



# Chapter 1

## Ethics and Government Communication

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This chapter reviews the role of the government communication function in South Africa during the transition from an autocratic apartheid state to a democratic state and explores how ethical theory could enable government communicators to navigate ethical dilemmas brought about by the transition. The government communication function is defined as “the role, practice, aims and achievements of communication as it takes place in and on behalf of a public institution(s) whose primary end is executive in the service of a political rationale, and that is constituted based on the people’s indirect or direct consent and charged to enact their will” (Sanders & Canel, 2013: 4).

The chapter argues that government communication during the apartheid era played a pivotal role in defending and promoting apartheid policies in South Africa and abroad, under the leadership of the Ministry of Information and the South African Communication Service (SACS). Following the adoption of a democratic Constitution in 1996, the role of government communication shifted toward promoting transparency and accountability through the GCIS (Glenn & Mattes, 2012). Notably, the Ministry of Information was abolished, and the SACS was replaced by a semi-autonomous GCIS that reported to the Presidency via a Minister without Portfolio. This suggests a deliberate intent to depart from a propagandist Ministry of Information that existed during the apartheid era.

## Public Sector Communication in the Digital Age

The chapter asserts that a government communication function is contextual and influenced by the nature and character of the state it serves. This chapter uses ethics (moral) theory to evaluate both the system and the conduct of communicators from an ethical standpoint. This is done to inform communicators that all forms of communication have contextual and ethical dimensions that pose dilemmas for those who work in the system. The chapter argues that during the apartheid era, the government communication function was designed to promote apartheid policies, whereas, in the post-apartheid era, the system was designed to promote transparency and accountability in line with the new Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Although a lot of literature exists about the role, nature, and structure of the government communication function globally, not enough attention has been given to the ethical dilemmas faced by government communicators when countries undergo radical transitions from autocracy to democracy. This discussion seeks to contribute to filling this gap in the South African public sector communication discourse and identifies areas for further study in this regard. Ethical theories are discussed as an analytical tool to identify, analyse, and evaluate the ethical dilemmas encountered by the government communication system and government communicators in post-apartheid South Africa. These government communicators are employees tasked with the responsibility of conveying information, both internally and externally, to diverse audiences regarding agency/departmental office policies, decisions, actions, and/or guiding communication strategy (Ruijter, 2017). I conclude by proposing an ethical theoretical framework that could enable communicators to evaluate their conduct in the exercise of their duties professionally and ethically while remaining loyal to the government of the day. In the end, understanding ethics is important because all forms, contexts, and instances of communication are infused with ethical dimensions (Japp, Meister & Japp, 2005).

## **Background: Government Communication in South Africa**

South Africa held its first democratic elections in 1994 after decades of colonial and apartheid rule. The first democratic parliament embarked on an inclusive process to draft a new Constitution that was finally promulgated as Act 108 of 1996. The preamble of the new Constitution of the Republic of South Africa seeks to “Lay the foundations for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is equally protected by law”.

During the apartheid era, government communication was characterised by a culture of secrecy, disinformation, and restrictions on press freedom (ComTask, 1996). The SACS’s mandate was to promote and defend the policies of the apartheid regime and to contribute to the acceptance of apartheid policies in South Africa and abroad. Although no scholarly literature exists regarding the policies and operations of SACS, its primary role was to use various media channels, primarily the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), to promote and defend the ideology of apartheid.

As the government communications function evolved from an undemocratic propaganda machine to an agile system that sought to promote transparency and accountability, the system experienced a new tension that was caused largely by the expectation that the government communication system should serve the narrow purpose of defending a state that was perceived to be corrupt and incapable of addressing the socio-economic needs of the vast majority.

### **Government communications during the apartheid era**

To understand the form and character of government communication, it is important to understand the character of the state that creates the system (Hansson, Belkacem & Ekenberg, 2015). The changing role of the government communication function during the transition requires an understanding of the nature and character of the state in the pre- and post-apartheid era. Goncalves and Santos (2017)

define political communication as the communication efforts to disseminate information to the media and the public in order to influence election results. Government communication, on the other hand, is defined as the process of communication and interaction between government and its citizens to convey information about government policies and programmes. The latter is based on the understanding that a healthy democracy requires an informed public and a government transparent and accountable to the electorate (Goncalves & Santos, 2017).

