



OECD Report on Public Communication

The Global Context and the Way Forward

Report Highlights





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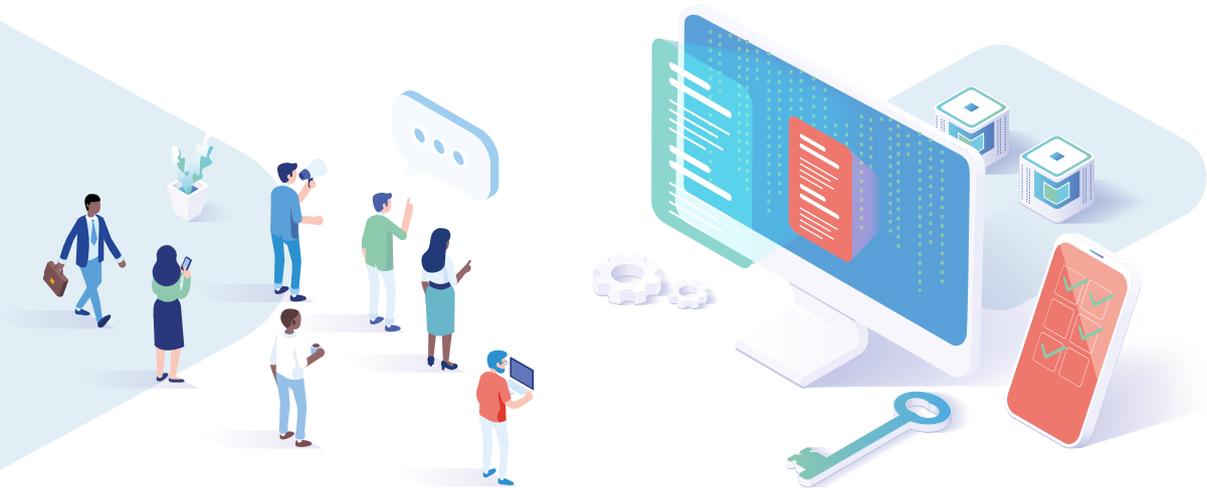
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The case for using public communication to enhance transparency, enable citizens' participation, increase public trust and strengthen democracy

The exchange of information between governments and citizens, and the dialogue that ensues from it, are essential parts of democratic governance and instrumental to better policy-making. Today, digital technologies have made communicating easier than it has ever been, as demonstrated by the central place that social media have gained in people's daily lives. Yet, the OECD report *Public Communication: the Global Context and the Way Forward* (hereafter – the Report) demonstrates that many governments are often missing the opportunity to effectively communicate and engage with their citizens. A recognition of the strategic potential of communication for policy, a timely investment to strengthen it as a public function, and a mandate to enable two-way dialogue can reverse this trend.

The deficit of transparent, inclusive and responsive communication has a clear cost to governments around the world. Many societies are undergoing a crisis of trust that is undermining democracy and challenging the traditional institutions that sustain it, such as traditional and new media, electoral processes, and public institutions in general. Almost half of people surveyed across 28 OECD member and non-member countries feel that the political system is not working for them (Edelman, 2021). As many as 60% of respondents from 21 countries felt that their government did not incorporate their views when designing social policy (OECD, 2018). Such findings have severe implications for citizens' trust in government.



Global challenges, such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, have clearly underlined the important role of information – and of its governance. This is notable not only in policy design and implementation, but also in maintaining healthy democracies. At the same time, citizens' trust in information is also being challenged. Hostile actors have demonstrated how they can take advantage of digital tools to fuel fear and divisions across the world. In the wake of a devastating pandemic, misinformation on science and vaccines has cost lives, whereas effective public communication¹ of health guidance has saved many others.

¹- For the purposes of this Report, public communication is understood as the government function to deliver information, listen and respond to citizens in the service of the common good. It is distinct from political communication, which is linked to partisan debate, elections, or individual political figures and parties.

As we look towards the looming environmental emergency, the difficult decisions to transform our societies and economies require constructive public debates that yield buy-in from all stakeholders on urgent and sometimes difficult reforms. These examples illustrate how information, public communication, and dialogue are more than ever necessary to sustain democratic processes, strengthen the resilience of our information ecosystems², and recover people's loss of trust, which is essential to overcome current and future crises.

Public communication can play a crucial role in addressing the double crisis of trust in both governments and information. Thanks to innovations comprising digital channels, big data analytics, behavioural insights and more, governments now have unprecedented means to share information with greater reach and impact and to encourage positive behaviours, but also to listen to citizens and understand their needs and expectations. Examples of such effective communication are widely seen in private sector, marketing or political parties' electoral campaigns, but also, more worryingly, in disinformation campaigns. However, the Report demonstrates that there are important gaps in the way governments make use of public communication to achieve these important goals.

