. (WPP can help with that...)

### 3. Distinctiveness

That old adage is right: not all channels are created equal. A programmatic banner is just not the same as a 30 second TV ad, but – depending on the point in the persuasion journey – both can be effective. By recognising that advertising needs to stand out and be distinctive to catch attention, by understanding which channels matter when and by which audience groups, can make the difference between spending millions of dollars on a TV campaign that falls flat, and a smarter, more cost-effective sequenced video buy that is triggered by cultural signals and piques just at the right time (WPP can help with that too...).

So, when considering media choices in the future, be sure to leverage both the tools AND the human smarts of your media and agency partners. Don't be disheartened – just be S.A.D. 😊

## EXTENDED PARTNERSHIPS

Unsurprisingly, 75% of respondents say that their organisation is delivering fewer in-person events since the start of the pandemic. These have been largely replaced by online events (79% say they have used this more since the start of the pandemic), often in collaboration with other organisations.

Nearly three quarters of respondents (71%) say their organisation has made at least some effort since the start of the pandemic to create extended partnerships with the private sector, community groups and media owners to foster and connect with communities, civic groups, and not-for-profits; develop more conversational ways of engaging with communities; and integrate listening into public policy development.

"We are more in touch with local people and grassroots organisations. We are well connected to local areas and have a finger on the pulse of what is concerning or upsetting [citizens] and are able to respond"

Communications Leader, Australasia



## DIGITAL DELIVERY

Nearly nine in ten respondents (89%) say their organisation has made some effort to improve digital delivery, addressing public demands identified by the Government Practice and Adobe<sup>1</sup> for improvements in design, relevance, and relationships online; for greater consideration to protecting citizen data; and for providing more efficient solutions online.

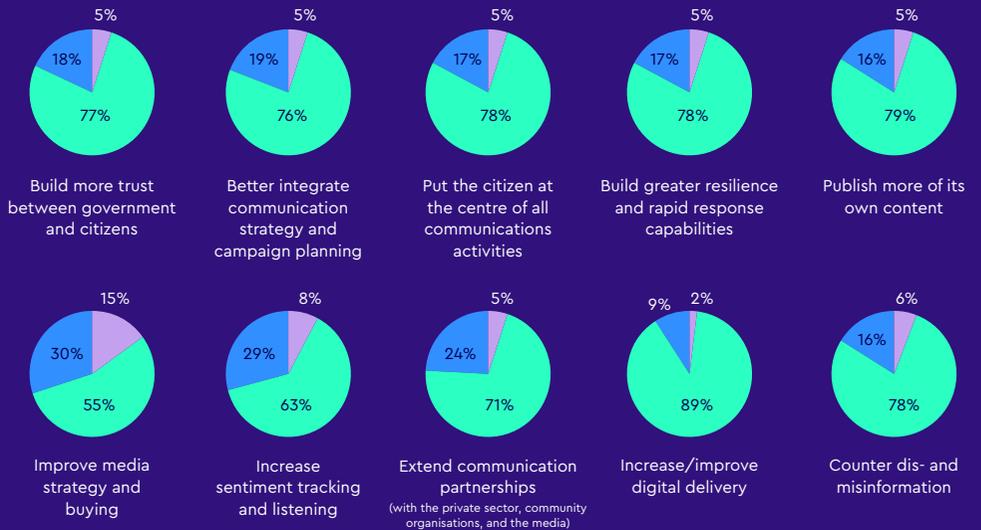
However, digital exclusion has increased as an issue of concern and, with it, the need for governments to consider evolving citizen journeys; ensure the end-to-end delivery of digital services; and offer content in preferred formats.

"I think there's no question, it's the emergence and the importance of social media platforms...I think we've become much more content driven. It's about creating compelling content and then using the various tools that we have at our disposal in terms of social media platforms to showcase that content and reach audiences that we need to reach"

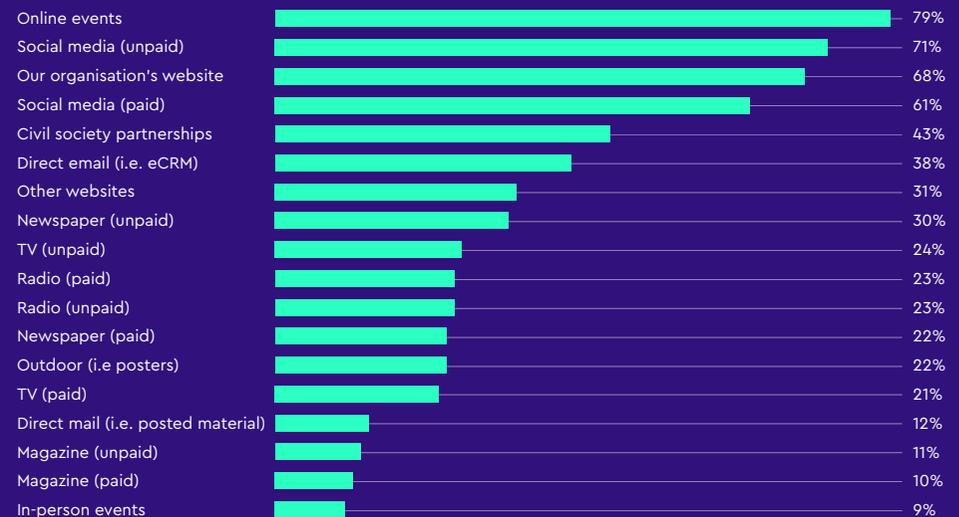
Communications Leader, North America

Since the start of the Covid pandemic (March 2020), how much effort, if any, has your organisation made to...

■ Significant/some effort  
 ■ Little/no effort  
 ■ Don't know



Since the start of the pandemic, which of these main channels has your organisation used more to communicate with the public?



<sup>1</sup> Delivering Experiences That Count, WPP Government & Public Sector Practice/Adobe, 2017

## **SUMMARY : HOW HAS THE DELIVERY OF GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION DEVELOPED SINCE EARLIER EDITIONS OF *THE LEADERS' REPORT*?**

Despite an extremely challenging period, respondents report that government communications delivery is continuing to reform and progress in many areas – often at pace, while delivering at pace. 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 communications delivery is still too one-way and lacks sufficient understanding of citizen sentiment.

Governments need to be significantly 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. Existing tools and techniques – such as Boolean and Vector text analytics – can help communicators better understand citizens, but we are aware that 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.





### Chrystiane Mallaley

Senior Vice-President and National Lead, Public Participation  
Hill + Knowlton Strategies, Canada



Only 22% of government communicators say their organisation engaged well with citizens over the last five years – despite the urgent need they faced to quickly support communities to change behaviour during and following the Covid-19 pandemic. That's probably no surprise: respondents also said they don't listen enough to the views of the public.

One of the key challenges we all face is to develop strategies that successfully inform the public of decisions on major policies and issues, but in a time of waning public trust in government, winning propositions can be rare and elusive. What's often at the heart of this challenge is not the decision itself – or even how it has been communicated – but how it was made in the first place. Citizens increasingly expect to have a say in the decisions that will impact them.

The issues that municipalities, provincial and federal government departments face are more complex than ever before, and the stakeholder environment is increasingly fragmented and polarised. But that doesn't prevent informed, respectful, and meaningful citizen participation in decision making on a range of highly sensitive issues.

Dialogue between governments and their citizens is a powerful means of building understanding, finding common ground, and exploring ways forward together. Here are five things to keep in mind to enhance your citizen engagement efforts:

- 1. Be clear and purposeful.** What are you specifically seeking input on and why does it matter? How will citizens' perspectives help inform your decision making? And where and how can you most strategically reach the audiences you seek to engage with?
- 2. Ask good questions.** It's important that you ask questions people can answer based on their own experience and knowledge, supplemented with strong communications that support informed deliberation on the key issues. Your questions must also elicit responses you can analyse with rigour and make real meaning of.

- 3. Engage diversely, equitably, and inclusively.** You may be wary of engagement for fear that it will only attract the loudest, most critical voices. By being deliberate in creating welcoming, safe, supportive environments in person and online for citizens who have been historically excluded from decision-making to bring their perspectives, you will generate richer and more representative insights.
- 4. Show them you've listened.** Nothing is more frustrating than offering your time and energy to an important issue, then hearing nothing more of it. Participants will want to know what you heard through the engagement process and how that input was considered in your decision making.
- 5. Agility is key.** There will be risks you identify and mitigate through good planning, and other issues will emerge later. Build monitoring, measurement, and feedback loops into your process, and don't be afraid to switch things up if needed.

At Hill + Knowlton Strategies in Canada, we use the core values and code of ethics of the International Association of Public Participation<sup>1</sup> to help governments design and implement award-winning engagement programs that bring stakeholders into problem-solving and decision making, and use that input to make stronger, more sustainable, and more defensible decisions on issues as diverse as transforming Canada's criminal justice system<sup>2</sup>, developing a new Canadian Strategy for Cancer Control<sup>3</sup>, shaping a strategy for Canada's radioactive waste<sup>4</sup>, and the deconstruction of Montreal's Champlain Bridge<sup>5</sup>.