The apartheid state was an autocratic and undemocratic state that did not embrace basic values such equality, law, and socio-economic rights. Hence its reliance on state-sponsored propaganda, stringent security laws, and the use of forces to maintain its survival. It is no accident that its communication system and policies were designed to perpetuate the subjugation of the black majority and to keep the white minority uninformed about the injustices of the system. The apartheid communication system was underpinned by secrecy and suppression of information that exposed the injustices of apartheid and opposition to apartheid in general. Public entities, such as the SABC, were used as a propaganda machine to promote apartheid (Glenn & Mattes, 2012). Legislative frameworks were also used to control the flow of information to the public, control media ownership and ensure that only the government and its supporters had free access to the media platforms.

The communication strategy was designed and implemented by the Ministry of Information with the SACS as its administrative arm. Media ownership was subject to stringent regulation, and numerous laws were in place specifically designed to preserve and propagate the apartheid ideology (Fourie, 2002). Private ownership of both print and electronic media was limited to only a few members of the white – and mainly Afrikaner – elite and a handful of others. However, the concentration of media ownership has persisted into the post-apartheid era (Radebe, 2022). Although bland and progressive journalists took the risk and established alternative media platforms, such as *The New Nation*, *The*

*Sowetan*, *Vrye Weekblad*, the *Weekly Mail* and others, these were dealt with harshly by the regime. Several journalists and editors were persecuted, and newspapers were routinely banned by the state (Berger, 2000; Wasserman, 2010). As if controlling the airwaves was not enough, in what became known as the 'Information Scandal' the state went to the extent of using public funds illegally to secretly establish *The Citizen* newspaper at great expense to the taxpayer.

Recruitment to the SACS was purely on a racial and partisan basis at all state levels (Posel, 1999). Just like all aspects of life under apartheid, the SACS was created to serve the narrow interests of the apartheid regime and the ruling elite of the time. Although the government communication system fulfilled its mandate of promoting the unjust policies of an apartheid state and the ruling elite, it cannot be said that the system's character, conduct and work would pass the ethical test.

### **The post-apartheid state**

In the period leading to South Africa's first democratic election, the ANC launched its Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) in 1994 stating, among other things, that democratisation requires an efficient, effective, responsive, and accountable government. Following the first democratic elections of 1994, the newly elected government had no choice but to introduce reforms to give effect to the new Constitutional dispensation (Horwitz, 2001). In other words, the ANC planned to establish a state that would be capable of intervening in the economy to deliver improved public services to all South Africans. This language and tone suggest that the ANC embraced the notion of an interventionist state.

A developmental state is defined as a state that, guided by a long-term plan, pursues higher levels of socio-economic development, has the requisite capacity, is run by an elite that is developmental in approach and is appropriately organised to achieve the predetermined goals (Gumede, 2015). Four

key elements are identified as pillars of a developmental state, namely:

1. electoral democracy;
2. popular participation in governance;
3. economic growth and state-driven socio-economic development; and
4. state capacity to deliver services (Edigheji, 2005).

The developmental state approach is therefore in direct contrast to the neo-classical economics approach that sees state intervention as tampering with economic growth and disrupting the market (Gumede, 2015). Key ANC documents also emphasise the need for the state to be capacitated to intervene in the market in the interests of higher national development, higher rates of economic growth, and achieving social cohesion (ANC Strategy and Tactics, 2007).

In the 30th anniversary year of South Africa's first democratic elections, although the ideological underpinnings of a developmental and constitutional state exist, several factors have emerged to undermine this trajectory. They include economic decline, high levels of inequality, poverty, unemployment, and corruption, and political infighting among the elite within the governing party, and the tripartite alliance made up of the ANC, Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the SACP. The tension within the ANC and its alliance partners points to a contest about two key issues: an ideological fight over economic policies on the one hand, and a fight for control over state resources among the elites within the ruling party (Pillay, 2011). Escalating levels of corruption in the state system suggest that some elements of the governing elite have fallen into the trap of putting personal interests ahead of national interests.