A legacy of top-down and unilateral dissemination of information, coupled with a focus on promoting governments' reputations, have hindered the realisation of the full potential of this function. Communication is still too often linked to media relations and press offices, with undue emphasis on securing visibility and on channels that are losing centrality with many audiences across the world. Moreover, a focus on responsive communication that supports the open government principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation (OECD, 2017) can often face resistance and be perceived as risky.

Figure 1. A crisis of trust in governments and information



Source: Author's own work

²- This is understood as the combination of communication and media governance frameworks (i.e. institutional, legal, policy and regulatory) as well as principal actors (i.e. governments, traditional and social media companies and citizen journalists).

The present context calls for governments to move beyond this outdated understanding of communication. This requires a change of culture primarily among senior public officials and policy-makers: communicators are often acutely aware of the opportunities to seize, yet often lack sufficient access to decision-makers or the necessary mandate and resources to move towards impactful communication. The Report found that less than half of communicators in Centres of Government (CoGs) interact frequently with policy teams. Both the existing literature and reflections from the OECD Working Party on Open Government (WPOG) and Experts Group on Public Communication (EGPC) meetings reaffirm the need for a culture shift to make communication better integrated with policy and more conducive to engagement (Sanders and Canel, 2013; WPP Government & Public Sector Practice, 2016).

To this end, the OECD Report identifies and focuses on the following key principles for effective public communication:

- 1 | **Empowering the public communication function** by setting appropriate mandates and developing strategies to guide the delivery of communication in the service of policy objectives and of the open government principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation; and separating it, to the extent possible, from political communication.
- 2 | **Institutionalising and professionalising** the function to have sufficient capacity, including by embedding the necessary skills and specialisations that are leading the transformation of the field, and ensuring adequate human and financial resources.
- 3 | **Transitioning towards a more informed communication**, built around measurable policy objectives and grounded in evidence, through the acquisition of insights in the behaviours, perceptions, and preferences of diverse publics, and the evaluation of its activities against impact metrics.
- 4 | Accompanying the **adoption of digital technologies and data** with considerations on their ethical use as well as the pursuit of inclusion and engagement.
- 5 | Strengthening the strategic use of **public communication to counter mis- and disinformation**.



Figure 2. Key principles to transition towards a more effective public communication



2

Navigating an evolving information ecosystem: seizing the opportunities of the digital revolution while addressing the challenge of mis- and disinformation

Government communication does not happen in a vacuum. Radical transformations to the information ecosystem have upended traditional communication methods and enabled the spread of problematic content at a previously unthinkable scale. The dominance of online channels, where every individual can be both a producer and consumer of content, means that governments face greater competition for the finite attention of citizens. Meanwhile, digital platforms also allow new opportunities for providing direct and unmediated contact with vast and diverse publics, allowing governments to deliver precise and relevant information in ways that enhance responsiveness and build trust.



Government communication does not happen in a vacuum. Radical transformations to the information ecosystem have upended traditional communication methods

Historically, traditional media were the main avenue for citizens to hear from and about their governments. In many parts of the world today, evening news and front-page headlines have lost some of their primacy in shaping public debates to a constellation of alternative voices across social media feeds, podcasts and online videos. Using these channels strategically to connect with a wider and more diversified public on the issues they care about has become imperative to successful communication, as has the ability to analyse and learn from data linked to the use of such channels. However, as many as 26% of Centres of Government (CoGs) surveyed do not target any specific audience groups in their communication.

Over recent years, the unprecedented spread of mis- and disinformation has disrupted the information ecosystem, already challenged by the ongoing decline of traditional media and journalism outlets undermining policy and fuelling polarisation (Reuters Institute, 2021). Governments have an important role to play in filling information gaps and clarifying facts on sensitive topics that are vulnerable to harmful rumours and conspiracies. Evidence from the Report suggests institutions in many countries are still working towards establishing and consolidating comprehensive approaches to preventing and responding to mis- and disinformation, although an evolving landscape of practices is pointing the way forward. Only 38% of surveyed Centres of Government (CoGs) and 21% of Ministries of Health (MHs) had adopted frameworks, policies or strategies to guide their interventions against this issue. Encouragingly, a larger share (64% in CoGs) have designated structures or staff to work on this issue, and most do at least some cross-government coordination of activities.

