Executive Summary: The future of government communication

How can governments better connect with their citizens in today’s increasingly polarised world?

Key findings from the first global study into government communication
Government communication in an age of anger

Mobile technology and social media have made people increasingly powerful:

- Citizens have almost unlimited access to information
- They broadcast their issues widely, regardless of accuracy
- They can criticise and campaign faster than the speed at which governments can respond.

At the same time, they have also become increasingly angry:

- Citizens fear change, distrust globalisation and disregard politicians
- They are venting pent-up anger at elites they believe to be out of touch
- Populism and extremism have become more mainstream.

Government communication leaders face unprecedented difficulties in responding to this wave of technological change and public dissatisfaction: audiences are increasingly heterogeneous, interconnected, and ever harder to reach. So how can they best respond?

There is a growing awareness that if communication is weak, everything else is worthless.

Head of Government Communication, South America

A global review of government communication functions

Spanning 40 countries, The Leaders’ Report is the first comprehensive global review of how government communication leaders and practitioners are working now, their concerns, and what they are doing to prepare for the future.

The research asks:

- How is communication used within government?
- What are the key challenges facing government communicators?
- What are the key attributes of high-performing government communication functions?
- Is there a clear path to improving performance?

Conducted across geographic, socio-political, economic and hierarchical divides, the research consists of:

- A comprehensive audit of existing practice, together with analysis of data on major trends in government communication and their associated organisational drivers
- A global conversation with eight advisory board members
- In-depth qualitative interviews with government communication leaders from 20 countries and five multilateral organisations
- An online, confidential qualitative survey with more than 240 communication practitioners from 30 countries.

The Leader’s Report: global advisory board

The Leaders’ Report was developed by WPP’s Government & Public Sector Practice. The programme was chaired by the Practice’s CEO, Dr Michelle Harrison. It was steered by an advisory board of global leaders in the fields of government, politics and communication to whom we are indebted for their input:

Vijay Chadda, CEO of the Bharti Foundation, the development arm of Bharti Enterprises, one of India’s leading business groups

Professor Kishore Mahbubani, Dean and Professor in the Practice of Public Policy, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore

Dr Juan Pardinas, General Director of the Mexican Institute for Competitiveness (IMCO)

Professor, the Honourable Stephen Martin, Chief Executive of the Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA)

Lisa Sherman, President & CEO of Ad Council, USA

Keith Weed, Chief Marketing & Communications Officer, Unilever Plc

Professor Ngaire Woods, Dean of the Blavatnik School of Government and Professor of Global Economic Governance, University of Oxford.
How is communication used within government?

Alongside legislation, regulation and taxation, communication is one of the key levers of government. But The Leaders’ Report shows that it is:

- Rarely understood fully by politicians and policymakers
- Frequently regarded as a tactical, shared service, rather than a strategic function of policy delivery
- Under-skilled in areas such as social media, data analysis, audience segmentation and citizen engagement
- Seldom used to its full potential.

How and why governments should communicate has changed – but communication structures and skills have not.

What are the key challenges facing government communicators?

In interviews with government communication leaders, the key issues described were overwhelmingly common across different regions, countries and governance models.

**Trust**
Declining levels of trust in government have undermined the connection between those who are governed and those who govern them:

- Only 40% of citizens trust their government, compromising the willingness of citizens and business to respond to public policies¹
- Even in countries with the highest levels of trust, one in four citizens do not trust their government is doing the right thing².

**Audiences**
A fracturing of audiences has broken the model of broadcast communication that many governments rely on:

- Only 25% of respondents actively tailor their messages to citizens, with the vast majority struggling to move beyond uniform messaging
- Nearly half of respondents say they lack an understanding of digital and social media.

**Conversation**
Many respondents struggle to move beyond one-way conversations that represent the majority of today’s government communication:

- Only 31% see citizen engagement as a priority for their government
- Only 14% have had any training on public engagement.

**Capability**
Government communication teams lack the skills and expertise to operate effectively in a rapidly changing media landscape:

- Only half of respondents believe they have the right tools and resources to do their job
- 43% report being in post for more than 10 years; few have built up modern communication skills in that time.

**Influence**
Government communication is under-invested in as a function of government. It is insufficiently regarded as an essential part of policy development and delivery:

- 60% of respondents don’t measure the impact of communication against policy objectives, reducing the perceived importance of communication as a lever of government.

² ibid
The expectations [of what we need to do] changed overnight but the skillsets in the communications departments didn’t. We’ve still got the same people so there is a capacity issue that’s going to need to be dealt with.

Communication leader, North America

There is a heightened individualisation. We can no longer send a uniform message to the entire public. It’s not possible. It doesn’t work anymore.

Communication leader, Western Europe

All over the world the authority of government is being eroded. There is a sense that citizens are beginning to doubt whether government actually can make a difference in their lives.

Communication leader, Africa

The ability to ‘push out’ information is necessary, albeit deeply insufficient. The willingness and ability to speak with citizens must be coupled with a willingness and ability to listen to them.

Communication leader, Multilateral Organisation

Evaluation? It’s very difficult. We don’t do enough of it.

Communication leader, Australasia

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What are the key attributes of high-performing government communication functions?

Findings from The Leaders’ Report highlight 10 requirements or attributes of high-performing government communication functions. These are:

**Strategy:**
- Having a clearly defined role of and structure for government communication
- Understanding the wider socio-economic and cultural environment.

**People:**
- Creating collaborative team environments
- Sustaining the investment in talent, skills and professional development.

**Process:**
- Maintaining consistency of messages across government and across channels
- Working across government on communication priorities.

**Structure:**
- Maintaining sufficient access to senior stakeholders
- Driving a focus on the citizen throughout the organisation.

**Tools:**
- Accessing a wide range of data sources to inform decisions
- Embracing technology to become more citizen focused.

To access and read the full report please visit:
wpp.com/govtpractice/leaders-report
How can we help?

We work with governments to create high-performing communication functions, putting in place the strategy, people, processes, structures and tools for success.

• Benchmarking how your organisation is performing against global best practice and its peers, using The Leaders’ Report global dataset
• Strategic planning to identify the critical challenges and opportunities ahead and develop action plans to improve performance
• Strategy development to articulate a clear purpose and objectives for communication, monitored against relevant KPIs with rigorous evaluation processes
• Organisation design to ensure that structures and processes enable the strategy
• Skills, process and structure audits to identify gaps in capability, now and for the future
• Training to develop specific skills including digital communication, social media, analytics, behavioural insight and evaluation.

To discuss improving the performance of your public sector communication function, please contact Sean Larkins, Director of Consulting & Capability, sean.larkins@wpp.com

About WPP and The Government & Public Sector Practice

Governments today cannot achieve their public policy goals without effective communications.

WPP is the leading global marketing and communications services company. It partners with governments in over 70 countries on the policy challenges where communication can have the greatest impact:

• Behaviour Change
• Digital Government
• Place Marketing
• Engagement & Participation
• Public Sector Recruitment

The Government & Public Sector Practice advises policymakers and public sector communication leaders on strategy, innovation, capability development and global best practice. Our team of senior consultants connects clients with the best ideas and expertise in WPP’s global network. We invest continuously to advance our thinking and evidence on the strategic use of communication.

Contact us to discuss a strategic communication challenge, improving the performance of a public sector communication team, or finding the right team within WPP for a specific brief.

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