

# 3

## The use of core competencies for strategic and effective communication in Lebanon

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This chapter focuses on the core competencies that are in place in Lebanon for implementing strategic communications, and how they can be upgraded and deployed to support the country's policy objectives and regain citizen trust. These competencies, when applied well, can evolve communications from an information dissemination tool to a lever of stakeholder participation and improved policy and service design and implementation.

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## How the use of key competencies can evolve communication from dissemination to engagement

Communication is the practice and discipline of relaying information between stakeholders, and is based on conceiving how to package and deliver that information for the greatest impact. As such, it relies on continuously evolving practices that, thanks especially to technological innovation, are becoming ever more effective. These form key competency areas that public communication units and officers across the administration should attain and strengthen to ensure that their work generates a dialogue with citizens and a better-informed society.

In the first place, strategies are an essential element to communicate effectively. In this context, these represent a practical operating document, developed and implemented by the relevant team, which lays out how communication activities will be conducted to support an organisation's overarching goals. It ties specific objectives to be achieved through communications to the objectives of the organisation, and defines an approach for attaining them over a defined period of time. It provides a single, coherent narrative that describes a solution to a problem, and is often supported by one or more plans, which translate the approach into structured lists of actions.

Strategies can be narrow and specific, for instance applying to one key sectoral objective in the short-term, or broad and comprehensive, for instance, developed annually across multiple areas or for the whole-of-government. For the case of public institutions, it is useful to develop such a document (either nation-wide or per ministry) setting the overall approach to communication and establishing the direction of all initiatives to be carried out, consistently with overarching short, medium and long-term policy goals and actions.

Another important element of communicating strategically is to identify the messages, and channels that can make complex policy questions accessible, relatable, and appealing to the widest range of stakeholders. Simply disclosing an official decision on a government portal or relaying the introduction of a new measure via a press release is usually insufficient to ensure the information is reaching the intended audiences and that it stimulates a desired reaction (be it an awareness, an engagement, or a change in behaviour or perception). For this to occur communication professionals resort to messaging, diverse channels and audience insights, as well as evaluation.

Developing and using key messages consistently across all channels is a key pillar of a strategic approach to communication. Messaging allows institutions to build a compelling narrative as a single thread that brings together different actions and events and serves the strategy's objectives. Consistency of messaging, especially for public offices, is important to maintain trust and avoid that one day's message conflicts with previous statements that can undermine the credibility of the institution. Good messaging also anticipates and rebuts arguments that can be raised against it, thus mitigating reputational risks. Most importantly, messaging as a competency relies on the ability to use language, imagery, or creative slogans that are compelling.

Audience insights allow public communicators to gain a better understanding of the profiles of people they seek to reach and how they consume information. This in turn helps them develop messaging that is likelier to resonate and identify the ideal communication channels to reach such target audiences. Especially in the case of governments, communication often needs to be addressed to a wide variety of stakeholder groups, which makes a one-size-fits-all approach less viable.

Audience insights can be more or less sophisticated, depending on whether they are based on segmentation by known demographic traits, on data analytics from online platforms, or on precise research through focus groups or behavioural insights (BI) gathered around the specific topics of interest. Nevertheless, this understanding forms the evidence upon which strategies, messages and communication tactics are formulated to be effective.

The baseline understanding from such an exercise can also serve as the benchmark for evaluating the impact of activities against the strategy's objectives. Related tools vary in their level of sophistication, but it is important at least that a set of performance metrics are specified. Finally, monitoring public discourse across media and digital channels, alongside other insights and evaluation data, offers a highly valuable means of "listening" to stakeholders. This exercise turns communicators into primary interlocutors with citizens, a role that if adequately acknowledged and integrated within decision making can support better policy making.

Beyond the adoption of this strategic approach and of the practices that underpin it, communicators rely on a broad range of tactics to aid them in delivering their messages through engaging content tailored for different channels. Digital and online channels, media relations, events, and campaigns, when deployed strategically, serve to stimulate interaction and debate, expand the reach of key messages and achieve the desired change in perception or behaviour. Other specific competencies additionally apply to areas such as internal or crisis communication that are important components of this function.

Ultimately, applying these competencies requires teams of trained professionals that can perform these time-intensive tasks and make the most of the available tools. Human resources, however, is a recurring challenge for public communication units across OECD countries, as highlighted in the OECD's 2020 survey *Understanding Public Communication* (and the upcoming OECD Report *Public Communication: The Global Context and the Way Forward*). As this chapter will discuss, investing in upskilling officials in charge of this key function (including both political appointees and public officials who are likely to maintain longer-term appointments) can improve the quality of their work, and help prioritise activities and optimise resources vis-à-vis objectives.

## Overview of the use of communication competencies in Lebanese public institutions

The governance structures for communication discussed in Chapter 2 have made the development and application of sophisticated competencies across Lebanese government ministries challenging. Nonetheless, examples of good practices in several areas are visible, especially among those institutions where clear structures and availability of resources. Notably, as discussed below, these examples are often correlated with donor support.