With thoughtful planning that considers your context, relationships, challenges, and opportunities, listening to citizens more will not only make for better decision making, but it will also be a powerful means of strengthening relationships and trust with the citizens you serve. Democracy is strengthened through dialogue.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.iap2.org/page/about>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sFsnT7GC1vY>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TDzAMQWBSxM>

<sup>4</sup> <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1E0OefYF5IHEabdPo89U8WENnxUFtKzkr/view>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2OJczATaiUE>

## WHAT DO CITIZENS WANT FROM GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS?

Emergencies have a habit of revealing the truth about the social contract and the Covid-19 pandemic was no different. It made the relationship between citizen and the state more explicit than customary during peacetime.

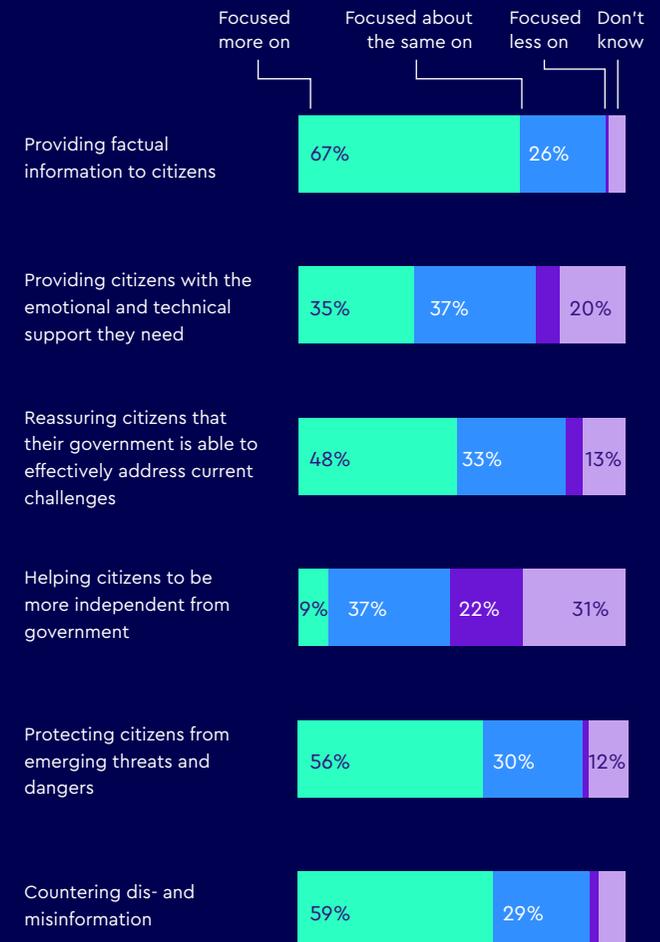
In 2021, *The Leaders' Report – what government communicators can learn from the Covid-19 pandemic* identified five things that the public required from government communication during the transition to a post-pandemic state:

- Facts and a sense of security. Citizens need communication that makes sense of their situation
- Emotional as well as technical support – and confidence that government is able to protect them
- Reassurance. While there were clear winners and losers during the pandemic, there has to date been no clear moment of victory to provide comfort
- Independence – citizens want to be treated like adults again
- Protection from new challenges and dangers, including an increase in cyber security and a fall in media literacy.

Two thirds (67%) of respondents say that their organisation has placed more focus on providing factual information since the pandemic, 59% on countering disinformation, and over half (56%) on protecting citizens from emerging threats and dangers. But just 9% say their organisation has placed more focus on helping citizens to be more independent of government.

The public still remain more dependent upon government than they were before the pandemic – perhaps even more so given the financial, political, and social shocks that have followed it. Governments have yet to grasp how to help them become more self sufficient. To do so will require traditional methods of segmentation to be complemented with psychographic and behavioural ones, and communicating with citizens based more on their interests, beliefs, activities, and lifestyle choices – and not just on their age, ethnicity, income, and location.

Since the start of the Covid pandemic (March 2020), have your organisation's communications focused more or less on ... ?



## APPROACHES TO SEGMENTATION NEED TO DEVELOP AS QUICKLY AS CHANGES IN OUR CITIZENS AND SOCIETY



**Gautham Pingali**

Executive Vice President,  
Performance & Innovation  
Group M, Canada



Consumer – or citizen – segmentation is one of the most dynamic and fastest-impacted areas of marketing, reflecting the pace of change in citizens and society in general. Yet government communicators still too often construct audiences based on factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, and income.

Segmentation has moved rapidly beyond old school infrastructure (such as tools and survey models) and heuristics that no longer serve our industry well. At WPP, we've developed tools, technology, and skills to leverage opportunities across three key areas.

### Moving from boxes to the intent

The diversity of any country doesn't shine through in traditional segmentation: the depth of cultural and socio-economic influence cannot be measured by mere age, demo, and location breakdowns.

Canada, for example, has a sizeable marketable population due to a median age of 41. This offers opportunities to drive profound impact from both an economic and a behavioural standpoint. And our national goal of adding around 2.9% to this population every year via new-to-Canada consumers (immigration + students + work permits), only makes the opportunity more significant – and segmenting people through age-old methods even more redundant.

At WPP, we believe people do not sit in boxes of consumer definitions: it is behaviour, their journeys, and their intent that point to opportunities we can impact. So, we bring together multiple sources of data, not just covering demographics but also purchase behaviours, consumption habits, perception of brands, and so much more via our data partnerships – and we overlay this with proprietary consumer survey panels so that our understanding of audiences is deeper than ever before. By doing this, we leverage the diverse opportunities our changing society brings us, and we do it at faster intervals to keep up with the pace of change.

### Moving from scale challenges to depth and dynamic

Segmentation has always depended on the hope that we're extrapolating correctly: most consumer surveys are, at best, 0.1% of the actual marketable population. We've disrupted this by combining multiple data sources together and providing audience segments and intelligence on a subscription model. This allows us to bring our data partnerships value along with solid internal frameworks and skillsets into a unique and straightforward manner to access our clients.

### Moving from the leap of faith to making it actionable

A critical challenge with segmentation has always been that once we segment audiences (however well done beyond the old school methods), media planning and buying tools do not speak the same language as our output of segments. This makes activation difficult.

Most people generally leap over this chasm by making the connections they see fit (i.e., a particular intent in our segmentation approach means a specific targeting on display or TV). But we have developed techniques that allow us to bucket the insights we develop into cohorts.

When activated on media, these cohorts provide identifiers or connections to respective media platforms. What this does is not just connect the dots between insights and activation but, more importantly, create a feedback loop that allows us to roll back and relook at our cohorts/audience insights, and question if they worked the way we wanted them to.

Segmentation will always remain dynamic and, to get ahead of it, we must continue to develop the tech, tools and, most importantly, the people and approaches that unlock the opportunity.

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

Covid-19 prevention and control campaigns required a range of messages to be tailored to reflect cultural drivers of behaviour. Many respondents acknowledge that their organisation struggled to develop quickly and effectively – beyond mainstream audiences – campaigns that used accessible language and featured content that reflected the social norms and identities of target audiences and communities.

## PRIORITY AND PERFORMANCE

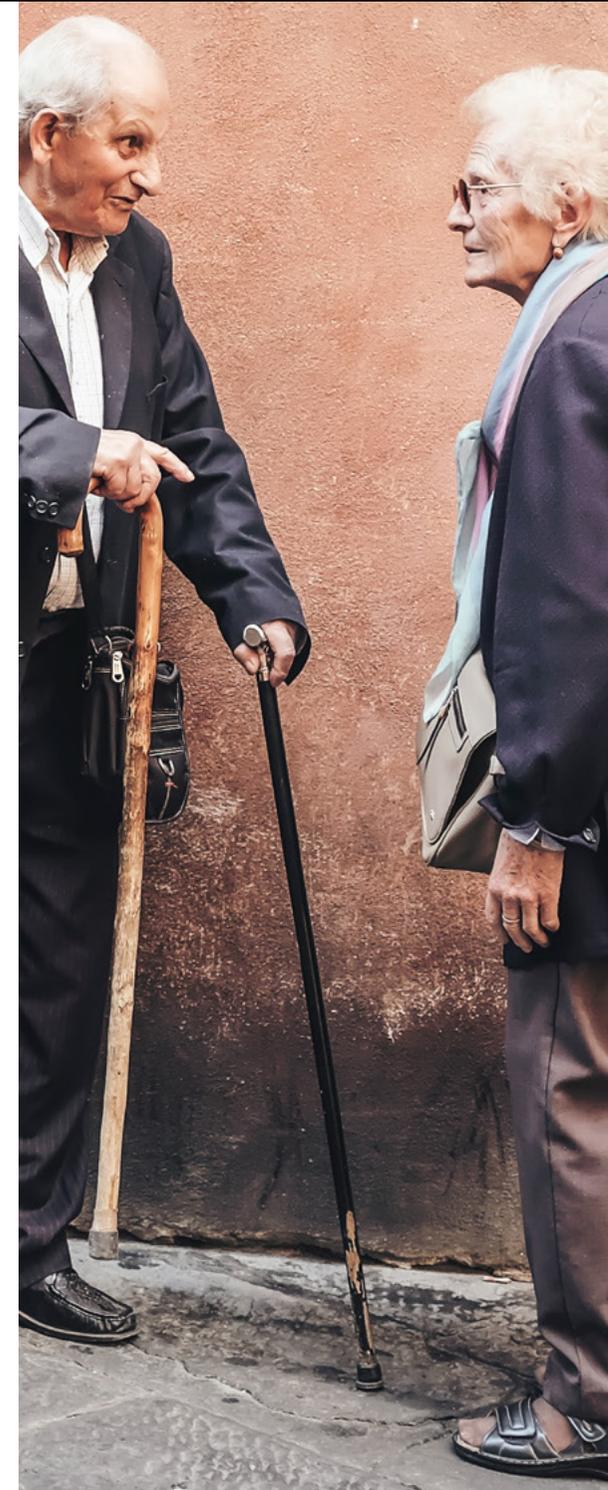
Over two thirds (68%) of respondents say that communicating with hard-to-reach audiences has become more important to their organisation since the Covid pandemic, with two in five (40%) saying that engaging with hard-to-reach audiences is now a priority (lagging behind reputation management and direct citizen consultation in focus). They identified it as the third biggest challenge for their organisation's communications (behind overcoming bureaucracy and budget limitations).

