




## Conclusion

# Contextualising the Complexities of Public Sector Communication

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This volume presents the overarching complexities of the interconnectedness of communication in the public sector. The importance of government communication has attracted significant academic attention; however, this book attempts to paint a broader picture of the economic and administrative structures owned, controlled and operated by the government in the context of technological disruption. We also outline public sector communication with the recognition of the three branches of government, namely the executive, the legislature and the judiciary.

The complexity of this public sector communication system involves various institutions that are charged with public service delivery and the equitable management of public resources, funded by the public purse. The acceleration of infrastructure development that facilitates and supports public sector communication is critical in a 4IR age, where the public have greater access. Through internet-enabled platforms and media, to engage with various sections of the public sector and their representatives. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent global lockdowns increased the reliance on digital communication technologies to drive reach for government, and yet, even post-COVID-19, evaluation of public sector communication efforts demonstrates the growth of the digital divide among the public.

South Africa has worked hard to address the ills of the past embedded in the pre-democratic public sector communication machinery and has developed commendable policies. However, upon closer inspection, the structure

of the public sector and the appointment of the principals in office through party-political structures perpetuate the principal-agent problem for professional communicators in the public sector. Chapter 1, by Themba Maseko, effectively outlines the key challenges of professional communicators, whose responsibility should lie with the South African public's interests, in maintaining a balance between the public and their principals' interests. The ethical conduct of public sector communicators and their professional integrity is challenged when government officials seek to re-capture the public sector machinery for their own political aims, in contrast with the policies put in place.

Transparency, accountability and the right to access information are constitutionally enshrined, requiring all public sector entities in South Africa's democratic society to adhere to these principles. However, as Margaret Dingalo points out in Chapter 5, the nature of government systems is bureaucratic, with high levels of concentrated control over all aspects, including the communication system. Furthermore, new 4IR-driven technologies are forcing the democratisation of information, demanding interactive communication from public sector institutions and public transparency from their communication employees. Bureaucracy is being challenged, along with public sector employees, in the level of information control possible, with new technologies enabling the formal and informal sharing of key information, which may be unreliable or from anonymous or unknown sources working against public institutions. This requires rethinking and re-evaluation of public sector communication practices in managing public information integrity and authority through official channels of the public sector.

Transparency and accountability are the key issues that influence the effectiveness of public sector communication. Anna Oksiutycz, in Chapter 10, draws attention to the fact that in South Africa, corruption, mismanagement, fraud, misappropriation of funds and other wrongdoings plague all levels of government. In order for the South African government to meet the prerogative of a modern democracy,

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transparency needs to be institutionalised within the public sector, through ideas of open government among government departments, as well as through designing and implementing policies that facilitate transparency, fostered through communication. The contribution posits the communication approach to transparency, where transparency is approached as a meaningful co-creation process that takes into account stakeholders' expectations, needs and resources. Thus, the social context is critical to transparency, with the public sector required to understand citizen expectations as key stakeholders. Transparency in public sector communication can form the foundation for open government, leading to new and robust forms of governance that are needed for South Africa's development.

Stakeholder engagement in the public sector is more critical than ever, requiring a strategic approach to communication and relationship management. Public sector employees engage in collective bargaining with respect to labour matters, which involve unions, local government, employees, media and other stakeholders. The environment of collective bargaining is governed by several policies, which influence the flow of information from, and between, the various stakeholders. In Chapter 3 Pay Shabangu outlines the sometimes-dire consequences of misunderstandings during the bargaining process, such as killings and protest action. The deep mistrust among stakeholders, based on the way communication is handled in this public labour process, demands that a new approach be considered that is more cooperative, transparent and co-created. The proposition of a strategic communication approach to collective bargaining would allow stakeholders to participate meaningfully, to harness the advantages of communication technologies for engagement, and to facilitate authentic dialogue in reaching agreement among stakeholders. The strategic communication paradigm proposes that the shift from consent to conflict drives more authentic engagements and often can result in better outcomes for stakeholders.