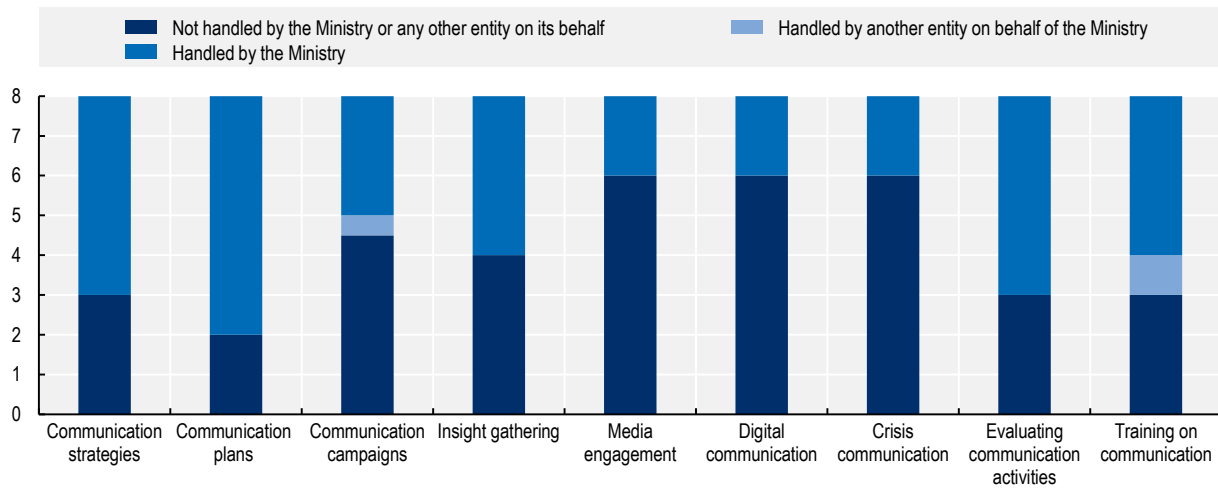
Respondents to the OECD survey remarked that the recent turbulent period, marked by demonstrations and crises, highlighted the importance of this function across all areas of policy. However, this recognition is not yet matched at the highest levels, nor with the necessary resources.

### **Strategy, audience insights and evaluation**

The prevalently tactical nature of public communication in Lebanon is evident in the relative lack of strategies and the sporadic use of data and evidence on audiences, channels and evaluation. As Figure 3.1 illustrates, only three ministries out of the eight participating in the OECD Survey reported developing such documents, and only two reported developing plans. These examples demonstrate however that despite limited resources or a high-level mandate, institutions can still establish a long-term vision of their activities and what they aim to achieve through it. However, from further discussions with respondents, it emerged that those who noted having strategies in place struggled to design and implement them properly. Overall, it appears that Lebanese ministries apply various competencies but do not do so in line with a particular strategy. Rather, they mainly conduct activities ad hoc with short-term horizons.

### Figure 3.1. Application of communication competencies across Lebanese institutions

“Which of these functions/areas, if any, are handled by the institution and which ones, if any, are managed/executed by another entity on behalf of the institution?”



Note: One respondent indicated that communication campaigns are handled both by their ministry and by another entity. This response has been split in the count above to keep it consistent with the eight surveys received.

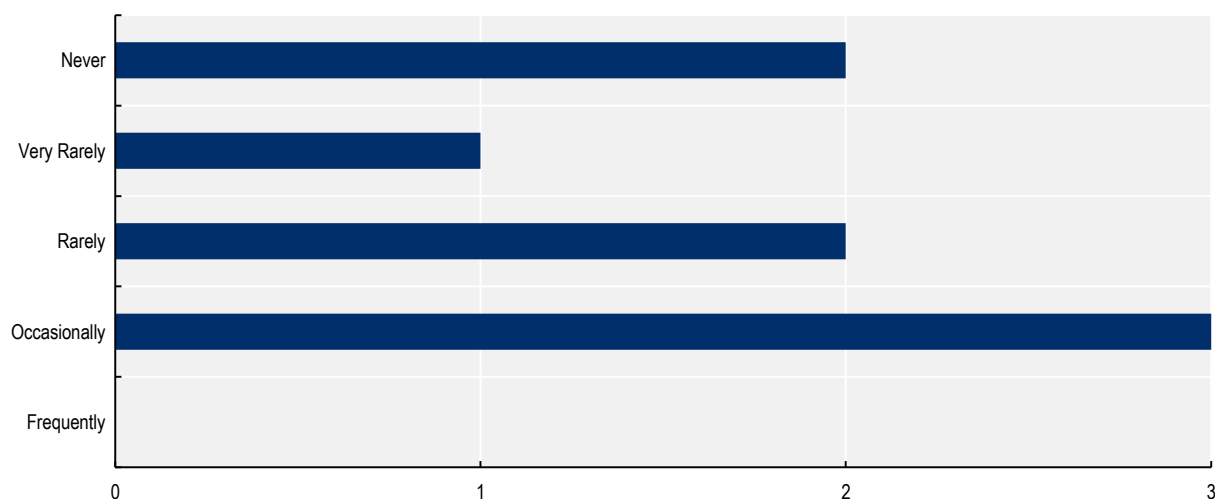
Source: OECD (2020), Understanding Public Communication Survey.

Although it did not report having a strategy, the PCM highlighted in its survey response a number of objectives that guide its communications, namely: to promote transparency; to better understand and analyse public opinion; to strengthen trust in government; to improve the implementation of reforms; to manage crisis or emergency situations. These objectives point to a welcome understanding of communication as a policy tool and a means to get closer to citizens. Formalising them in writing would be a desirable first step.

Similarly, other ministries noted a range of more traditional types of objectives for their activities, such as raising awareness of institution policies and services, as well as some more ambitious ones, such as building trust through transparency and influencing behaviour to align with policy goals. However, an overall analysis of their survey responses suggests that efforts to pursue them so far lack consistency and continuity and that the evidence to understand how to pursue such objectives and measure progress is gathered infrequently.

### Figure 3.2. Use of audience insights

“How often, if at all, are audience insights used when conducting communication initiatives?”



Source: OECD (2020), Understanding Public Communication Survey.