"Every year that goes by, we understand the communities more and more, and how different communication works for different communities – so it's not like a one size fits all"

Communications Leader, Australasia

However, just six in ten respondents (59%) believe that their organisation provides hard-to-reach audiences with the information they need. They cite a range of limitations and challenges in non-mainstream communications including:

- Lack of insight into marginalised communities
- Failure to adequately understand competing audience needs
- Less engagement of marginalised groups in mainstream channels
- Digital exclusion
- Lack of budget and diversity within communications staff
- Lack of trust in government among some marginalised audiences.



Despite an increased focus on diversity in public communications, less than a third (30%) of respondents say that hard-to-reach audiences are a mandatory part of communication and campaign development.

Respondents say that they insufficiently understand and connect with the breadth of minority audiences they need to serve, and that active segmentation beyond ethnicity and language remains limited.

"We group people by language, but should we be doing this some other way? It might be the medium, not the language... that's anecdotally what I've heard. I think there's more thought that needs to be put into this"

Communications Leader, North America

Despite weaknesses, the majority of respondents were able to cite some practical changes that had improved their organisation's ability to reach marginalised and hard-to-reach groups. Given the lack of resources and time available to them, they represent primarily easy wins in practical delivery (rather than broader organisational change) such as:

- Using simple, clear, and easily-translatable language
- Expanding communication channels – particularly digital channels
- Better using partnerships including community groups and online influencers.

"Nobody is doing it perfectly. We're certainly still on a journey, but there's been a lot of reflection and conversation following Covid about whether enough was done. There's been inquiries, reviews, consultations which have really exposed gaps in how, for example, we handled [communication] during Covid"

Communications Leader, Australasia

Respondents question whether these changes will be meaningful in the long term, however: although they feel they can better target marginalised audiences than previously, they are not better able to understand them. More realistic funding of non-mainstream audience activity – together with more diverse representation and skills within communications teams – were identified as key requisites for improvement.

"When we're talking about inclusion, there's a very difficult situation because... the majority of senior communications practitioners are all middle aged and white. So how are we representing our society if we aren't even managing it in our own industry?"

Communications Leader, Europe

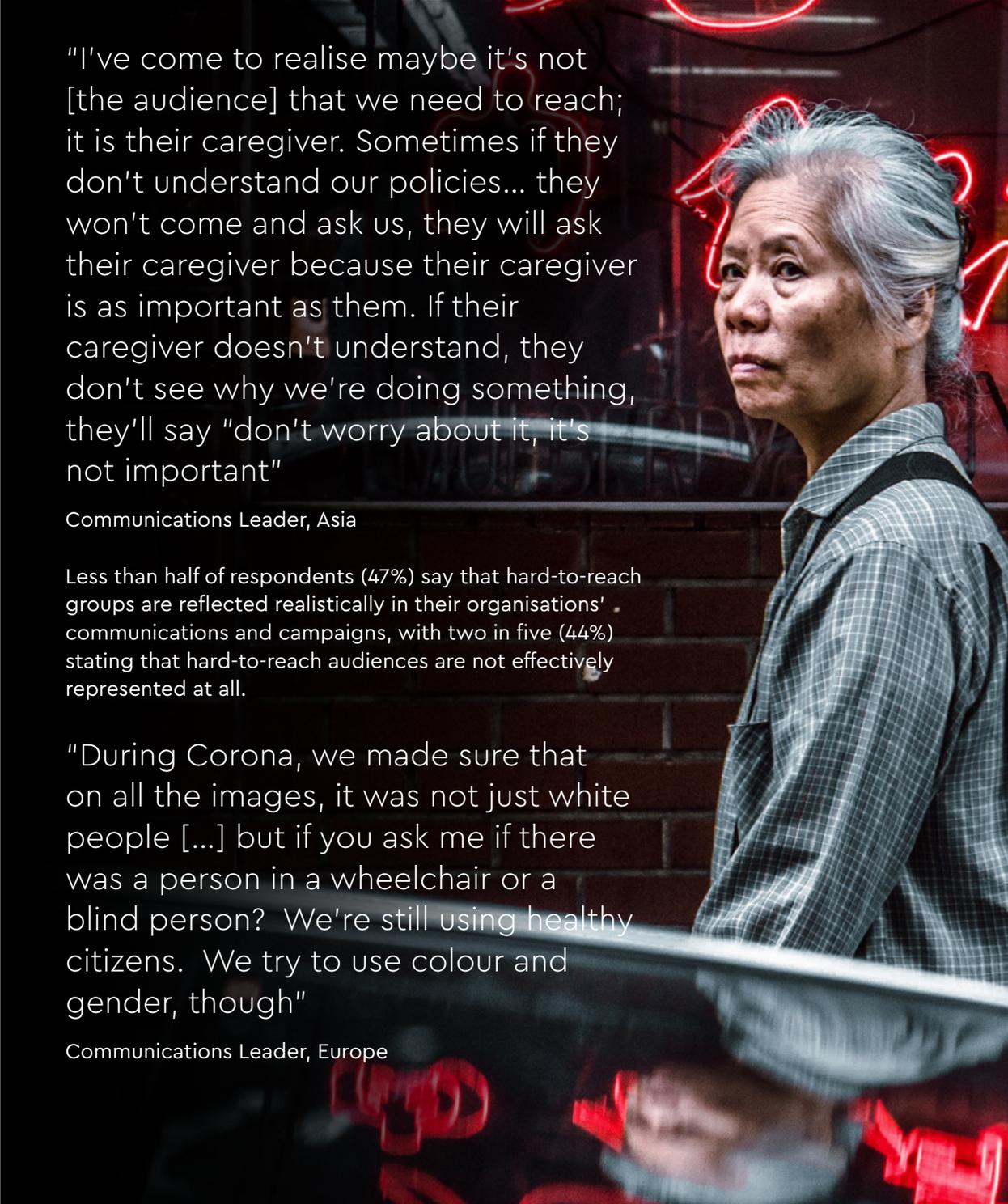
## REPRESENTATION

Respondents identified the five most excluded audiences that their organisation needs to engage with as being:

- Technologically-excluded communities (44%)
- Ethnic minorities (41%)
- Low-income individuals (38%)
- People with a mental disability (37%)
- Linguistic minorities (29%).

They believe that their organisations communicate most effectively with young people (48%) and older people (44%).

In contrast, technologically-excluded communities and people with a mental disability were said to be both the audience types that organisations communicated least effectively with (42% each), and also the groups that they found the most challenging to communicate with (46% each). Linguistic and ethnic minorities were secondary in terms of communicating least effectively with them (29% each) and being challenging to communicate with (39% and 33% respectively).



"I've come to realise maybe it's not [the audience] that we need to reach; it is their caregiver. Sometimes if they don't understand our policies... they won't come and ask us, they will ask their caregiver because their caregiver is as important as them. If their caregiver doesn't understand, they don't see why we're doing something, they'll say "don't worry about it, it's not important"

Communications Leader, Asia

Less than half of respondents (47%) say that hard-to-reach groups are reflected realistically in their organisations' communications and campaigns, with two in five (44%) stating that hard-to-reach audiences are not effectively represented at all.

"During Corona, we made sure that on all the images, it was not just white people [...] but if you ask me if there was a person in a wheelchair or a blind person? We're still using healthy citizens. We try to use colour and gender, though"

Communications Leader, Europe

## INTERSECTIONAL ATTITUDES

There are indications that respondents are developing a more inter-sectional awareness of audiences, understanding that:

- A single element of identity might render some individuals marginalised, hard-to-reach, or belonging to multiple marginalised groups
- Individuals in multiple-marginalised groups might find certain facets of their identity become more important to them in different circumstances – for example, in the way that ethnic, linguistic, and cultural minorities are often inherently linked; or that geographically-marginalised minorities often also fall into digitally-excluded groups.