However, this institutionalisation gap remains an obstacle to pursuing and scaling responses to adequately confront the immediate threats from growing information disorders. To this end, the [OECD Principles of Good Practice for Public Communication Responses to Help Counter Mis- and Disinformation](#) (forthcoming) highlight ways to strengthen and expand the role of the communication function within a broader range of interventions to bring about an

enabling ecosystem for trustworthy information. The Principles, and the practices on which they elaborate, can provide a roadmap for the design of holistic strategies to counteract this problem, building on the essential roles of all stakeholders in society – whether media and fact-checkers, or citizens and the platforms themselves.

Figure 3. Responses to mis- and disinformation in numbers



Source: Author’s own work

3

Addressing the need for better dialogue with citizens: linking communication with the open government agenda

The potential for public communication to engender a genuine dialogue with citizens is wide. However, the Report demonstrates that seizing it will require a more conscious effort from governments to use this function strategically for such purpose.

The open government reform agenda, which has been guiding governments around the world to put citizens at the heart of policymaking for over a decade, provides an ideal blueprint for this. Communication is indeed highlighted in several provisions of the OECD Recommendation of the Council on Open Government (2017).

In this respect, it is important to note that, for the purposes of this Report, public communication is understood as the government function to deliver information, listen and respond to citizens in the service of the common good. It is distinct from political communication, which is linked to partisan debate, elections, or individual political figures and parties. While this distinction is not necessarily always relevant from an open government perspective that encourages equally both political and public communication, the Report explores how institutions can put in place rules and processes that support a greater separation between these types of communication. This differentiation is particularly relevant, and has hence grown in importance, within the context of rising misinformation and distrust toward information perceived as manipulated or politically partisan.

When we take this distinction into consideration, communication can serve as a means to widen the reach of information about policy issues to the largest number of citizens. In this sense, it is a vehicle for greater transparency, which is one of the primary objectives of communication for **45% of CoGs** and **67% of MHs**. When it is designed to be inclusive, relevant and targeted to diverse groups in society, transparent communication can give even the more disengaged of citizens the facts and information they need to form opinions and hold their governments to account.



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TRANSPARENCY
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45%
Centres of
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67%
Ministry of
Health



Information is essential to participation in democracy and public life, and through communication governments have the opportunity to facilitate participation

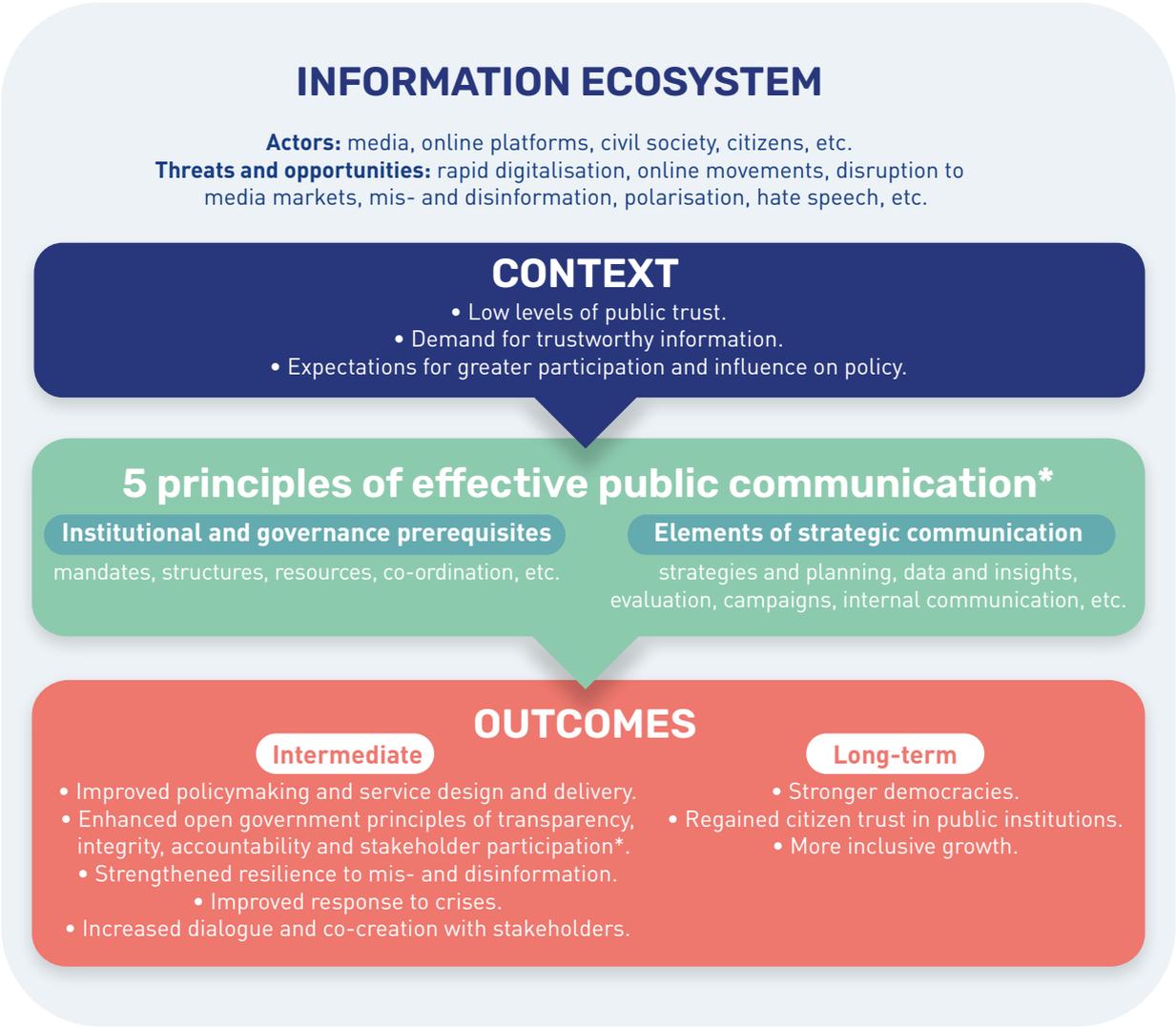
Information is essential to participation in democracy and public life, and through communication governments have the opportunity to facilitate participation in more than one way.