Digital technologies have provided a different means for the public sector to demonstrate its efforts in serving communities. Social media has grown in popularity for public sector entities, political figures and even elected officials. Lakela Kaunda and Ricky Mukonza, in Chapter 2, focus on the use of Facebook by municipalities to showcase their public service delivery efforts through online communication. Social media promotes public participation in matters influencing their communities, and the main aim of municipalities is to reach as many members of the public as possible. However, public sector communicators and their principals need to consider how their approach can be changed, as their current practices do not adequately harness the interactive power of social media. Municipalities were observed to be using Facebook as a bulletin board, with limited feedback or responses to comments by members of the public, driving frustration. The public perceived some interactions as dismissive, reducing the social media communication efforts of municipalities. However, the key driver of the quality of communication from the public sector is inextricably linked to the perceived quality of public service delivery – a key insight for public sector leaders in looking to improve the quality of their stakeholder engagements on social media.

In Chapter 9, Mandla Radebe addresses the influence of power and class on citizen engagement outcomes for public sector communication. While citizen engagement is lauded as a positive exercise by the public sector, even considered a critical element of public service delivery, the manner of its implementation through communication falls short of being able to redistribute power in society. The consequences of the limited citizen engagement approaches reveal deep-seated social challenges that lead to public strikes and service delivery protests in an effort for those citizens feeling powerless to negotiate their own communicative power. South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world, which influences the quality and effectiveness of citizen engagement communication, especially in the absence of a redistribution of power because it can leave powerless citizens

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feeling frustrated. The chapter focuses on the importance of bottom-up communication to ensure meaningful citizen engagement and participation, through redistribution of power, not simply as a placation tool to be used by the public sector communicators, but rather a means for building social cohesion.

Public wellness includes the critical aspect of health. One of the key challenges of any government is ensuring a healthy citizenry, driven through public health communication and policy setting. Public health communication by government, as Elizabeth Lubinga highlights in Chapter 7, is critical for informing, persuading and maintaining healthy behaviour among citizens. In South Africa, a significant portion of the national budget is committed to the health portfolio – a demonstration of the importance of public health and its communication in influencing healthy behaviour among the public. There are, however, challenges with respect to health information access, which the public sector, through various stakeholder partnerships, needs to combat, particularly along the urban/rural divide. In South Africa, the challenges of access to health information very often leads to the exclusion of certain segments of the South African population, inadvertently creating health disparities. The issue of health literacy is also key to understanding public health messages and behaving accordingly in response to these messages, irrespective of the medium used to disseminate them. The COVID-19 pandemic, HIV/AIDS crisis and other health crises are discussed in the context of the effectiveness, reach and understanding of the health communication messages developed by the government for dissemination by the public sector. Public health communication may only be effective through the collaborative partnership of community-level stakeholders, alternative health providers such as traditional healers and local leaders to drive healthy citizen behaviour.

Key to effective public health communication is the engagement between public policymakers and healthcare practitioners. Vincent Tshuma and Sibongile Mpofo, in Chapter 8, outline the eye healthcare communicative landscape in

Zimbabwe, highlighting the policy restraints that widen the information gap among the public. The restrictive policies of regulatory bodies on the private sector in Zimbabwe's healthcare communication activities may contribute to the low levels of participation by citizens in seeking eye healthcare services due to a gap in public knowledge. The proposed approach to tackling the current challenges includes a re-evaluation of the existing policies, in line with the availability of multiple channels of communication, especially the growth of digital communication technologies to promote eye health messaging. Paramount to successfully raising awareness through communication among Zimbabwe's public is the redefinition of the strategic stakeholder partnership between eye health practitioners and public policymakers to facilitate a more flexible communicative environment.