"Young men in many countries are very alienated. In Britain, we saw young men aged 18–25, many of whom had unemployment issues, many of whom had run-ins with the police, become very disheartened and disenchanted with the government and just retreated. They don't vote, they don't participate in politics at all and yet there are policies being made that directly affect their lives"

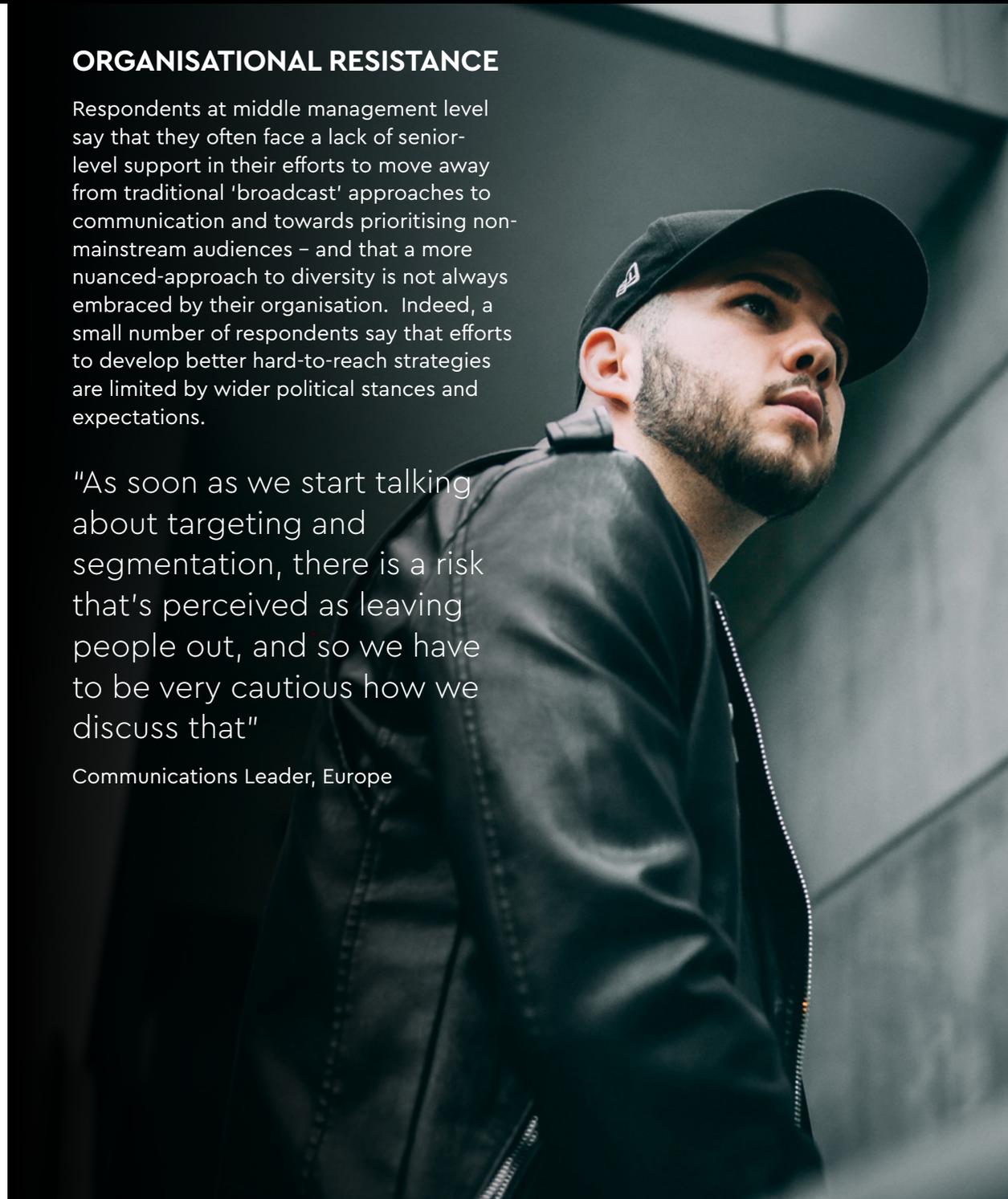
Communications Leader, Europe

## ORGANISATIONAL RESISTANCE

Respondents at middle management level say that they often face a lack of senior-level support in their efforts to move away from traditional 'broadcast' approaches to communication and towards prioritising non-mainstream audiences – and that a more nuanced-approach to diversity is not always embraced by their organisation. Indeed, a small number of respondents say that efforts to develop better hard-to-reach strategies are limited by wider political stances and expectations.

"As soon as we start talking about targeting and segmentation, there is a risk that's perceived as leaving people out, and so we have to be very cautious how we discuss that"

Communications Leader, Europe



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

Which of these audience types do you think your organisation...





### Michael Harris

Executive Director, AUNZ  
WPP Government & Public Sector  
Practice



Respondents to this latest edition of *The Leaders' Report* say they don't get sufficient political support to properly deliver communications that are inclusive and address effectively the needs of diverse and hard-to-reach audiences.

Even before the Covid crisis of 2020, citizens were demanding that organisations, brands, and companies take a stand on key issues such as climate change, First Nations peoples' rights, race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, and socioeconomic background. The past two years have only accelerated this trend, with the pandemic having a disproportionate effect on disadvantaged and marginalised communities, bringing about profound changes in how people think, live, and communicate.

Global movements for change continue to transform our idea of what individual identity means, what race, religion, language, and colour signify – what is culturally relevant and important, what is holding us back, what is liberating us, and what we need to reinterpret. Change is taking place on a massive scale, and government communicators have an essential role to play in adopting and promoting this change, as reflected both in internal values, behaviour, and practices, and in external communications.

In a global survey for WPP agency Wunderman Thompson, 90% of respondents said that equality is now everyone's business. Three quarters said companies and brands must play a role in solving big societal challenges such as inequality and social injustice<sup>1</sup>.

For government communicators, this means working with diverse creators to help elevate marginalised talent, support communities, and drive better representation with nuanced communication strategies that go beyond translation, building on cultural behaviours and practices so people see themselves represented authentically – and therefore building trust.

For governments, in the race and competition for talent, policies and pledges will not be enough; action, accountability, meaningful investment, and measurement are all necessary to create an inclusive culture in which everyone feels a sense of belonging.

Concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) need to be expanded to include accessibility too. The US Government, for example, has said that across the federal government, agencies will work collaboratively to drive innovation and organisational outcomes, draw from the full diversity of the nation, and position the federal government to serve as a model employer that values and promotes equity for all Americans<sup>2</sup>. That goal is relevant to public organisations everywhere and includes interactions and engagement with citizens, regardless of who or where they are.

DE&I is now a core business value. It should be baked into initiatives and campaigns from the beginning, not included as an afterthought or a box-ticking exercise. Here in Australia, for example, WPP has joined a network of more than 1,100 corporate, government, and not-for-profit organisations that have made a formal commitment to reconciliation with First Nations' people. Our Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) outlines our total commitment towards a more diverse, equitable and inclusive future.

As the history of inclusive design shows, if you build inclusion in from the start, you will end up with a better product, service, experience, or campaign. By planning and designing with inclusivity front of mind, you can create a better future for everyone.

And that should be a key driver for all of us.

<sup>1</sup> Original consumer data collected by Wunderman Thompson Data among 5,001 adults aged 18+ in Brazil, China, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The research fielded in March and April 2022.

<sup>2</sup> US Government Strategic Plan to Advance Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce, November 2021.

## COMMUNICATING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE IS COMMUNICATING WITH THE FUTURE



### Hervé Paques

Strategy Director  
Ogilvy Social.Lab,  
Belgium



Young people are impacted both financially and mentally by the multiple crises we face today. While their optimism for the future and their trust towards institutions may be strained, they are also a force of change: they are the trend-setters and leaders of tomorrow, and it's crucial that public institutions get them on board, restore their trust, and empower them to fully play their role in society.

Communication can help achieve this and given their online media consumption, reaching them is less problematic than other 'marginalised' audiences. But how? What's the best approach given their diversity? How can we meet their needs and expectations? Here are three key principles we should all follow:

### Togetherness

Listening is mandatory in building and reinforcing a relationship. It's even more important for young audiences. They have high expectations and are attached to progressive values. This is a generation that needs to feel heard. They are also keen to take part in decisions making, and this calls for open and two-way communication (a far cry from the traditional top-down model of governments). This means less hierarchy, but more collaboration, inclusivity, and transparency.

The purpose of a government's or an institution's actions must be transparently communicated and underpinned with shared values. But don't just boastfully showcase policy achievements: focus on people-centric stories that this audience can relate to.

Here's an example where artworks were created by different artists and put in auction as NFTs to support cancer patients: <https://www.ogilvy.com/work/buy-my-cancer>.

### Adaptability

Young people are active on new communication touch points like Twitch, TikTok, Discord, gaming platforms and engaging with influencers. These channels have their own rules and specific codes to follow to be visible, effective, and credible.