Although half of the surveyed ministries noted insights gathering as a responsibility handled internally (Figure 3.1), Figure 3.2 suggests that a couple of those who answered negatively still do employ audience insights on occasion. No respondent, however, claimed to do so frequently or very frequently. Two ministries noted drawing on audience insights to select which communication channels to use. Similarly, two ministries reported using insights to target specific groups, noting women, youth, and people with special needs or disabilities as targets. For instance, the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) has integrated sign language in video animations developed as part of campaigns and produced tailored content for female audiences around maternal health and breast cancer topics. Similarly, Box 3.1 illustrates in more detail a good use of insights for inclusive and effective campaigns by the UK’s Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).

Moreover, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the MoPH used insights and analytics tools to keep track of audience interactions through different social media platforms, and to better direct the paid content provided by Google and Facebook, as revealed in responses to the OECD survey and validation discussions. Building on these existing fruitful practices, Lebanese institutions can look to systematise audience insights in the short term thanks to rapid and freely available analytics from web and social media platforms, which are the second most popular category of communication channels among respondents (Figure 3.4).

### **Box 3.1. UK's Department for Culture, Media and Sport: Use of messaging, channels, audience insights and evaluation in a campaign**

The UK's DCMS was charged with organising a communication campaign around the centenary of the First World War. One of its primary objectives was to ensure that young people heard the campaign's messages to help build a lasting legacy of commemoration among them.

Insights into this audience group became a key step for developing the campaign. By analysing its target audience, the communications team saw the need to ensure a strong emotional connection to communication activities. When planning around particular milestones, the team, therefore, worked to develop integrated communication activities that were specifically designed to engage younger audiences and minorities.

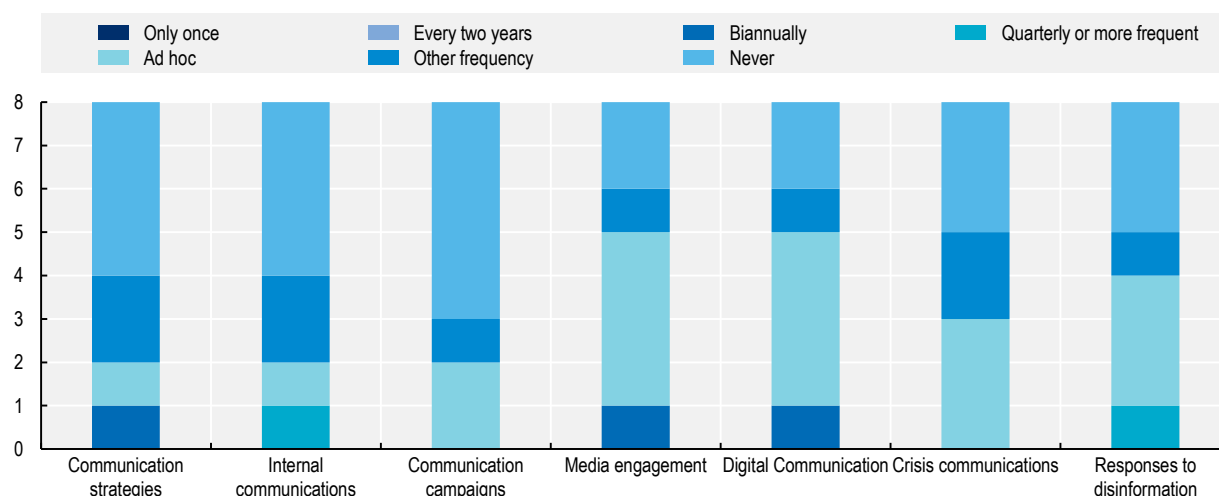
By developing a campaign strategy based on insight into the target audiences' interests and behaviour, the DCMS was able to deliver an impactful programme of activities and reach a greater proportion of the population. Carrying out the research and analysis ahead of time meant that the communications team was able to develop strong and resonant collaterals, which could then be rolled out in line with the strategy tied to key dates. Moreover, by incorporating a strong element of monitoring and evaluation into the campaign to track engagement, the DCMS team was able to collect further information and insight which could then be used to feed into future campaigns.

Source: UK Government Communication Service (2020<sup>[11]</sup>), *Modern Media Operation: A Guide*, <https://3x7ip91ron4ju9ehf2unqrm1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Modern-Media-Operation-guide.pdf>.

Online analytics can similarly provide solutions for simple evaluations of communication activities, especially those conducted through digital channels. Indeed, assessing impact and learning from past activities remains infrequent except for a few ministries (Figure 3.3). Conducting evaluations more rigorously and frequently can be a means for greater buy-in from the leadership levels of institutions. Demonstrating the impact of communication can support the argument for a greater focus on reforming this function and attributing it needed resources. Evaluations can likewise be a means of measuring the contribution of this important function to open government objectives for example. Introducing metrics and targets that align with indicators of transparency and participation, which could be as simple as measuring the reach of previously undisclosed information or tracking levels of two-way interactions with citizens, can shift communication closer to these overarching objectives.

**Figure 3.3. Frequency of evaluation of communication activities**

“How often, if at all, is the impact of the following institution communication functions evaluated?”



Source: OECD (2020), Understanding Public Communication Survey.

### ***Digital communication, campaigns and relations with the media***

Overall, Lebanese communicators appear to apply the full spectrum of competencies that can enrich their activities and make them more impactful. However, they tend to do so ad hoc and unevenly, with gaps across the administration.

#### *Digital communication*

Digital communication is a priority area of competency for Lebanese public communicators to master. Like many sectors, communication has been disrupted by rapid technological change of the last decade that has revolutionised how people consume and share information. Social media has become a primary source of information for a third of the Lebanese population, with 90% on WhatsApp and 81% on Facebook (Wee and Li, 2019<sup>[2]</sup>). Other networks are still wide-reaching, but more established among younger audiences: 40% of Lebanese actively use Instagram, followed by 35% for YouTube, and 24% for Twitter. (Wee and Li, 2019<sup>[2]</sup>).