This suggests that while the post-1994 democratic state may have had the characteristics of a developmental state at its inception, it may now be deemed 'anti-developmental' as the state appears to have been derailed from its trajectory. Government appears to be experiencing what Fanon referred to as "... the mishaps of the educated classes who were

unprepared, lack practical links with the masses, laziness and cowardice”. Further, he writes: “The intellectuals who, on the eve of independence, rallied to the party, now make it clear by their attitude that they gave their support with no other end in view than to secure their slices of the cake of independence. Thus, the party becomes “a means of private advancement” (Fanon,1963).

This context present dilemmas for the government communication system in general and the communicators in particular as the two are caught between an underperforming, untrusted and seemingly unethical state, on the one hand, and an unhappy, distrusting and discontent populace. Edigheji’s (2005) characterisation of a development state is useful to evaluate the role, design and character of the South African state; and how the model of a government communication system mirrors his model of a developmental communication system.

The newly elected South African government had to design a state that would be capable of fulfilling the constitutional mandates to address the socio-economic challenges facing the majority. However, the state could not fulfill these objectives without intervening in the market to direct the country’s economic trajectory toward the achievement of these goals. In other words, the design of the new state had to confront the relationship between politics and the economy. However, the rising levels of poverty, unemployment, and inequality post-1994 suggest that the state may be failing to fulfill its developmental state role. This failure, real or perceived, is putting strains on the post-1994 government communication system as it struggles to build trust between the state and its citizens.

### **The post-apartheid government communication system**

In 1995, a year after the first democratic elections, the new government established the Communication Task Group in 1995 to conduct a review of the government communication system and recommend a new communication system for

South Africa that would be aligned with the constitutional imperatives of guaranteed political and civil rights, freedom of information, transparency and accountability. The review led to the establishment of the current Government Communication Information System in 1998, which I joined as its Chief Executive Officer in 2009. The GCIS's mission was to "deliver effective strategic government communication, set standards and proactively communicate with the public about government policies, plans, programmes and achievements through media relations, public reporting and responsiveness to citizens' needs" (GCIS, 1998). In addition to being a service to achieve accountability, the new government acknowledged the need for political communication and included a subset of political communicators whose task was to meet the political communication needs of elected representatives.

The establishment of the GCIS resulted in the amalgamation of structures and absorption of personnel from the white administration, the nine ethnically based so-called homeland governments, and four white provincial administrations. Other than the white national administrations and the four provincial administrations, all the government departments had their communication staff, structures, strategies, and systems. Following the recommendations of the Communication Task team, the above-mentioned communication units were integrated into what became known as the GCIS, which included all the racially based communications divisions.

Incidentally, the GCIS adopted the structural model of the SACS with a central Head Office, departmental communications, and provincial communication divisions that reported to their political and administrative heads. Each political head of a ministry or department was allocated the post of a politically appointed media liaison officer whose term of office was linked to the term of office of the political principal.

The recruitment of government communicators was decentralised to each ministry and department and province

with no uniform norms and standards. Except for the political communicators, known as Ministerial Liaison Officers (MLO), all communicators were civil servants who were appointed on the basis of communication qualifications, skills, and work experience. The MLOs have no direct reporting line to the heads of administrations in the departments and are not subject to public service rules and regulations. This points to a systemic weakness. The lack of a governance framework to regulate the role and relationship between the political communicators and the heads of communication in the system creates tension within the system. For instance, GCIS's mandate is to develop the national communications framework for national and provincial governments and to manage all communication functions in the organisation, including strategy design and implementation, marketing, and media liaison (GCIS, n.d.). This conundrum could be addressed by creating a dotted reporting line between the departmental head of communication and the MLO to improve coordination and alignment while allowing the MLO to fulfil their political communication responsibilities.