Public institutions need to play outside their comfort zone and adopt these cultural codes in order to grab attention, to be heard and to be understood. Everything from tactics to visuals, and tonality to wording, need to be reshaped to fit this diverse and demanding environment.

The Tourism Authority of Thailand entered the gaming culture with Home Sweet Home, a virtual experience that leverages Thailand's culture of superstition and folklore: <https://www.ogilvy.com/work/home-sweet-home>.

Young people's voracious digital consumption offers us a huge amount of data signals. We can use these to glean insights and tailor messages through targeted, trigger-based communication, rather than through complex audience segmentation. One size doesn't fit all; a test-and-learn mentality is key.

This German public transport company leveraged users' data to personalise visuals and messages: <https://sites.wpp.com/wppedcream/2019/direct/consumer-marketing/no-need-to-fly-around-the-world-in>.

### Responsiveness

This kind of iterative process requires flexibility and responsiveness. Young people are quick to act and react, specifically online. The ability to optimise campaigns in real-time already brings great added value, but data can also help to limit and manage reputational risk. When triggered, young people can be quick to criticise, or even launch a movement against an organisation, so it's crucial that we monitor conversations, detect potential backfires in real time, and react quickly.

Making an impact on young audiences requires important shifts in communication for public bodies. Open the door to young people and welcome their contribution. While policy requires rigor and seriousness, the way to engage with them is to be lighter, more creative, and bolder.

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

Engaging with minority groups is recognised as an increasing priority. There is a growing realisation that groups such as the technologically excluded and those with mental disabilities need greater support from public communications. But respondents acknowledge that their understanding of hard-to-reach audiences remains limited and that, to date, most actions to engage with them have been 'easy wins' likely to have only limited ongoing impact.

Respondents also 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, they lack the capacity to innovate: there

is a tension between what respondents want to achieve, and what they are able to achieve in reality.

Greater insight and engagement are critical to more effective communication with marginalised groups. 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.

The Practice is 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?

In 2019, our study of 10,000 members of the public in 10 countries identified a range of behaviours that citizens wanted governments to take to help rebuild trust and foster a closer relationship between citizens and state. In particular, they expected governments to:

- **Act in the common good:** citizens expect their government to find mutuality and solutions that serve everyone's interests – in effect, to exercise power for the public good rather than self interest
- **Support social cohesion:** people are more positively drawn to actions they perceive to reinforce equality and inclusion across communities.

But to what degree is this happening?

Our research identifies high levels of concern among government communicators about divisions in society, but also a significant degree of confusion over the role that government communications should or could play in fostering greater social cohesion.

"People have polarised on a whole range of issues, and I think openness to debate, and compromise is really low. People are angry... I think a lot of the way we did communications [in Covid] actually pitched people against each other... it feels like we've lost decades of community"

Communications Leader, Australasia

The majority of respondents – 64% – say that society in their country or region of focus has become less cohesive since the start of the pandemic. Many believe that the Covid-19 crisis has contributed significantly to increased isolation, individualism, and inequality: any sense of collective spirit engendered by the pandemic is perceived to have since faded.

While two-thirds of respondents (67%) say that their organisation's communications seek to increase community cohesion, only 16% say that their organisation's communications always or sometimes do. A similar proportion (60%) say that their organisation's communications successfully help build community cohesion, but only 8% say they always or sometimes do. And just one in seven (14%) believe that their organisation's communications support social cohesion 'very well' (with 51% stating 'somewhat well').

While the lack of community and civil solidarity is a concern for government communicators:

- Just one respondent in six (16%) see the issue as a high-ranking priority for their organisation
- Only one in ten (9%) selected it as a high-ranking challenge from a list of difficult issues facing government communicators
- Only a third (37%) say that their organisation's communications activities devote more attention now than pre-Covid to tackling divisions within society.

## LEGITIMACY

Respondents report that, due to increased politicisation, they frequently struggle to find common ground in communications. Indeed, they question whether there is a legitimate role for them to help strengthen weakened communities.

"[It is a] difficult and grey area for government communications. On one level, I suppose you could say we are mere vessels for the political views of ministers and it's our job to serve them and explain their policies whether they are policies that tend towards cohesion or deliberately create division... ultimately, it's Parliament's role to hold policies to account, not the civil service, but there's a level of duty of care to try and encourage social cohesion"

Communications Leader, Europe



## CAUSE AND EFFECT

Respondents cite the fragmentation of the media landscape, the rise of social media, and the collapse of physical community forums as adversely affecting social cohesion, and resulting in the growth of echo chambers; the promotion, normalising, and spreading of more extreme views; and the politicising of topics that may have previously been regarded as uncontroversial.

"I think social media can sometimes feed the divisions. It provides you with the place to be heard, or have your opinions heard or verified by whatever groups you know... the algorithms will support that more negative approach"

Communications Leader, Australasia

Four in five respondents (78%) say that their organisation has made at least some effort to counter dis-, mis- and mal-information since the pandemic in March 2020, with 44% saying that their organisation has made significant efforts. However, they question both the role that governments should play in attempting to tackle dis-, mis-, and mal-information – and the success of attempts when they do.

"My personal view is that it's something so systemic [...] because the media environment has fragmented, the journalistic profession has also suffered, [...] also the way politics

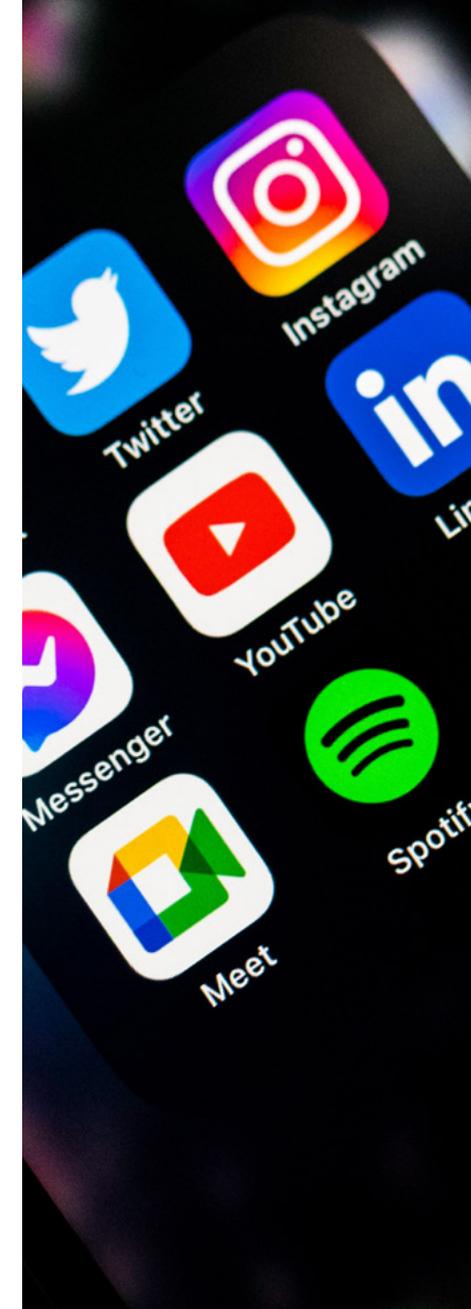
works is completely different because everything is much more fast and decisions are taken quicker because the news cycle goes so fast... because of this there is a lack of trust in the media and politicians [...] it's so complex [...] and to just say, 'we're gonna take a few lines to fight disinformation online or whatever' [...] I don't know"

Communications Leader, Europe

Respondents say there is also danger in governments attempting to be "arbiters of the truth", and in over-regulating content and free speech – especially against a backdrop of waning government trust. A minority believe that opinions should not be dictated to the population, and that differences of opinion and behaviour are ultimately inevitable.

"There was a real push for my team to lead on disinformation [...] You know, 'this bad actor put out information that...can you put out social media to say that that is not true' [...] And I can't do that. I'm not the arbitrator of truth in this space [...] I don't promote. I put out information"

Communications Leader, Europe



Despite this, some participants did suggest steps that governments could take to better support social cohesion. These included:

- Ensuring that issues affecting social cohesion are tackled proactively
- Making better use of audience insight to improve segmentation
- Better targeting communications messages to cut through noise
- Ensuring that all communications are truthful, honest, and evidence based
- Ensuring all communications are apolitical and authentic
- Avoiding a disconnect between policy intent and citizens' reality
- Being braver in the use of trusted voices.

"I don't think that government communications can freestyle on wanting to engender community cohesion, or pursue communications to advance the cause of equality and diversity. Because the democratic process, flawed as it may be, is an expression of the will of the people.