More significantly, digital platforms offer unparalleled opportunities to have a direct channel of interaction with individual citizens, where up until recently public institutions had depended on media organisations to relay their messages to the general public. Social media in particular allows for direct two-way exchanges, as well as providing rapid and accessible data about what different people care and talk about. These features make it a crucial, yet challenging tool to optimise. For instance, the use of such platforms was particularly central for disseminating key health guidance for citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic, as showcased by examples of innovative and creative responses from multiple OECD countries in Box 3.2.

### Box 3.2. Use of digital channels in a selection of OECD countries during the COVID-19 pandemic

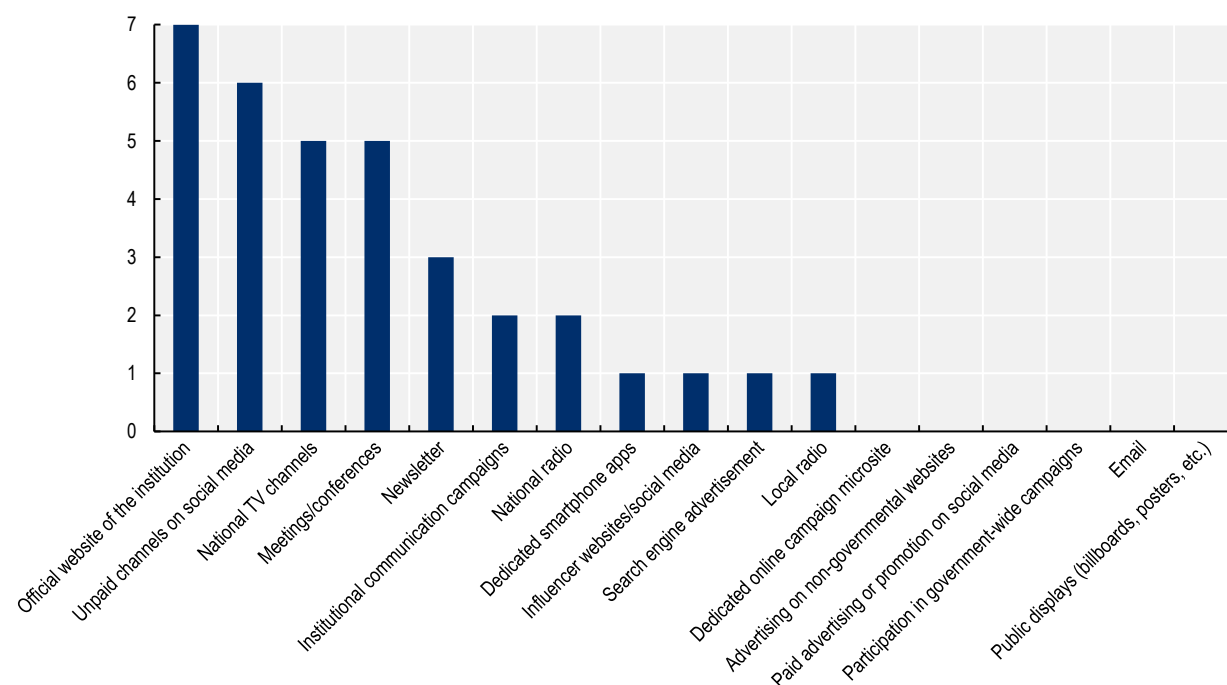
- In light of the COVID-19 crisis, digital channels have served as a key dissemination tool for innovative and interactive campaigns.
- For instance, a common strategy employed by several governments has been the use WhatsApp in new ways. Singapore provided daily COVID-19 updates through this platform, while France, the United Kingdom and Australia created chatbots as a way to directly interact with citizens and answer their questions. These types of digital communication allow for rapid dissemination of crucial information and data through two-way exchanges.
- On another hand, several digital campaigns were launched to target specific audiences. The Government of Mexico targeted youth through a social media-based cartoon superhero, *Susana Distancia* (meaning “keep your distance”). This initiative proved useful in increasing the understanding and adherence of social distancing measures in younger crowds, through an amusing and interactive campaign.
- In a similar way, the New Zealand Police undertook a series of digital efforts to communicate important instructions and engage with citizens in a creative way. Through the “Creative Genius” campaign, they published regular humorous, informative videos on YouTube, and in turn, invited citizens to submit their own creative videos related to the crisis.

Source: OECD et al. (2020<sup>[3]</sup>), *Embracing Innovation in Government: Global trends 2020*, Innovative Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis, OECD/OPSI/Mohammed Bin Rashid Centre for Government Innovation/World Government Summit <https://trends.oecd-opsi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/OECD-Innovative-Responses-to-Covid-19.pdf>.



**Figure 3.4. Use of communication channels by Lebanese institutions**

“What are the top five mechanisms used by your institution to share/disseminate information with the general public?”



Note: Responses do not include the PCM.

Source: OECD (2020), Understanding Public Communication Survey.

To this end, an analysis of the surveys and discussions with officials indicated that Lebanese institutions rely greatly on their websites to publish content and information. OMSAR, for instance, stands out for the modernisation of its website that serves as a hub for information on all of its work, its proactive disclosures under ATI Law, and manuals and guides for the public sector on a wide range of administrative processes. However, there is less indication of how they work to attract people to their pages. Websites, on their own, are not always effective vehicles to communicate because they rely passively on users visiting them. Prioritising the delivery of information where audiences are likely to check and engage with it is essential.