## **Government and the Media**

In a democratic state, the media plays a 'watchdog' role of balancing the executive, legislative and judicial arms of the state by challenging the accuracy of information provided by the government, exposing misinformation and corruption, poor performance and criminality in the public and private sectors in the public interest (Goncalves & Santos, 2017). As previously stated, the relationship between the apartheid state and the media, in general, was frosty at best and non-existent at worst, due to the regime's secrecy laws, intolerance, and an anti-media posture. The alternative press in particular was overtly anti-apartheid (Wasserman, 2010), with many of its journalists and editors imprisoned (Radebe, 2021). The apartheid regime's media function was managed and led by the Department of Information whose mandate was to restrict, monitor and control the flow of information to the public. The SABC was the apartheid regime's mouthpiece and

fitted the definition of a state broadcaster rather than a public broadcaster. Essentially, the SABC operated within narrow apartheid logic (Sparks, 2009).

Following the adoption of the new Constitution and the Bill of Rights, the relationship between the state and the media was designed to change as new legislation was promulgated in pursuit of the constitutional imperatives of access to information and a free press (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005). For instance, the post-apartheid Broadcasting Act 4 of 1999 states categorically that the SABC's objectives will include the promotion of democracy, the development of society, and nation-building. The Act also states that the SABC will be owned and controlled by the South African public and not the state. Section 6(2) of the Act provides that the SABC will exercise its powers, and enjoy freedom of expression, and journalistic, creative, and programming independence.

This represented a monumental shift from the apartheid era in which the SABC was a state broadcaster (Fourie, 2003). Further, the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) Act 13 of 2000 was promulgated to establish an independent body to regulate the broadcast media environment. ICASA published a code of conduct that requires all broadcasters to deliver news in a fair manner and without distortion and exaggeration (White, 2006). The jury is still out about whether this policy change was successfully implemented by the previous and current elected representatives and the boards, executives and media practitioners at both the SABC and ICASA.

In the light of the 1996 Constitution, the new laws and policies created a legitimate expectation that the relationship between the state and the media would change for the better. However, cracks emerged between government leaders and the media, suggesting that although the new democratic state was obliged to implement the new Constitution and the Bill of Rights, there were signs that the post-apartheid government was unhappy about the media's role. For instance, South Africa's first democratically elected president Nelson Mandela

voiced concerns regarding the ownership and staffing composition of the South African media, predominantly by white males, which he believed contributed to a biased portrayal of the South African experience (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005).

Nevertheless, Valentine (2014), regards former president Nelson Mandela as having laid a firm legacy for media freedom. She cites Mandela's speech at the International Press gathering in 1994: "A critical, independent press is the lifeblood of any democracy. The press must be free from any state interference." Mandela is perceived as having stood firm on media freedom. However, he did have lapses in which he criticised black journalists whom he described as disloyal. This led to a meeting with the South African National Editors Forum (SANEF) in 1996, where Mandela was reported to have reassured the editors that media freedom would never be under threat in South Africa (Valentine, 2014).

Criticism of the media continued under President Mbeki's administration, with government and ANC leaders advocating for stronger regulation of the media (Radebe, 2023). Valentine (2014) submits that in his weekly online article, Mbeki became very critical of black journalists and even went to the extent of branding black journalists as 'Uncle Toms'. President Zuma's relationship with the media was even more acrimonious. For instance, between 2006 and 2010, he is reported to have sued the media and other critics for defamation in 15 cases (Milo, 2023). On 7 June 2023, Zuma lost his legal battle to prosecute a journalist for publishing his medical records ahead of his corruption trial (Hawker, 2023).

Although President Ramaphosa appears not to have taken a negative posture against media freedom, his perceived reluctance to interact directly with the media through media conferences is causing disquiet in the media fraternity. For instance, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Ramaphosa opted for what became known as 'family meetings' at which he communicated with the public through prepared statements on radio and television without allowing journalists to ask

difficult questions about the government response to the pandemic and its impact on the economy. Inevitably, these one-sided meetings received criticism (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2022).