Maphelo Malgas and Andiswa Mrasi consider the public/private partnership reliance for effective public sector communication from a small business lens in Chapter 6. The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown period had a devastating effect, particularly on small businesses, which were recognised by the government as needing support. The South African government's legislation, and other small business-supporting agencies such as the SEDA, SEFA, IDC and the CSBP, are critical for successful public sector engagement with small business. However, the number of institutions and departments responsible for stakeholder communication among small businesses leads to fragmentation, with frustrations building from a lack of clarity in the communication with respect to the varying roles of the public institutions.

The COVID-19 crisis caught the small business-supporting agencies underprepared, with limited means to engage and communicate the various interventions designed to support small businesses to weather the pandemic storm. The existing institutional communication challenges were made far more apparent during COVID-19, because of the limited success in meaningfully supporting small businesses through public sector interventions because of a lack of access

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to clear information. The proposal from this volume is for the implementation of a collective intelligence communication framework involving government and public sector entities openly collaborating through engaging small business owners to co-create and co-design for a specific output. The important role of digital and social media channels being used in this framework is considered central to the success of the collaboration through the power of these tools.

Karabo Sitto-Kaunda, in evaluating the increased use of digital and social communication for public engagement, considers the South African IEC and its communication of voting matters in Chapter 4. South African voter turnout has experienced significant decreases since the first publicly held elections in 1994, potentially linked to the diminishing efforts of public voter education through mass communication channels and limited digital access by the public, especially along the rural/urban divide. The 2021 local government elections, which took place during the COVID-19 lockdown period, highlighted the challenges of voter communication, linked to health behaviour imperatives and voter turnout. The IEC itself faces a principal-agent problem, between serving the interests of voters and political parties. The public communication activities of the IEC have reduced visibility, are less frequent and have led to a younger voting population with limited understanding of the power of their participation to influence democratic outcomes. The IEC as a Chapter 9 institution, tasked with safeguarding the participation of citizens voting, needs to reevaluate the effectiveness of its communication strategy in increasing voter turnout through a more consistent, participatory and converged approach.

### **Public Sector Communication Framework**

The volume engages public sector communication at various levels of government, including the legislation and agencies in place to deliver on the public promise. Throughout the chapters, this volume highlights that stakeholder centricity is inextricably linked to public sector performance and

communication effectiveness. At the heart of public sector communication's effectiveness is quality public service delivery. The reflexive perspective of stakeholders, if taken by the public sector, would enhance critical processes such as labour bargaining, voter participation and digital and social media engagement and foster increased transparency to the South African public. The government needs to consider the increased empowerment of the public to engage with its public agencies through 4IR-driven communication technologies such as social media and reconsider its communication strategies to take advantage of avenues to improve stakeholder relations.

In its strategic approach, government needs to consider the numerous factors – both internal and external – that influence public communication. The investment in public communication infrastructure – particularly expanding internet access – is critical in increasing public participation among citizens, as is raising public literacy, which involves linguistic access and digital literacy. Diversifying the channels to access public sector messages through bridging inequality of access will increase communication reach. The reach of public sector messages may be increased by:

- diversifying the channels by bridging inequality of access;
- using a converged media approach;
- delivering options for the recognition of differences in communication channel access; and
- strategically addressing the digital divide.