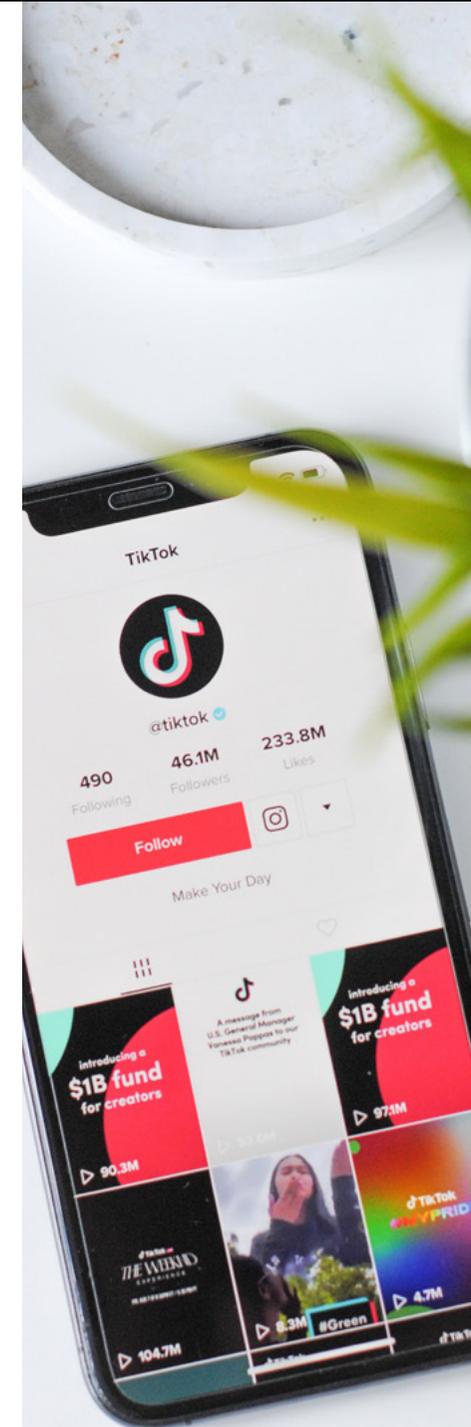
However, we have to be truthful, and we have to talk about facts and give information in a way that is truthful. And we have seen that tested to the limit"

Communications Leader, Europe

Respondents acknowledge that social cohesion is not easily achieved, and that government abilities to tackling it are limited. As a result, it was felt that government should focus on building partnerships with private and third sector organisations, social media influencers, and community leaders to promote social cohesion via their own platforms, especially when they are trusted more than government.

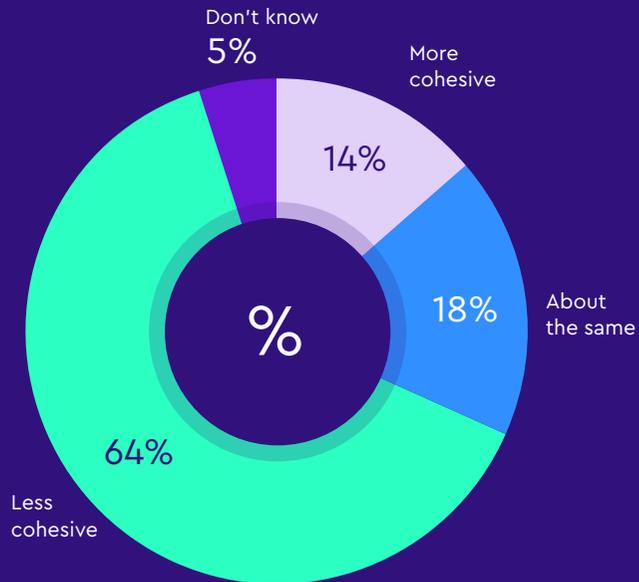
"[We] should be driving that social cohesion through our communications from that apolitical lens as much as possible [...] Government needs to be using more tactics that they use in the private sector so it's that thing of communicating through intermediaries, you know, trusted advisors of people [...] so being more creative and innovative about the way we communicate for that social cohesion"

Communications Leader, North America



# TO WHAT DEGREE ARE GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS SUPPORTING SOCIAL COHESION?

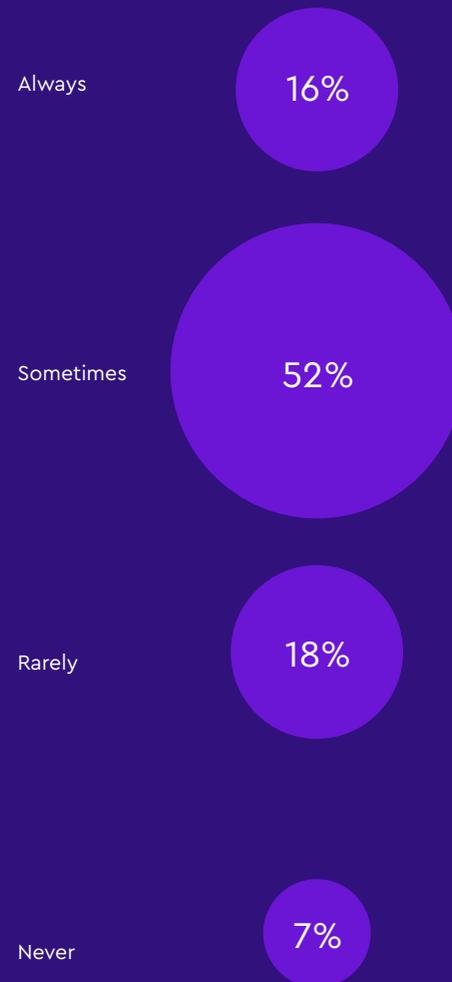
Since the start of the Covid pandemic (March 2020), do you think that society in your country or region of focus is becoming more or less cohesive?



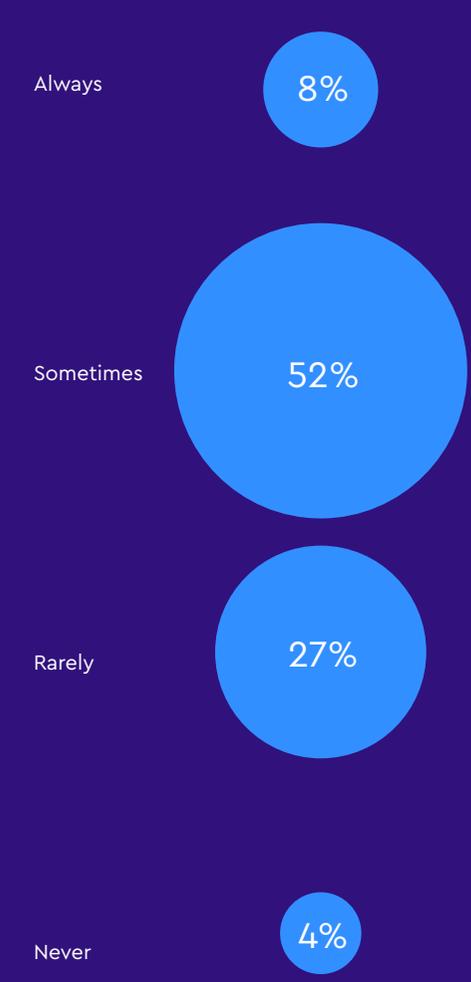
Since the start of the Covid pandemic (March 2020), how well do you think your organisation's communications have ...?



To what extent do you think that your organisation's communications actively seek to increase community cohesion?



To what extent do you think that your organisation's communications successfully help build community cohesion?





**Sean Larkins**

Global Director of Capability  
WPP Government & Public Sector  
Practice



Measuring social cohesion is difficult, but that didn't stop nearly two-thirds of respondents to our research saying that their country or region has become less cohesive. And if that doesn't worry you, it should.

While we may lack the means to measure social cohesion directly, there has long been consensus that cohesion is a factor in societal success or failure: the more internally divided the society, the more likely it is to distrust those in positions of authority, and to lose its ability to problem solve.

Earlier editions of *The Leaders' Report* charted the shift, over time, from Ages of Deference and Reference to newer Ages of Proximity and Intimacy. We're now less likely to listen to and respect people because of their position in society, and more likely to listen to and respect those we feel closest to and have the greatest emotional connection with.

That's a difficult – but not impossible – space for governments and public bodies to step into. Government communicators can better support social cohesion within the boundaries and constraints of their roles by:

### 1. Understanding what creates social cohesion

Evidence suggests that six factors<sup>1</sup> help build cohesive societies:

- Membership attraction – the benefits of being part of a society or community
- Perceived cohesion – the degree to which citizens believe that others are cheating or gaming the system
- Participation – opportunities to contribute, take part, and be heard
- Shared community values – the ethics, ideals and principles that underpin a community, region, or country
- Social capital – the networks and relationships that help us achieve a common purpose
- Role of institutions – how effectively our politicians, business and community leaders are creating stable economic, legal, and social relations.

### 2. Developing messages that actively support cohesion

Countries and regions with high levels of social cohesion believe that their government is working to help society as a whole; they can define what the benefits are of being part of that society; and they share and celebrate collective accomplishments. Government communicators can reflect this through messages that:

- Accentuate the common good. Citizens are instinctively drawn towards the common ground, and solutions that serve everyone's interests
- Reinforce equality and inclusion across communities. As tempting as it may be to scapegoat in a time of crisis, short-term pillorying only leads to greater longer-term mistrust
- Are honest, truthful and evidence based. The public are more likely to spot messages that are mendacious or polemical than we often give them credit for.