### **Responses to post-1994 government threats against media freedom**

Media organisations, civil society bodies and the courts have pushed back on what was perceived as the democratic government's attempt to muzzle the media and limit public access to information. SANEF, together with other civil society organisations, mounted campaigns for media freedom, which included taking the government to court to demand access to information. In response to the call by the ruling ANC to set up a punitive Media Appeals Tribunal, SANEF and media owners set up an independent Press Freedom Commission, chaired by a retired judge, to propose a mechanism to address the concerns raised by the ruling party about media bias (Daniels, 2020). This Commission proposed the establishment of an independent Press Council to strengthen ethical standards for media reporting and to administer a hierarchy of penalties for breaches of ethical standards in the media. This demonstrates the contested nature of South Africa's media (Wasserman, 2020).

The GCIS played a pivotal role in building a bridge between the media and government leaders. This took the form of regular meetings between SANEF and members of the National Cabinet that were convened by the Minister in the Presidency responsible for government communications. Although these meetings served the purpose of managing the tension between the government and the media, the infrequency of these meetings only served to reduce tensions but never dealt with the underlying mistrust, namely: the government's challenge of the media's right to report on all aspects of governance including corruption and governance failures, and government's expectation that the media should under-report on government failures and over-report on government successes. However, there are indications that

tensions between the media and the governing party predated the 1994 transition. (Jacobs, 2004).

## **Ethical Dilemmas**

The socio-economic challenges, rising levels of corruption and the state's failure to address service delivery concerns are some of the many factors that are posing ethical dilemmas for government communicators. Ethical theory could play a key role in helping them to evaluate and navigate some of the dilemmas. Some argue that corruption within government departments stems from deficient ethical standards in leadership, consequently resulting in sub-par public service delivery (Mbandlwa, Dorasamy & Fagbadebo, 2020).

The major cause of the trust deficit is the perception that government leaders are driven by self or party interest and are not accountable to the public. For example, since 2008, it is reported that more than 2 million South Africans have taken to the streets in protest at the government's poor service delivery record (Plaut, 2012). Poor state performance and rising levels of corruption often breed discontent as the masses witness the rising living standards of the ruling elites at their expense (Fanon, 1963). The display of arrogance, corruption, and factionalism is evident in the perceived disregard for the poor in numerous municipalities (Ndletyana, 2020). At a macro-level, the primary dilemma facing the communication system relates to balancing personal, government, and societal interests in the performance of the function in an environment characterised by socio-economic and service delivery challenges, and increased corruption.

The GCIS describes its mission as to give the public access to information and create opportunities for the government to hold dialogues with stakeholders to discuss policy implementation and delivery of services. Furthermore, in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, effective government communication plays a crucial role in fostering institutional trust and credibility (Lerouge, Lema & Arnaboldi, 2023) and in convincing stakeholders that government is

delivering on its electoral mandate. This opens the government communication service to the risk of being perceived merely as a system that engages in propaganda because of the disconnect between government's messages and citizens' lived experiences.

In such situations, virtue ethics come into play because communicators will have to consider their personal values such as honesty, integrity, consistency, and truthfulness to determine their actions. Essentially, this is about the person's character and the action that caused that character (Alzola, Hennig & Romar, 2020). Therefore, individual communicators may decide not to comply with the demand to engage in propaganda and take the courageous step of exiting the system at great risk to their personal interests, such as career and loss of financial incentives. Similarly, ethical elected leaders also have a choice to either remain or resign as members of an elected executive that is perceived to be corrupt, incapable of delivering services, or that provides misleading information to the public.

Elected leaders and government communicators are often confronted with the conflict between public, party, and personal interests – to be re-elected or retained in a position. For example, when former President Zuma was facing corruption allegations, political leaders from the ruling party and government communicators were torn between defending or criticising him because any decision would attract consequences from either political actors or the public. Many political leaders chose to keep quiet as threats of disciplinary action loomed overhead (Brett, 2020). A similar scenario arose when President Ramaphosa faced serious allegations of corruption and money laundering when large amounts of US dollars were stolen from his private residence (Mahlala, Juta, Chigova & Zweni, 2023). Expectedly, ANC members are often divided about whether to support or criticise their presidents under these circumstances, and government communicators are often caught in the middle of these conflicts.