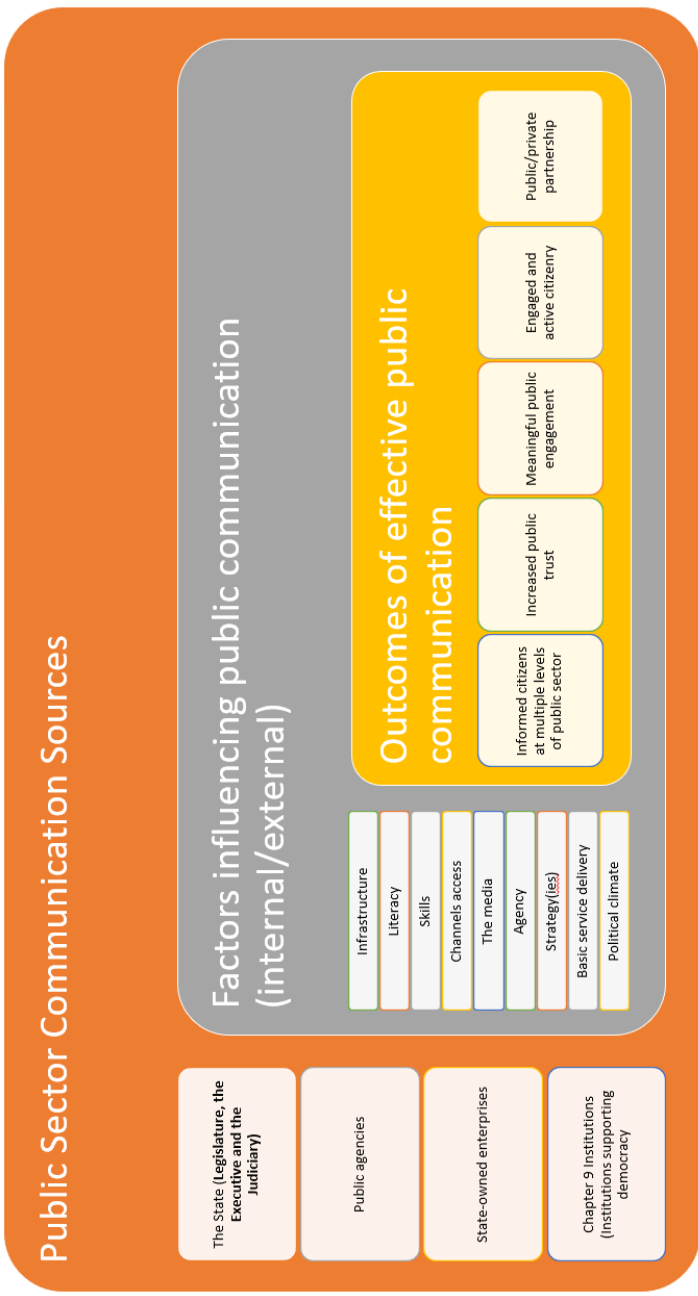
Public sector communication practitioners need to possess professionalism, excellent communication and linguistic skills and be adept at bargaining with stakeholders. The media's role in influencing public perceptions of public sector messages is significant, particularly because of media agenda-setting. The media raises questions of the interests of citizens, and public sector communicators' media relations effort should be linked to the government institutions they serve, and not just their principals. The matter of transparency, balanced against bureaucratic systems, requires a communicative approach by

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the public sector that aims to balance stakeholder interests. Agency among public sector communication professionals is key to ensuring clarity of whose interests are represented, as well as autonomy with respect to communication activities across all communication. The GCIS's coordination of government communication at national level has contributed towards some gains in successful public sector communication; however, with no holistic national public sector communication strategy in place, there continues to be limited alignment at different government levels.

Basic service delivery influences the attitudes and reception of all public sector communication, and a perceived lack of service delivery renders important public sector communication ineffective. The current political climate in South Africa, because of the way government is constituted, is often divisive, along party political lines – in some instances perpetuating segregation along historical lines. The political climate makes public sector communication non-cohesive and reduces public trust in critical government institutions.

Some of the outcomes of effective public communication, if a stakeholder-centric approach is pursued, would be informed citizens, increased public trust, meaningful public engagement, an engaged and active citizenry and successful public/private partnerships. Informed citizens improve the performance of the public sector, with better relationships between citizens and institutions and a clear understanding of roles across different public sector spheres. When government-controlled entities are considered to be transparent and acting in an ethical manner, the public are far more inclined to engage, and their scepticism is reduced, and they are thus more receptive to government communication efforts across the public sector. Citizens will then be able to engage with public sector messages on multiple levels, beyond basic service delivery, and provide feedback in a relevant manner to the public sector on public input required. Engaged and active citizens improve the health of a democracy, leading to improved stakeholder engagements and strong public/private partnerships and relationships, uplifting the health of a democracy.



**Figure 10:** Public sector communication framework