They can increase the reach and visibility of engagement opportunities, such as consultations or deliberative processes on specific policies. They can also harness the opportunities that ensue whenever citizens engage with the information provided and voice their preferences and concerns across online platforms, social media, or government portals. All these channels can serve in practice to multiply the occasions and avenues that citizens have to participate in shaping policies

and services. Developing better capacities to turn this feedback into insights for policymakers, and responding to it, should be the priority for achieving a real dialogue (Macnamara, 2017).

A more open government is not simply an outcome of effective communication, it is also the underlying culture of governance that is necessary to bring it about. This mechanism and the factors that enable communication to deliver better policy and governance are illustrated in the below analytical framework. This framework, which guides the structure of the OECD’s research, sets the five principles of effective communication as catalysts to address the context of low trust and bring about more openness, improved governance and better policies, against the backdrop of an evolving information ecosystem.

Figure 4. OECD analytical framework on the contribution of public communication to better policies, increased government openness and resilient information ecosystems



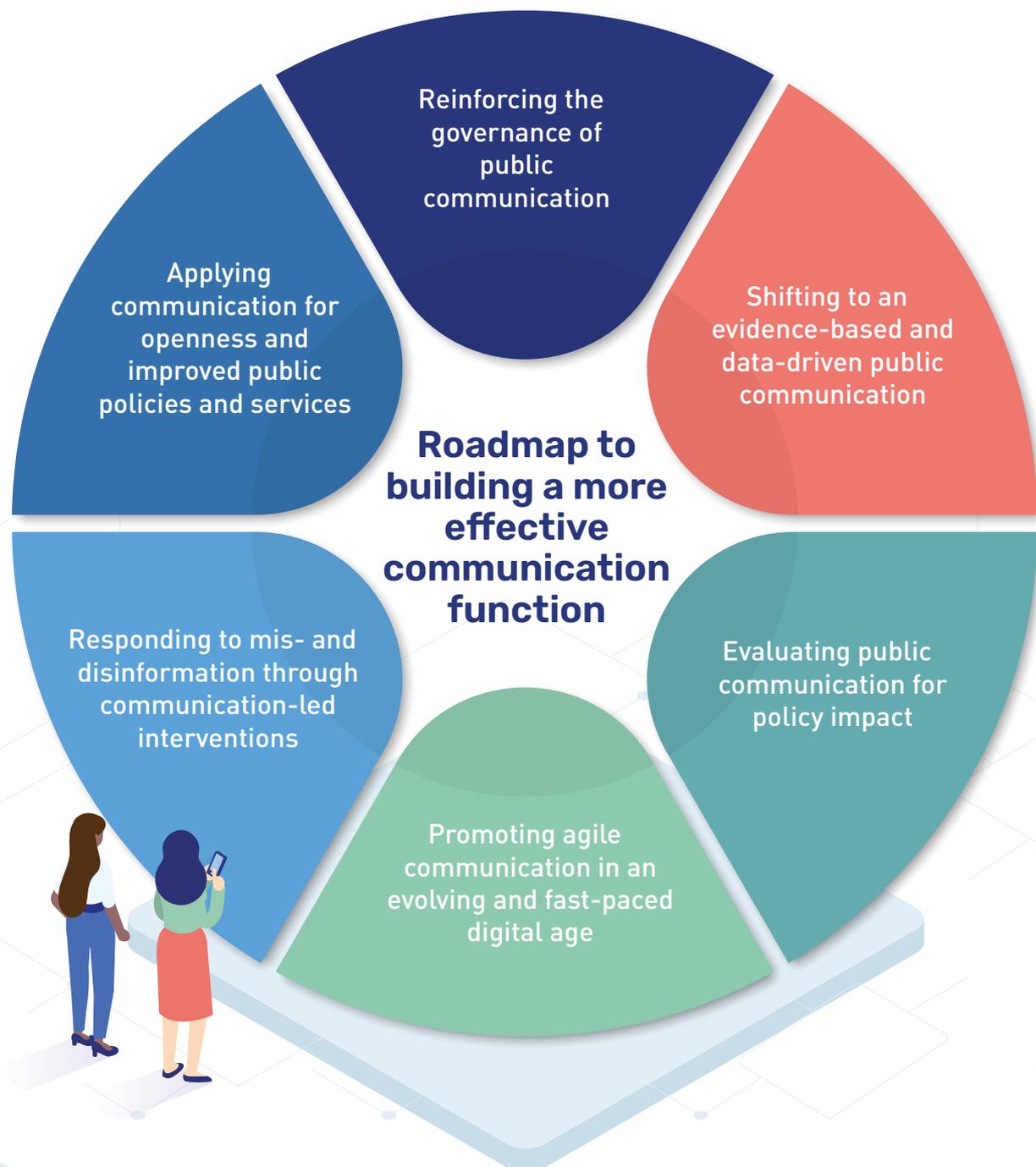
Source: Author’s own work

* Principles that also inform effective communication

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The roadmap to building a more effective communication function

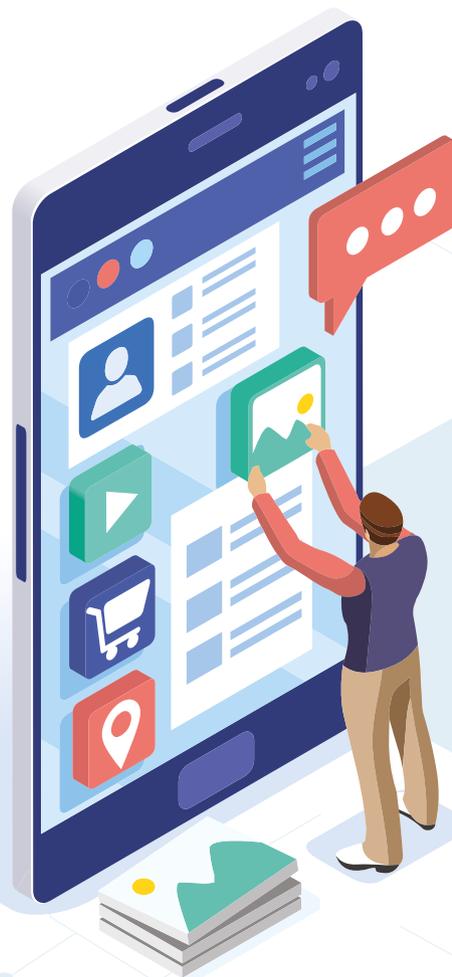
In light of the current transformation of the information ecosystem described above, and of the related challenges to public governance and democracy, the case for strengthening governments' ability to communicate with their citizens is a compelling one. Over seven chapters, the OECD Report on Public Communication lays out the actions that are being taken by the 64 institutions around the world that have been analysed through the OECD Survey on Public Communication; identifies gaps and opportunities for intervention; and presents a roadmap to build a more effective communication function. The core actions are:



Reinforcing the governance of public communication

Chapter 2 of the report discusses the prerequisites for an effective governance of public communication. These entail institutional structures and mandates, strategies and planning, co-ordination, as well as human and financial resources that can support the institutionalisation and professionalisation of this key government function. The chapter finds that:

- The governance of the communication function is core to determining whether it will be effective as an instrument for public policy and citizen trust. The policy documents that provide its mandate are a primary avenue for reform for governments seeking to improve how communication can better serve strategic objectives.
- To achieve more effective communication, governments will benefit from transitioning away from purely tactical approaches and pursuing more strategic ones. This entails increasing the use of communication strategies as blueprints that can concretely guide the execution of the function against its stated mandate. Presently, only a minority of CoGs and MHs make use of these tools: as many as 43% of CoGs and 57% of MHs surveyed have not developed any strategy document in the previous three years.
- Virtually all OECD survey respondents demonstrated having dedicated communication teams and offices in place, albeit in a wide range of formats. This reinforces the finding that the function varies considerably between countries, and there is no single dominant model for how it is organised. The core responsibility for communication is often located in the CoG, which plays a leading and co-ordinating role in about half of the governments surveyed.
- Coordinating public communication activities emerged as both a high priority and the biggest challenge for OECD survey respondents. A number of practices in this area highlight how relevant teams are investing in more cohesive and aligned communication through shared planning tools and dedicated networks. Going forward, governments can seek to achieve greater efficiencies and speak more effectively with one voice by pursuing a truly whole-of-government communication.
- Communication cannot be effective without adequate financial and human resources. Yet the lack of human resources and skilled staff was selected by more than three fourths of CoGs (76%) and MHs (79%) respectively as one of the top three challenges to carrying out core communication functions. Promoting efforts toward professionalization, through the multiple areas of specialisation of this function will benefit from dedicated trainings, including on new digital trends, and from retaining talent through ongoing learning opportunities and setting good practice standards.



Shifting to an evidence-based and data-driven public communication

Key data on audiences, their perceptions, behaviours, and on the performance of different content and messages can make communication more strategic. Chapter 3 provides an overview of governments' gathering and use of insights about their publics and the application of behavioural science in this field. It also explores the potential of these practices to foster a better understanding between government and citizens and contribute to more data-driven and inclusive communication:

- Survey data revealed room for governments to more systematically embed audience insights into the planning, design and delivery of communication activities, given that 41% of CoGs and 21% of MHs conduct this type of research on an ad hoc basis compared to smaller share who do so at least quarterly. Similarly, greater audience segmentation and diversification of content across channels and target groups that is based on audience insights can contribute to more impact.
- Audience insights can provide communicators with a real-time understanding of public concerns and sentiment. Beyond simple demographic traits, understanding the habits, attitudes and information consumption patterns from different segments of society is key to designing communications that are more inclusive, especially for vulnerable or hard-to-reach groups.
- Emerging technologies have opened new possibilities for public communicators to gather and analyse evidence to inform communication activities. For example, big data, cloud computing, smart algorithms and analytical software have unlocked a vast trove of insights and diminished the cost of acquiring and processing relevant information.
- Similarly, behavioural insights provide key evidence on cognitive factors and biases that enable communication to be more responsive and effective in reaching citizens amid competition for their attention in a crowded media ecosystem. Testing behavioural science-based approaches can serve to design communications that are more effective at encouraging desirable actions that align with policy goals.

Evaluating public communication for policy impact

Capitalising on communication's potential also requires ensuring it is meeting policy objectives. Chapter 4 explores evaluation practices and discusses the importance of linking it to organisational goals to reap benefits for learning, accountability and strategic foresight. The chapter finds that:

- While the importance of evaluating public communication is widely recognised, governments have scope to expand its application. Evidence points to the lack of institutionalisation and the limited integration of evaluation within strategic planning processes as the main limitations. The lack of adequate human and financial resources compound these challenges.
- Evaluation cannot demonstrate communication's impact if it is not linked to the policy priorities of the given institution. Across surveyed institutions, there is a prevalent focus on outputs (e.g. volume of coverage or online reach) over outcomes (e.g. change in perceptions or awareness, behaviour change, uptake of services) that is illustrative of

a tactical, rather than strategic, approach to communication. For example, only 42% of CoG respondents analysed changes in service uptake, while even fewer evaluated changes in participation levels following a communication activity (16%). Conducting more systematic evaluations will be crucial in demonstrating the added-value of communications and justifying a greater investment in this function.

- Anchoring evaluations in an end-user perspective and including trusted voices outside of government can help improve their relevance and transparency.
- Introducing requirements and standards for evaluating communication activities can make evaluation more consistent, help instil methodological rigour, and facilitate the comparability of data. The upcoming OECD Recommendation on Policy Evaluation can provide useful guidance in this regard.