The central question in both scenarios pertains to the prioritisation of personal and party interests ahead of public interests. Government communicators face similar dilemmas in their day-to-day work. For example, do they prioritise personal, government (employer) or public interest when confronted with instances of governance failure or corruption allegations against their ministries or departments? According to deontology theory, they could rely on codes if such rules exist, to help them make a choice about their communication role in such circumstances. A rule or code could state that ‘thou shall not tell lies or mislead the public’. Alternatively, the communicator could rely on their own virtues of honesty and integrity, combine these with their knowledge of the truth, and decide not to be part of the government communication system.

### **Evaluating government communications from a moral theory perspective**

#### *Ethics theories*

Understanding ethics is essential to developing an ethical framework to guide and evaluate the government communication system, and for government communicators, as agents of the system, to evaluate themselves. Ethical theories have evolved and have been adopted to inform different disciplines that require certain standards of behaviour and performance from members of their professions.

The word ‘ethics’ comes from the Greek word *ethos*, which means character and is used in moral philosophy to refer to the evaluation of the character and conduct of a person or persons using the standard of “right or wrong, good or bad, or acceptable or not” (Theroux, 2004). Ethics is described as a system in which ethical behaviour is a good virtue in cultivating responsibility to the self and to the society one exists within, and character may be explained as the qualities which an individual, organisation or society finds acceptable (Dieffenbach, 2020). Therefore, each stakeholder or agent of government communication who faces ethical dilemmas in

the performance of their duties could use one or more of these theories to evaluate their conduct and the conduct of others. These theories could be used by stakeholders to evaluate the conduct of individuals in the system and or the performance and role of the system.

Elected representatives are often faced with a tension between their personal interests, such as career and material benefits on the one hand, and public interests on the other. During the COVID-19 pandemic, politicians across the world were caught out for undermining the very stringent regulations they were enforcing in their respective countries (Guttman & Lev, 2021). These violations included issues in their private lives, allegations of corruption, nepotism, and favouritism. Civil servants in government communication face the dilemma of choosing between giving priority to the interests of the government as their employer, the public interests and their values.

Ethical shortcomings become more pronounced when a government communicator is managing a communication crisis because they must make a choice between telling the truth and protecting the image of the government or telling half-truths (spin) to protect the elected leader, thereby putting the government's reputation at risk (Goncalves & Santos, 2017). This challenge primarily arises from the inherently political nature of government communication, which frequently confronts communicators with the dilemma of navigating between conveying factual information and potentially propagandistic messaging, as well as balancing the needs of the public with those of political parties (Brown, 2012).

For the purposes of this discussion, the view is taken that government communication under apartheid fell within the framework of political communication as the system was designed to defend and promote the state's apartheid ideology. Ethical theory contributes to society's evaluation of the conduct of both the government communication system and

the agents. However, these theoretical tools are also available for use by the agents to evaluate themselves.

Different philosophies have emerged over time and the question that often arises is which theory applies to the field of study in question. In most cases, different theoretical approaches exist in the same field, which requires theorists and practitioners to choose the best theoretical tool to apply. According to Goncalves and Santos (2017), three ethical theories are applicable to the study of government communications:

1. utilitarianism;
2. deontology; and
3. virtue ethics.

The first theory, utilitarianism, provides that an action or conduct of an agent is deemed ethical if the overall consequence of the action provides the greatest possible good to most people. This is calculated by adding together the partial 'good' that makes up the whole society and minimises the negative consequences that may arise for the minority (Goncalves & Santos, 2017). In this instance, government communication's task is to justify the action or conduct based on benefits that accrue to the majority. This theory is criticised for its majoritarianism.

The second theory, deontology, places emphasis on ethical principles and morality to evaluate human action. In other words, no ethical shortcoming of an act can be justified or rationalised by a cost-benefit analysis, however great the aggregate good that arises from the action or inaction. This theory advocates for the institutionalisation of ethics through codes and rules that regulate and evaluate whether rules have been broken. Its downside is that there cannot be rules for every situation or circumstance and that agents always find ways around rules. Agents ask, "What is my duty, and which rule is applicable?" (Goncalves & Santos, 2017).