This type of communication can similarly be integrated with and support the shift towards digital services envisioned in the Government’s Digital Transformation Strategy, which also includes improvements to institutions’ web portals. Websites also provide a primary interface for citizens to interact with government information and especially for accessing digital services. As such, refining web portals would efficiently contribute to helping achieve broader digitalisation objectives under the *OECD Digital Government Review of Lebanon* (2020).

Social media channels are common across Lebanese ministries that took part in the OECD survey, all of whom noted having a Facebook and Twitter handle, with a minority (3) also having official YouTube and WhatsApp accounts and one more having an Instagram handle. The choice of these channels is consistent with the prevalence of Facebook as the country’s primary platform, with Twitter being prominent among a smaller but specialised group of stakeholders across the civil society, media, academia, business, and international development sectors. Indeed, all respondents noted overall channel reach as a main criteria for the adoption.

Despite their widespread presence, communicators lamented that social media are insufficiently utilised as channels. In particular, one respondent to the OECD survey noted that engagement on their official handles was low, and recognised digital skills as a barrier for a better application of this competency area. Indeed, low rates of public engagement with official digital channels are often the result of a traditional “one-way” dissemination approach in the use of these platforms rather than one focused on interaction and informed by evidence.

A few good practices exist including that of the Ministry of Public Health in particular which has been conducting sophisticated digital communication, including high volumes of information being provided to citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic via its social media channels and featuring visually engaging content. On this occasion, as mentioned in the OECD survey and by the network of public communicators, the Ministry has also employed paid advertising on digital platforms, thanks to in-kind gifts from the social media companies themselves. Building on this, they further launched the COVID-19 Symptom Checker Chatbot to encourage citizens to conduct self-assessments, and guide them on appropriate steps to take.

Overall, a majority of the eight responding ministries have noted lacking any guidelines for social media, whereas three of them have at least one type (for social media or sponsored content). Such documents can set a baseline for standards and for the ways that official handles can or cannot be used. They can also serve as guiding officials on how to manage content, respond and interact with users on these platforms, in conformity with official requisites (for instance on hate speech, counter-disinformation efforts, or in respect of privacy policies). Moreover, they can provide other criteria to separate political and public communication, enhance the strategic use of digital tools and orient it towards inclusiveness, participation, and policy support.<sup>1</sup> In Italy, an interactive set of guidelines has been developed specifically to support communications around the uptake of digital government services (Box 3.3).

### **Box 3.3. *Comunica Italia*'s social media and branding guidelines for the promotion of digital public services online**

The Italian agency for digital government, *Agenzia per l'Italia Digitale*, has set up a website dedicated to “communicating how to communicate” for officials who are launching or promoting digital services in their ministries or agencies. The site offers specific guidelines accompanied by examples and detailed guidance on how and why to develop communication strategies to support the uptake of a given service.

Guidelines encompass three main categories: marketing, communication, and storytelling. Each section includes an index with detailed sections for all steps of developing and implementing strategies online, including short boxes of what users “must”, “could”, and “should” do for each step.

The website also links to downloadable materials, including branded templates, and its online format makes it easy to navigate and use than a static document. The user-friendliness is important to their uptake by communicators government-wide: their purpose is to ensure consistency in how public services are presented and in the quality of their promotion and communication to citizens.

Source: *Comunica Italia* (2020<sup>(4)</sup>), “Linee Guida”, <https://comunica.italia.it/linee-guida#block-six8theme-page-title>.

### *Media engagement*

While communicating via digital channels can allow Lebanese institutions to have direct interaction with a vast range of audience groups who follow their accounts or access their websites, doing so via the media can help reach vast and different audiences. Indeed, the more diverse the media that public communicators engage with, the wider the reach of its communication in terms of demographic groups.

Media engagement is a more established and traditional competency, since prior to the rise of online channels it was the dominant means of reaching the public. In Lebanon, media relation is well established and the figure of the media advisor and press officer is a common one especially for the political domain of communication. However, responses to the OECD survey suggest a degree of irregularity with which this competency is applied. For instance, a majority of ministries reported preparing media handling plans only ad hoc when preparing to announce a new policy or initiative. Figure 3.5 illustrates the frequency with which responding institutions issue press releases and hold press conferences. While more than half of respondents disseminate press releases at least once a week, a majority conduct press conferences ad hoc or even more rarely.

In many OECD countries, press briefings with government officials open to all journalists (often with simple accreditation procedures) have become a common feature. In Slovenia, regular sessions are held to interact with the media and keep the public informed (Box 3.4). These events allow journalists the opportunity to ask direct questions to officials and get more in-depth substance about their work and policies. In Lebanon, only half of respondents to the survey noted that participation in press conference was open to all journalists. Moreover, insights from OECD interviews with government and external stakeholders suggest that certain media can enjoy privileged access to officials and information in line with the editorial line or political affinity of the publication. One respondent noted in particular that the institution can urge journalists to highlight desired topics and angles. While this is still a reality in much of the world, it can have detrimental effects on trust in media and government, and undermine the role of the media as agents of government accountability.