Promoting agile communication in an evolving and fast-paced digital age

Chapter 5 explores emerging practices and salient issues that governments should consider when communicating in a fast-paced digital environment. It takes stock of how CoGs and MHs are seizing new technologies for direct, interactive and tailored two-way communication and addressing key challenges that may arise. The chapter finds that:

- Although surveyed officials value the utility of digital communication, a focus remains on its traditional use for information sharing rather than engagement. Social media platforms for example could be used in more strategic ways to encourage stakeholder participation. While a large share of CoGs and MHs have guidelines for the use of these platforms, communicators in most countries lack dedicated guidance on how to use them to achieve strategic objectives. Furthermore, a greater use of the interactive features of online tools could be made.
- Digital tools can also serve as means to increase inclusion, as demonstrated by the number of survey respondents who have taken steps to expand the reach of digital communication activities for youth, women, the elderly and individuals with disabilities. Nevertheless, survey data highlight the need to further exploit the opportunities offered by technologies to engage with hard-to-reach segments of society, such as ethnic minorities, migrants, youth or LGBTQ+ groups.
- Governments can pursue three main avenues to develop more inclusive and citizen-centred digital communication: (1) pursuing collaborations with influencers, civil society, businesses and community members, (2) improving the accessibility of digital interfaces, content and messages, and (3) tailoring the delivery of messages and the choice of channels according to the needs of different groups and the constraints of the digital divide.
- Efforts to tap into the strategic value of data for public communication could be accompanied by a reflection on the role of data quality principles, the sharing of protocols and the establishment of relevant training programmes. In this regard, the OECD Recommendation of the Council on Enhancing Access to and Sharing of Data sets out general principles that could further guide related conversations.

Responding to mis- and disinformation through communication-led interventions

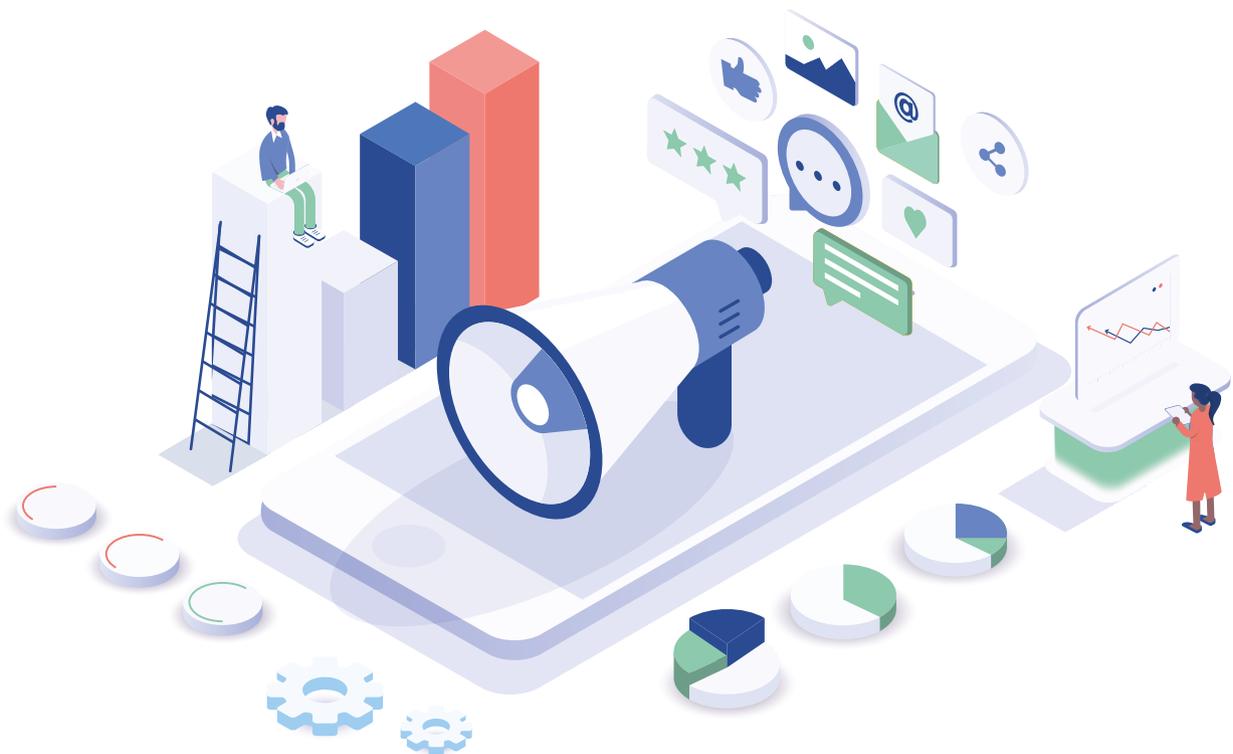
Chapter 6 analyses how governments' public communication functions can contribute to responding to the evolving challenge of mis- and disinformation. It reviews countries' efforts to institutionalise interventions, notably through the creation of official guidance, training and evaluation, and the role of intra- and inter-governmental co-operation. The chapter highlights that:

- The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought new urgency to the challenges posed by the spread of mis- and disinformation. Notably, only 38% of CoG and 21% of MH respondents had a guiding document in place to govern the response to mis- and disinformation at the outset of the crisis. This indicates that they may have been inadequately prepared to face the wave of health misinformation that accompanied COVID-19.
- Strengthening communicators' understanding of how to counter mis- and disinformation and establishing consistent practices can help identify a path forward and stay ahead of emerging media and technology trends. Identifying successes and lessons from responses initially established to counter misinformation about COVID-19 will also be a useful approach.
- OECD data suggests that there is scope to strengthen the evaluation of governments' responses to disinformation. Through the regular evaluation of counter-disinformation activities, governments can build evidence of what works and what does not. This research, alongside a focus on training public communicators on proven approaches, are important avenues for future activities.
- The complex and cross-cutting challenges posed by mis- and disinformation highlight the importance of co-ordination across and between governments, as well as with external stakeholders. Overall, co-ordination was widespread across surveyed countries, with 86% reporting co-ordination between CoG and ministries, agencies, or departments, and 72% of CoGs surveyed engaging with actors outside of government on topics related to disinformation. Nevertheless, given that the majority of countries that co-ordinated externally did so on an ad-hoc basis, there may be scope to continue to formalise and regularise such engagement.
- Governments should view the public communication function as part of a wider set of actions to tackle this problem. Efforts to strengthen the media and information ecosystem through media literacy, regulatory responses, initiatives to strengthen independent, local and fact-based journalism, and additional research on what works, among others, will help ensure public communication can play an effective role in governments' holistic responses to these challenges.

Applying communication for openness and improved public policies and services

Chapter 7 analyses the contribution of public communication to improved policies and services as well as to the open government principles. It illustrates practical ways in which this function can be implemented to meet a range of policy goals and support transparency, integrity, accountability and citizen participation. The chapter notes that:

- Campaigns are one of the most ubiquitous and effective instruments of communication to raise awareness of – and compliance with – government policies, as well as to promote the uptake of services. Emerging practices highlight the opportunity to expand the use of campaigns to encourage greater stakeholder participation and strengthen a culture of integrity.
- Media relations, as the oldest and most established area of communications, is widely used to provide information and promote government priorities. However, its potential for improving transparency is under-exploited. Engagement with the media is mostly conducted through formalised means such as press releases and conferences. Instead, maintaining regular conversations with media outlets on issues beyond high-profile news stories, for instance by partnering with them to amplify opportunities for citizen participation could be considered.
- Internal communication appears to be an under-prioritised competency that suffers from constrained resources, limited guidance and co-ordination challenges. Nonetheless, it plays a central role in creating a more effective public sector by creating alignment with, and buy-in for, governmental priorities.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of crisis communication, while underlining numerous limitations. Indeed, this was the most challenging competency for 58% of CoGs and 54% of MHs. Having defined and clear structures, responsibilities and protocols that can be easily adaptable are essential to ensure preparedness and to speak with a coherent voice. Evidence points to the possibility of reforming this competency to render it more evidence-driven, co ordinated and collaborative. Future-proofing crisis communication and increasing preparedness will require learning from thorough evaluation of crisis communication and its impact. Scrutiny by external stakeholders would benefit such exercises and ensure greater accountability in crisis response and management.



5

More information about the OECD Report on Public Communication

The Report is a first-of-its kind exercise to analyse in detail the communication functions of such a vast sample of countries across the world, against the backdrop of a global pandemic that has put communications in the limelight like never before. It was developed based on survey answers from 46 countries as well as the European Commission to the OECD 2020 Understanding Public Communication Surveys. The questionnaires targeted centres of government and ministries of health, to ensure both a whole-of-government perspective as well as a sectoral one from a key service-providing ministry. While the survey requested countries to answer regarding the practices and status quo in 2019, some responses may reflect the priorities of countries in 2020, given that the COVID-19 crisis unfolded in parallel to the data collection process. Whenever applicable, the OECD Secretariat noted these instances. Furthermore, while the Report does not aim to analyse or assess COVID-19 related communication, relevant examples are included in some chapters based on the request of members of the OECD Experts Group on Public Communication. In addition to survey answers, the Report is based on discussions with the OECD Working Party on Open Government as well as its Experts Group on Public Communication.

Figure 4. Overview of institutions that responded to the OECD Survey “Understanding Public Communication”



Note: Centres of Government (blue) and Ministries of Health (green) that responded to the OECD survey are presented on the map.

Source: Author's own work

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