The third theory, virtue ethics, states that an agent's action is guided largely by character traits that drive them to

act in a particular way, such as having the courage to take risks to perform a particular good, and acting rationally without following rules. The use of codes is not simply banned but should be more aspirational than prescriptive. This theory favours internalisation and application of ethical values by agents themselves, who apply them in every situation (Goncalves & Santos, 2017). For instance, an agent internalises truthfulness, honesty, and integrity in the exercise of their duties and does not need rules or codes to apply these values in their personal, organisational and societal capacities.

Goncalves and Santos (2017) adopt the view that although virtue ethics theory is more useful as a tool to evaluate the performance of the government communication system, deontological theory's adoption of ethical codes to guide government communications also has a place because professionalisation of the function may not be achievable without adopting codes to guide good practice. This is the context that presents ethical dilemmas for those who have the task of communicating on behalf of a state that seems incapable of executing its ideological and constitutional obligations to build a capable developmental state. The dilemmas are essentially about how a government communication system positions an incapable state. Government communication is a product of, and is shaped by, the character of the state of which it forms part.

Government communicators are also appointed in terms of the Public Service Act of 1994, Batho Pele Principles (Public Service and Administration, 1994), the Public Service Regulations of 2016, and the Code of Conduct for Public Servants (Public Service Regulations, 2016).

The premier legislation that directs the communicators' conduct is the Constitution of 1996, which requires that a high standard of professional ethics must be promoted and maintained in public service (Semono, 2020). Further, Chapter 2 of the Public Service Regulations (2016) provide an ethical framework that regulates the conduct of all public servants, including government communicators. These regulations

include the promotion of unity and wellbeing of all citizens, not receiving bribes, serving with impartiality, and politeness, being accessible, providing a high standard of service, the right of access to information, and refraining from participating in political activities in the workplace. These principles and values are designed to achieve efficiency and effectiveness and can be used to evaluate the conduct and performance of public servants.

Other than the GCIS broad frameworks, there is no code of conduct that guides communicators when faced with ethical challenges. In the examples previously stated, communicators could either follow the party line and defend the presidents or choose to be guided by their virtues. However, one of the Batho Pele Principles that states: “Citizens should be given full and accurate information about the services they are entitled to receive” comes close to providing a tool that communicators could use to evaluate their conduct. When confronted with a specific or broader ethical challenge such as providing misleading information, defending wrongful and unethical behaviour of elected and appointed government officials, or using communication tools and platforms to justify poor performance by the government, a communicator could use this Batho Pele principle to refuse to comply and face the consequences, which could include dismissal. Similarly, the communicator could choose to exit the system on account of being unwilling to defend a government whose values and performance record are contrary to his or her own.

## **Discussion**

Indeed, government communication is a tool at the disposal of government and the character of the state it serves defines its character (Sanders & Canel, 2013). In other words, the public communication system is designed to serve the government of the day. This could lead to a dilemma for communicators who experience a conflict between their values and the values of the government they serve. Examples of this conflict include instances where a government communicator embraces

liberal and democratic values while working for an autocratic apartheid state and an ethical communicator who is employed by a corrupt and incompetent state. In these instances, a communicator who is confronted by this dilemma has a choice whether to align their conduct with the interests of the state as their employer or put their ethical interests first and exit the system. For example, should a progressive-minded communicator continue to work for a racist company at which they are expected to promote and defend the racist or homophobic policy of their employer?