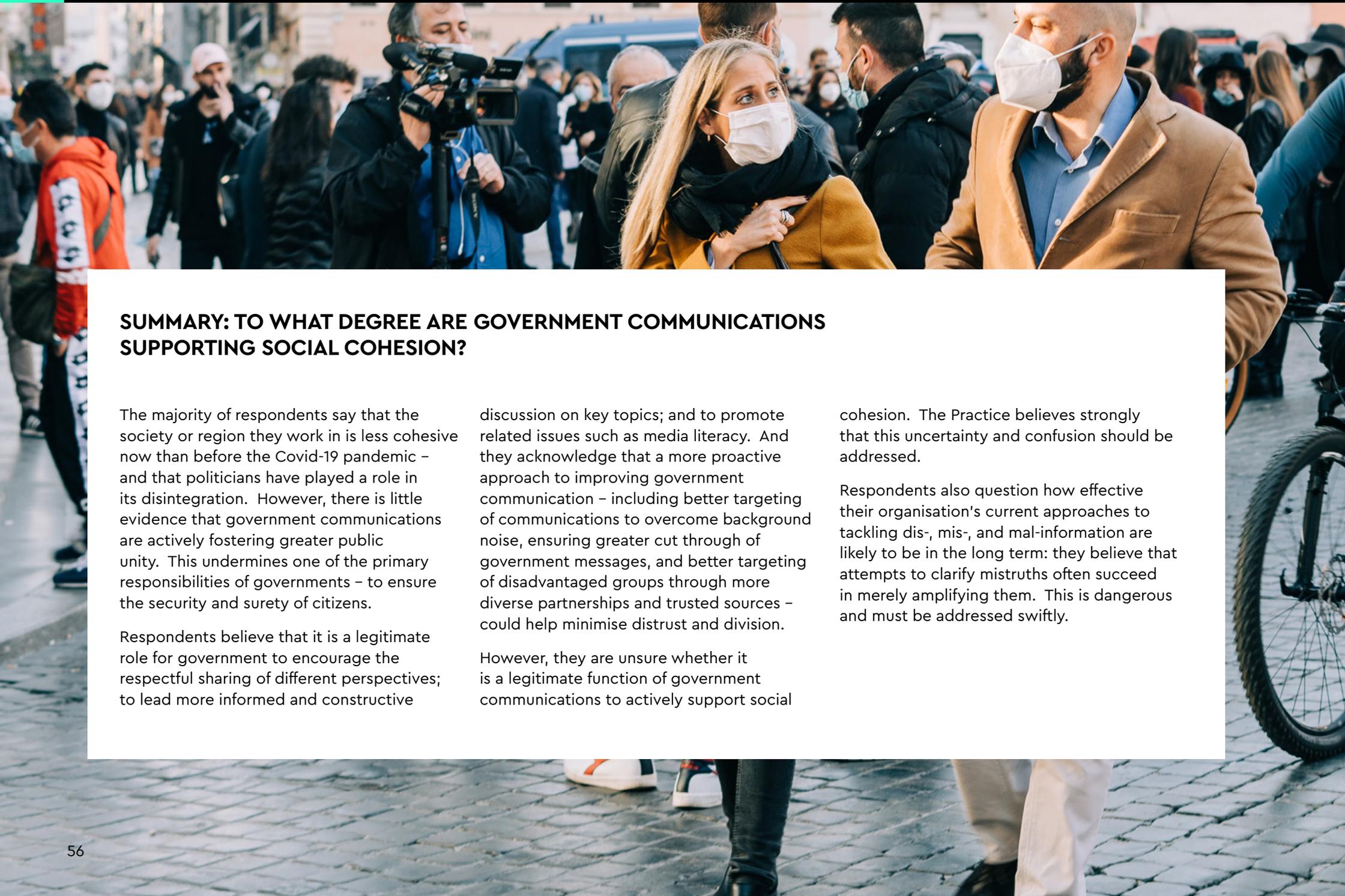
### 3. Better targeting communications

It's undeniable that social media has helped to weaken community cohesion by building echo chambers; enabling conspiracy theories and extremist views to be shared and normalised; and by creating algorithms that prioritise content containing conflict to get the most views. While social media remains an important channel for government, communicators can better target messages by:

- Forging communication partnerships with trusted community-based organisations
- Engaging directly with specialist community media at local, regional, and national level, including community specific television and radio stations and websites
- Creating on- and offline community engagement activities
- Using direct-to-citizen owned channels, including through civil and public servants (who, in general, tend to be trusted more than governments).

When acrimony and division are held in check, and when communities are motivated by shared aspirations and ideals, societies can thrive. But when social trust erodes, societies are much more likely to struggle. We all have a responsibility to try to prevent this.

<sup>1</sup> <https://so03.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/liberalartsjournal/article/view/244243>



## SUMMARY: TO WHAT DEGREE ARE GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS SUPPORTING SOCIAL COHESION?

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. This undermines one of the primary responsibilities of governments – to ensure the security and surety of citizens.

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 communications to overcome background noise, ensuring greater cut through of government messages, and 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 actively support social

cohesion. The Practice believes 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 addressed swiftly.



**Rob McPhedran**

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**KANTAR PUBLIC**

Mis-, dis- and mal-information (let's just call it misinformation for now) is one of the biggest challenges government communicators say they face, eroding trust in communications and policies; creating political and social unrest; and even destabilise the economy – all at the click of a button. While its prevalence remains unclear, research suggests that citizens encounter misinformation daily.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever the motivations of those responsible for spreading misinformation, it is disrupting governments' operations and adversely impacting citizens' wellbeing, its influence further amplified by our increasing reliance on social media as a 'fast' information source.

Government communicators are concerned that their organisations' responses inadvertently amplify, rather than clarify, fake news. We believe that a model that includes prebunking, or 'inoculation' is likely to be much more successful. It consists of:

- 1. Government intervention.** Governments in many countries have implemented laws or codes to stem the flow of misinformation by creating bodies to monitor social media for misinformation and compelling social media self-regulation. However, misinformation must first be identified via fact-checking and then debunked using a 'false tag' or removed. Unfortunately, evidence suggests that such reactive approaches are not effective for all citizens – particularly those who initially believe the misinformation being debunked or removed.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the volume of posts on social media means that the financial costs associated with adequate fact-checking are unsustainable at best or prohibitive at worst.<sup>3</sup> So many government intervention with:
- 2. Mass media literacy campaigns.** Implemented on- and offline by governments, NGOs, social media companies or special interest groups, they provide citizens with the tools they need to spot misinformation by offering identification tips. Research suggests that media literacy campaigns have a positive impact

on spotting false information. However, they may be less helpful for those who use the internet infrequently.<sup>4</sup> So the third tool in our armoury is:

- 3. Prebunking.** Alternatively called 'inoculating'. Prebunking can help build citizens' psychological immunity against misinformation by presenting them with 'weakened doses' that highlight manipulation tactics. Research to date suggests that prebunking could prove to be one of the most successful ways to reduce general susceptibility to misinformation, including in vulnerable subpopulations.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, different formats of inoculation interventions – including games, videos, and short education modules – have been tested, all of which appear effective.<sup>6</sup>

Each of these three types of intervention can work in isolation, but each has strengths and weaknesses depending on the particular demographic and psychographic subgroups at risk. Given this variability – and the rapid evolution of misinformation manipulation techniques, such as deepfakes – a combination of all three interventions looks to be required to maximise population immunity.

Whatever the mix, it's clear from the success of preventative interventions that a more proactive approach is needed by governments – and would be welcomed by government communicators. By inserting media literacy or inoculation interventions into the paid communications cycle, we can help citizens spot misinformation and better navigate an increasingly complex, uncertain media landscape.

*For more information on the effectiveness of misinformation interventions, you can read Kantar Public's paper on a recent experiment: <https://psyarxiv.com/bd2zu/>*

<sup>1</sup> Allen, J., Howland, B., Mobius, M., Rothschild, D., & Watts, D. J. (2020). Evaluating the fake news problem at the scale of the information ecosystem. *Science advances*, 6(14), eaay3539.

<sup>2</sup> Chan, M. P. S., Jones, C. R., Hall Jamieson, K., & Albarracín, D. (2017). Debunking: A meta-analysis of the psychological efficacy of messages countering misinformation. *Psychological science*, 28(11), 1531–1546.

<sup>3</sup> Allen, J., Arechar, A. A., Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. G. (2021). Scaling up fact-checking using the wisdom of crowds. *Science advances*, 7(36), eabf4393.

<sup>4</sup> Guess, A. M., Lerner, M., Lyons, B., Montgomery, J. M., Nyhan, B., Reifler, J., & Sircar, N. (2020). A digital media literacy intervention increases discernment between mainstream and false news in the United States and India. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 117(27), 15536–15545.

<sup>5</sup> Roozenbeek, J., Van Der Linden, S., Goldberg, B., Rathje, S., & Lewandowsky, S. (2022). Psychological inoculation improves resilience against misinformation on social media. *Science advances*, 8(34), eabo6254.

<sup>6</sup> Roozenbeek, J., & Van Der Linden, S. (2019). The fake news game: actively inoculating against the risk of misinformation. *Journal of risk research*, 22(5), 570–580.