#### **Box 3.4. Slovenia's structured media relations approach**

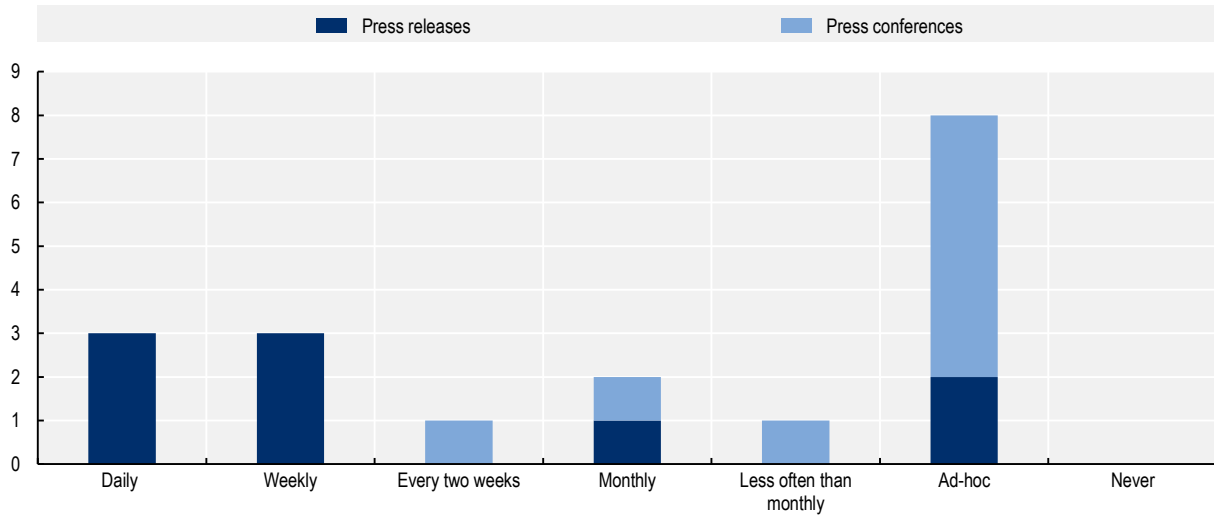
The Government Communication Office (GCO) in Slovenia uses established tools for its media relations, including regular press briefings, releases, and official statements. These are conducted according to a structured schedule that creates a regular news cycle, which allows the media to plan their coverage and questions, and to rely on timely information and access to official sources or spokespeople.

Cabinet sessions are held on a weekly basis, after which press briefings take place where key decisions are announced by ministers and their spokespeople. Key messages and briefing materials are prepared and distributed by the GCO in advance of these press briefings, and a “media room” on the premises allows journalists to work onsite and hold interviews with officials.

Source: Briefing to the OECD from the former Director of Communication of the Government of Slovenia (2020).

### Figure 3.5. Frequency of engagement with the press

“How often did the institution issue press releases and organise press conferences?”



Source: OECD (2020), Understanding Public Communication Survey.

Lebanese institutions can take more creative and inclusive approaches to engage media in support of policy and open government objectives. This can for instance include working on features and special content for broadcast programmes and magazines that go beyond the traditional news cycle to make them accessible and relatable to particular audiences, as per the UK’s Department of Education Campaign on Gender Pay Gap (Box 3.5).

#### Box 3.5. The UK’s Department of Education Campaign on Gender Pay Gap

To shape the narrative on the gender pay gap in the public discourse, the UK’s Department for Education (DfE) pursued a creative approach around a high-visibility moment, provided by “Equal Pay Day”. Using this date as a news hook to engage the media, the DfE provided a range of consumer media titles and magazines with press kits that included explainer graphics, factsheets and “myth-busters”. These helped ensure that reporting on the gender pay gap addressed common misconceptions on the issue. Quotes from official spokespeople were provided in a format that could be presented in a Q&A-style interview.

The campaign achieved significant success in delivering coverage across a range of popular media outlets, including in lifestyle publications that helped reach young, professional women, a critical audience for its gender pay gap messages. By preparing content that was specifically designed to appeal to such publications, the media team helped ensure that key messaging would be carried in coverage.

Source: UK Government Communication Service (2020<sup>[11]</sup>), *Modern Media Operation: A Guide*, <https://3x7ip91ron4ju9ehf2unqrm1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Modern-Media-Operation-guide.pdf>.

## Communication campaigns

Campaigns are one of the most important tools that public institutions deploy to bring focused attention to a given issue. In OECD countries, campaigns are used in a range of ways, and are increasingly leveraged to support policy goals by growing awareness or nudging desired behaviours, based on insights from behavioural science. Effective campaigns can be resource-intensive and require substantial dedicated planning and execution, but even smaller-scale campaigns can give a useful boost to a policy goal.

In Lebanon, there are considerable disparities between ministries when it comes to communication campaigns. Half of the survey respondents, for instance, claimed that their institution does not conduct them. The other half includes one of the most active ministries across various dimensions of public communication – the Ministry of Public Health, which reported conducting over 50 campaigns in the three years preceding the survey. In 2019 for example, campaign topics included World Antibiotic Awareness Week, National Breast Cancer Day, and Mental Health Awareness.<sup>2</sup> These campaigns aim to bring visibility and reduce stigma for specific health conditions, and to encourage screening and prevention among target groups. In a recent example of this approach, an anti-stigma campaign was conducted in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic (Box 3.6).

### Box 3.6. The COVID-19 anti-stigma campaign in Lebanon

In June 2020, the Lebanese Ministry of Public Health, in collaboration with Abaad and several international stakeholders, launched an anti-stigma campaign under the slogan “#TheRealTest”. Its main goal was to break social stigma and discriminatory behaviours that emerged from the COVID-19 virus, such as labelling, stereotyping, and discriminating against anyone perceived to have been exposed to the virus, particularly women and young girls.

Collaborating with several national TV outlets, the MoPH kicked off its campaign on synchronised prime-time news segments, in which anchors broadcasted the campaign video and echoed its message. The campaign also included an important digital component, whereby influencers and opinion leaders amplified key messages via their social media platforms.

Beyond countering the stigma and spreading a positive message, the Ministry further encouraged a two-way dialogue with citizens by providing a platform to share and showcase local stories of hope and solidarity.

Source: #TheRealTest, Launching Lebanon’s Anti-Stigma Campaign, OCHA, <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/therealtest-launching-lebanon-s-anti-stigma-campaign>.