In a government context, ethical shortcomings often become more pronounced when government communication is managing a communication crisis because the agents in the system may have to choose between telling the truth and protecting the image of the government or telling half-truths (spin) to protect the leader, thereby putting the government's reputation at risk (Goncalves & Santos, 2017). In these circumstances, the South African government communication system and its agents have tended to either err on the side of caution or align their conduct with the policies of the government of the day. Although understandable from a career and personal interest point of view, this approach carries reputational risks for the individual concerned. In most cases, government communicators opt out and become unavailable for comment for fear of being seen to be defending what they consider indefensible policies of the employer or the conduct of political principals. This is largely due to a lack of theoretical tools that could enable them to navigate difficult situations. The opting-out option creates another problem for elected leaders as communicators are then evaluated as inefficient, incompetent, or not communicating sufficiently because they expect communicators to defend the government at all costs.

The fundamental question is what these 'agents' should do under these circumstances. In terms of virtue ethical theory, communicators must internalise virtue ethics and if they conclude that simply complying and defending the indefensible would be contrary to the ethical beliefs they have internalised, the option might be to choose to exit the

system (Goncalves & Santos, 2017; Alzola, Hennig & Romar, 2020). This requires courage on the part of the professional communicator. Similarly, those government communicators who worked in SACS, the apartheid government communication agency, would have had to make a judgment call on whether to stay or exit the government system if they considered the apartheid system as racist and unjust.

Sometimes it is not good enough to say, “I’m just doing my job”. The suggested route for communicators is to follow their personal character traits and beliefs, such as honesty, without needing a rulebook. In other words, take what they believe is the right course of action with a full understanding that this carries risks and could be career-limiting when dealing with unlawful and unethical directives from an elected leader or superior. Government communication is a pivotal part of governance as it promotes transparency and accountability, and strengthens democracy by providing avenues for citizens to become actively involved in the policy implementation processes and to hold the government accountable (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2018).

In these instances, two possible scenarios exist for consideration by professional and ethical communicators who face these dilemmas. Firstly, a communicator could remain in their post and continue to tell half-truths, provide misleading information to the public, defend corrupt practices, and could justify their conduct by arguing that they were just doing their job, and didn’t break any code or rule. In other words, they would have chosen to suppress their virtues in the hope that they would be rewarded and evaluated sympathetically because of loyalty to the government of the day. Secondly, they could choose to exit the system on account of irreconcilable conflict between their personal ethical standards and rules, on the one hand, and the values and practices of the government they serve, on the other. Although this may be the most ethical or ‘right thing to do’, this may have negative consequences for the individual, which may include loss of income.

## Conclusion

Government communicators will need to empower themselves with theoretical tools that enable them to evaluate their role as they navigate the complex and sometimes toxic political context. Virtue ethics theory is the most viable framework for navigating through the ethical dilemmas that communicators and elected leaders face in the performance of their duties. This theory suggests that, as they confront ethical dilemmas in the performance of their duties, these agents of the communication system need to internalise character traits such as: honesty, courage, coherence, trust, skills, and rational action. Furthermore, deontological codes may be useful as an attempt to professionalise the service and to provide a guide, so long as they are seen as aspirational and not judicial because codes cannot anticipate every ethical challenge that communicators may face.

In conclusion, ethical codes and prescriptions holding to account communication agents who break the 'codes' will not lead to the disappearance of ethical dilemmas from government communication systems primarily because the system itself is political, located as it is at the interface between government and the citizens. Like most public service departments that are at the coal face of service delivery, elected representatives will always struggle to resist the temptation to use the government communication function to advance their narrow party-political interests. Therefore, those who choose to join the government communication service will always be exposed to these ethical dilemmas as they will be subject to – and expected to organise and manage – the government communication system so as to support the political class's electoral mandate and political objectives. Most importantly, they could be required or be expected to defend conduct, practices or policies that may conflict with their personal virtues and traits.

Government communicators must be alert and understand that all communication conduct is infused with ethical dimensions and that deliberately lying is more

potently unethical and could cause serious reputational damage. Equally, telling half-truths in an attempt to win acceptance from an elected leader or a section of the public is itself unethical. Deliberately lying may attract immediate consequences such as dismissal or snubbing by journalists or communities, whereas merely glossing over aspects of truth to protect an elected principal or to hide government failures may not necessarily attract immediate consequences as this approach may be less easy to detect. Both are decidedly unethical and should be always avoided (Japp, Meister & Japp, 2005).

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