**Rob Reilly**

Global Chief Creative Officer  
WPP



Why is creativity the world's most valuable asset? Because building trust, engaging citizens emotionally and changing their behaviour in an era where disinformation is rampant requires us to think and act in evermore imaginative and transformational ways.

This edition of *The Leaders' Report* identifies 12 practical actions that government communicators can take to improve the performance issues they told us about. I want to add a 13th to that list, which is to act creatively. Because if you don't act creatively, you'll never achieve your goals, whether in government or the public and private sectors.

Creativity is not solely about the words and pictures of communications or marketing; it is a way of thinking and acting that we all possess and is the world's most valuable asset.

I encourage all senior government leaders to build a culture where new ideas are nurtured, and people with different views are invited to be creative. When we view creativity as an asset, we enable new ideas that can transform communities, economies, and humanity. Ultimately, it's time to retire 'let's think outside the box' and instead say, 'let's think creatively.'

Here are four simple ways to start unlocking the world's most valuable asset:

### 1. Act more like a brand

Over the past decade, more corporate brands have stepped in to help fill roles traditionally held by governments through their purpose, sustainability and

ESG programmes. Those brand's consumers, who are also citizens, have readily accepted this transformation shift, because they have witnessed it making their lives and societies better.

As government communication professionals evolve their departments and teams, they could imagine themselves, and their government, as a brand itself. This will accelerate building a creative culture that will unleash creativity in everyone. It enables all of us to think about new challenges in non-traditional, unconventional, and creative ways.

There are three questions which are the foundations for any brand brief, and I believe they are equally crucial for government communications professionals:

- Do we have a great product to sell (our policies)?
- Do we have a great strategy and a clear brief to sell this product (our defined objectives)?
- Do we have the kind of content people will share, journalists will write about, and people react to (our communications)?

Each one of these questions requires embracing creativity at every level.

### 2. Stop saying no

There is an old saying that many people can say no, but it takes someone of true power to say yes. Creative transformation begins with eliminating as many speedbumps in our processes as possible and allowing individuals at all levels to contribute to every individual's ideation and creative thinking.

## CREATIVITY IS THE WORLD'S MOST VALUABLE ASSET



While the word "no" will certainly be required at some point, the creative flow of ideas and channels to freely share ideas will create a momentum that allows for better policy development and better efforts at reaching all our citizens – including those most marginalised.

### 3. Embrace creative partnerships

In recent decades businesses and their brands have stepped up, helping carry the burden of building a better society. Now is the time for governments to seek more ways to partner with brands. That may be controversial or challenging in some parts of the world. Still, meaningful, and measurable results are possible from public and private partnerships – especially when creativity is the glue that binds them together.

The development of the Covid vaccine is a powerful example of creativity and public/private partnership in action. The amount of new thinking, different ways of working, and bravery (to not only create a vaccine but to sell that vaccine to governments before it was even fully developed and THEN sell that vaccine to the public) was uniquely creative in terms of original ideas, invented processes, and precise coordination.

Using the power of creativity from the outset truly helped governments do what they do best – protect their citizens.

### 4. It's the data, stupid

As my colleague, Di Mayze, has said elsewhere in this report, governments can better utilise the vast amounts of data at their fingertips to inform and enable creativity and creative ideation.

Data, AI, and machine learning are all tools for understanding that may produce new strategic insights into what citizens needs from government services if used responsibly. This source of insights, when refined into strategic briefs, empowers, and enables communicators to think creatively about how to address problems and needs in fresh ways.

The good news is that governments have the power to master creativity, and every single person working in them can contribute creatively to building a better future.

Ultimately, it requires bravery to reform the cultural and structural aspects of government communication departments and develop a working environment where new ideas can gestate and evolve. I recognise this may be a step-change. I won't deny that it may also be uncomfortable, but the more we fear unleashing our creativity, the longer it will take to truly serve our citizens and rebuild public trust.

# CONCLUSIONS

In 2017, *The Leaders' Report – the future of government communication* concluded that government communication professionals around the world were confronted by a series of five interconnected challenges:

- Declining levels of trust and the rise of populism
- A lack of understanding of – and ability to connect with – increasingly fragmented audiences
- An over-reliance of one-way 'broadcast' communication
- A lack of modern – particularly digital – communication skills
- The inability of many government communication leaders to influence sufficiently within and across their organisation.

Six years on, these challenges remain as pressing as ever, but government communicators have taken significant steps in addressing them. The profession is continuing to evolve and, as a result, we believe that government communication is continuing to improve. For example:

- Structural changes are enhancing the integration of communications and marketing with policy development and delivery
- Public organisations are updating the media channels they use and increasing the amount of information they share through their own – particularly digital – channels
- There is a revived focus on communicating better with a wider range of hard-to-reach and minority audiences
- And there is a growing understanding of the importance of using psychographic segmentation alongside demographic segmentation – so that citizen behaviours can be influenced by "how" people think and "what" they aspire their lives to be, as well as "who" and "where" they are.

However, there is little evidence that governments have used the recent series of crises to achieve longer-term goals. Communication is still overwhelmingly tactical and short term, and there remains a number of areas where more action is urgently required:

- Inflexible processes and unnecessary red tape stifle creativity and mean that overcoming bureaucracy is once again the number one priority of respondents

- A lack of insight and sentiment analysis – in effect, the failure to listen to the public – means that attempts to become more citizen centric are limited
- Short-termism and the absence of coherent communication strategies make media planning and buying ineffective
- The failure to invest in evaluation and attribution mean that overall effectiveness remains difficult to assess.

Additionally, this year's research suggests that:

- Efforts to actively support social cohesion are scarce and the role that government communication can play in building stronger communities requires clarification
- Approaches to tackling mis-, dis- and mal-information remain confused. Respondents fear that, on occasion, government interventions can be counterproductive
- Increased reports of politicisation suggests that refreshed training on propriety and ethics is required to overcome the partisanship that many respondents believe is undermining confidence in government communication.

# APPENDIX: THE LEADERS' REPORT SERIES

In 2017, in the first edition of *The Leaders' Report*, WPP's Government & Public Sector Practice concluded that citizens were angrier and more insecure than probably at any time since the end of the Cold War. Since then, increasing geopolitical disorder, economic turmoil, and the continued growth of technology have produced a state of almost permanent disruption.

By auditing existing practice and analysing data on government communication performance, we were able to identify the 10 key drivers of the best performing government communication functions, and show the difference between the highest- and lowest-performing ones.



Two years later, we stress-tested government communication further and, after qualitative research with 10,000 citizens in 10 countries, we identified 10 requirements or drivers for effective government communication that we believe form the bedrock of more effective and emotionally-driven engagement with citizens.

- Mobilising factors that boost acceptance and approval of government actions
  - » 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
- Shaping factors that build and reinforce the relationship between citizens and the state
  - » 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 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 to them
  - » Coherence: public leaders need to maintain consistency between what they say and what they do, and consistency of message across ministries and departments

- Involvement factors that actualise the benefits for both citizen and society of better collaboration
  - » 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.

In 2021, we found that after an unprecedented year, the pandemic had created a range of new challenges for governments to tackle. These included the further fracturing of societies; rapidly changing social behaviours – and the need to change many of them further still; changing trends in areas such as e-commerce, entertainment, healthcare, retail, and travel; accelerated changes to media consumption and atomisation of channels; and an increased dependency of citizens upon the state.

Our research concluded that citizens needed five key things from government communications:

- Facts and a sense of security, to help them make sense of a rapidly-changing situation
- Emotional and technical support, to help them cope with any emerging difficulties

- Reassurance: governments had over promised but under delivered in a range of areas, and citizens were losing confidence in their ability to deliver
- To be treated like adults: citizens were eager to reassert their independence after a year of being told what they could and could not do
- Protection from new and emerging dangers: citizens needed communication to help address their key vulnerabilities, both on- and offline.

In 2023, we identified important successes in managing crises and reputation management; providing accessible information; and delivering digital services.

However, we also noted with concern that boundaries between what is political and what is public communication have become increasingly blurred; challenges remain in successfully segmenting and communicating with non-mainstream audiences; and that there is uncertainty around the role that government communication can, and should, play in an increasingly opinionated environment.

Copies of all editions of *The Leaders' Report* are available to download at [www.govtpracticewpp.com](http://www.govtpracticewpp.com).

## WPP GOVERNMENT & PUBLIC SECTOR PRACTICE

The WPP 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.

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2023 survey data was collected via an online survey sent to WPP Government & Public Sector Practice (and agencies) and Kantar Public clients, as well as owned social media posts, and the WPP Government & Public Sector Practice database. The fieldwork period was 15 August to 30 September 2022. 153 government and public sector communicators completed the survey.

2023 qualitative interviews were conducted among 37 participants across 13 markets. Fieldwork took place throughout October and November 2022, both online and face-to-face, conducted by representatives from WPP and Kantar Public. Participants were senior government and public sector communications clients of WPP Government & Public Sector Practice (and agencies) and Kantar Public.

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# THE LEADERS' REPORT