There are several additional examples of campaigns that indicate scope for rapid gains in this competency area. For instance, in 2019 then-Prime Minister Saad Hariri lent his voice to one of the priority policies of his cabinet to support local industry, launching a nation-wide campaign that put the spotlight on local businesses (Xinhua, 2019<sup>[5]</sup>). Similarly, with support from UNDP, the Ministry of Finance has been conducting campaigns to encourage citizens to fill out their tax forms and remind them of the deadlines. Likewise, the Institute of Finance runs annual campaigns to explain and simplify the Government’s fiscal budgets to the general public, as discussed as part of the OECD peer review mission.

Like other aspects of communication in Lebanon, donors have a considerable role in sponsoring or driving campaigns directly or through in-kind support for ministries. This is also the case for the Ministry of Public Health, particularly since its response highlighted, like other ministries, that no dedicated budget had been made available for this function. In practice, some ministries’ role in communications campaigns can be limited to approving activities designed and implemented primarily by third-party actors, according to stakeholder accounts during interviews.

In the near term, external support for these activities will remain necessary, but Lebanese institutions can develop a greater role in defining the communication strategy and scope of these efforts and assume greater responsibility in delivering campaigns through their own staff. This can especially be the case of low-cost, smaller-scale types of campaigns.

### ***Internal communication and communication during crises***

The competencies discussed in the above sections are applicable across a wide variety of contexts and scenarios. Two contexts in particular, however, present distinct features that have led them to evolve into distinct specialised disciplines of the communication function – internal and crisis communication. Both areas are grounded in the same structural and competency frameworks but present unique characteristics that require dedicated approaches.

#### *Internal communication*

Communicating with external stakeholders and citizens is an essential element of delivering policies, information, and listening to public opinions and perceptions. Often, however, a government's own staff are key ambassadors to carry these messages and deliver them across the full reach of the public sector. This is a central objective of internal communication, which can make public institutions more cohesive and effective.

Internal communication can support dialogue, information sharing, and change management within and across institutions. It deploys standard communication competencies, but tailored to an internal audience whose identity and common features can be known with greater precision than citizens at large, and for whom channels of communication are more direct.

Open Government reforms are one particular area where it is important to foster a cultural shift towards openness and inclusion and promote the principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and participation at all levels – an objective that this communication competency area is well placed to support. First, internal communications can be used to facilitate change management to ensure that public officials are aware of the open government agenda and understand how it will affect their work. Second, internal communication can serve as a means to share knowledge and disseminate good practices across government. In turn, it would also allow officials to become effective spokespeople for the open government agenda within their departments and across government agencies. Finally, internal communications on open government reforms can serve strategic goals, including identifying synergies between public communication officers and access to information officers, co-ordinating communication activities horizontally and vertically across the government, and combating the challenges posed by disinformation (including “fake news”).

According to OECD surveys and interviews, internal communication is not a common practice across Lebanese government institutions. Rather, internal information is provided in seemingly traditional and primarily paper-based ways. The COVID-19 pandemic is the latest and unequivocal example of the need for internal communication: at a time when government work is shifting online, public sector staff needs to be equipped with the information to keep public offices and services running and manage organisational change. Beyond these urgent challenges, internal communication is also key to support cohesion and the ability of the government to speak with one voice.

Within the context of a shift towards remote and smart working solutions in the public sector, ministries could envision establishing basic channels, such as intranet and newsletters, to share key information and encourage desired actions from civil servants that support policy implementation and service delivery for a more effective public sector (Box 3.7).

### Box 3.7. Internal communication approaches in Paraguay and Norway

Paraguay's Ministry of Technology of Information and Communication (MITIC) conducts and co-ordinates internal communication to ensure key information is shared and available with all ministries and civil servants and that they can then amplify messages and support given objectives. MITIC does so through the use of multiple channels, including internal newsletters, emails, WhatsApp groups and also physical posters on premises. Moreover, the MITIC publishes weekly newsletters on its website. These group and present all relevant news and activities, recent publications, or policies established.

In a similar way, the Norwegian National Security Authority (NSM) launched an internal communication campaign, the National Security Month, in October 2019. The campaign was conducted via intranet and consisted of a series of short podcasts with security experts. The goal of the internal campaign was to raise awareness, guide and inform ministry employees across all institutions on relevant IT news, information security and security strategies.

Source: Information provided to the OECD by the MITIC and the NSM as part of their responses to the OECD (2020), Understanding Public Communication Survey.

## Towards the professionalisation of public communication in Lebanon

Improving how core communication competencies are applied to bring about a more engaging dialogue with citizens rests in good part with building qualified and professional teams. As previously discussed, there is an overarching need to expand the often thinly-staffed communication function across government with additional, professionally-trained communicators. This requires first of all mitigating the volatile nature of the public or political communications positions and establishing mechanisms to preserve institutional memory, such as defining protocols and guidelines that facilitate continuity despite the high staff turnover. Secondly, especially in the context of the public sector hiring freeze, it requires an investment in capacity-building to developing essential skills.

There are considerable gaps in the training background of communication teams across Lebanese ministries. For instance, none of the five ministries who reported having a unit or dedicated staff claimed that they had communication training. Several respondents recognised the need for officers to be trained on working with data and digital tools specifically to be able to communicate effectively where public debates are taking place.

As noted previously in this study, donor organisations are providing important support to several of the communication initiatives being implemented with or by Lebanese government institutions. As an important asset in this space, the Government could consider taking a proactive approach to shaping the collaborations conducted with donors in the context of communication to align with objectives for the professionalisation of its teams. Going an extra step, the government could consider developing a set of professionalisation targets and criteria that donors could contribute towards, rather than pursuing initiatives in a disconnected and piecemeal way. The network of public communicators, or the inter-ministerial committee that has been proposed, could be an ideal forum for steering this process.

Another element that can contribute to this end goal is to conduct capacity-building on key competency areas and dedicated training on tools and platforms that can make the work of communicators more efficient and evidence-based. In order to preserve the institutional knowledge and harmonise the skills across institutions, the Government of Lebanon, in collaboration with international support and expertise, could envision introducing a combination of long-lasting digital training materials (increasingly common in the form of MOOCs, or Massive Open Online Courses) and more traditional in-person formative

workshops. Canada's School of Public Service showcases a good practice of these training materials (Box 3.8). While the latter type of capacity-building can be more effective in consolidating skills and practices, the former can help ensure a baseline of competencies over time and at a lower cost. This is an aspect that OMSAR could assist in addressing, having developed an e-learning portal for government employees and that covers a vast range of training courses, including recent modules related to COVID-19.

### **Box 3.8. Canada's School of Public Service**

Canada's School of Public Service (CSPS) is the main educational institution leading the government's enterprise-wide approach to learning. The CSPS offers a wide range of courses, programmes, series and learning tools available to civil servants. The School's curriculum is meant to support and equip these public servants with the necessary training and skills needed as they go through key career transitions.

While many courses are held in conventional classrooms or through on-site workshops, the School also offers a considerable variety of topics online. These digital courses are interactive, self-paced and allow for flexible and long-lasting learning. The CSPC also hosts seminars, forums and other learning events that allow civil servants to interact and engage in dialogue on relevant issues facing the public service.

Relevant topics include capacity-building and training in communication skills, information management, team development, digital communication, policy and regulation, and many more.

Source: Canada School of Public Service; <https://www.cspc-efpc.gc.ca/index-eng.aspx>.



## Recommendations

Based on the observations in this chapter, the following recommendations capture a series of medium- and long-term steps to further professionalise public communication in Lebanon and integrate more effective use of key competencies to serve strategic objectives linked to policy and open government reforms.

- In a co-ordinated way, the inter-ministerial committee or network on public communication that will be formed can lead the development of a set of objectives for strengthening relevant capabilities across all Lebanese institutions. Besides setting internal goals, this document could also be provided as a framework for all donor projects relating to this function, with the aim to combine activities with longer-term capacity-building aims.
- A two-pronged approach to capacity-building would help establish some baseline skills and ensure a degree of continuity in the application of communication competencies. This process can be eventually led by the inter-ministerial committee, and when formed, taken over by the central co-ordinating authority for this function proposed in Chapter 2.
  - Firstly, specialised trainings for dedicated political appointees and civil servants can for example prioritise digital communication skills and the use of data and analytical tools for audience insights and evaluation as highlighted by survey responses. Ideally, a programme of trainings can be envisioned, perhaps in collaboration with donor organisations, to cover all competency areas.
  - Secondly, basic trainings on other competencies can be conducted by communication professionals within the government (and/or in collaboration with donors) to establish baseline skills across relevant government functions, such as Information Officers appointed to comply with ATI disclosures and requests and IT and website management staff, to ensure they can perform essential communications for their institutions if dedicated personnel is not in place. This would also support broader efforts for transparency and openness across other functions and achieve a wider understanding of the value of communicating.
- In line with a shift towards a more strategic approach to public communication, Lebanese ministries could focus in the short term on elaborating a written strategy to guide their activities. Effective strategies need not be over-ambitious, but rather align with the scope and capacity of each institution. Importantly, they can be centred around priority policy goals for the Ministry, optimise the use of resources, and guide teams to plan ahead for key moments. They can also include a series of low-cost or no-cost activities.
- The adoption of strategies would be rendered more effective by basing its development on insights on audiences that can help make objectives more precise and can help benchmark ahead of evaluations. To this end, in the first instance, Lebanese institutions could systematise the collection of audience insights based on available social media and website analytics and monitoring of public attitudes online. Over the long term, they can look to complement them with more in-depth types of insights gathered from surveys, focus groups, and other methods. A central unit could take the lead on such efforts and co-ordinate across the government.
- In parallel, it is important that communications are evaluated against a set of pre-defined metrics, which should be systematised as part of any strategy development. For example, metrics can evaluate the reach of content and engagement through audience interactions. At a more advanced stage, activities can be evaluated against the policy objectives they aim to serve, for instance, the use of a given public service or compliance with a particular directive.

More specifically, metrics relating to transparency and to participation can be included in any upcoming Open Government Plan to ensure that communication serves related objectives.

- Dedicated guidelines can address a number of areas where public officials need guidance and can help consolidate good practices for various competency areas. The network of public communicators (or, when it is formed, the inter-ministerial committee) could therefore lead the development of government-wide guidelines covering the following areas as examples:
  - Digital communication (including guidance on responding and engaging with individual users on official social media channels; making content more engaging; targeting specific societal groups via paid and unpaid content to achieve more inclusiveness; separating political from public communication; aligning with branding guidelines; etc.)
  - Media relations (including guidance on preparing press materials, press conferences, conducting media interviews and performing the role of spokesperson; advice on following and reacting to the news cycle and editorial deadlines; templates for press kits for key events and media moments, including print and broadcast content; advice on collaborating with media on features and creative content; etc.)
  - Campaigns (including planning and implementing each phase of a campaign, evaluating it against stated objectives, etc.)
  - Internal communication (including guidance on developing staff newsletters and dedicated platforms such as intranet portals; inter-ministerial co-ordination mechanisms; etc.)
- Additionally, guidelines can serve to harmonise practices and processes across the various ministries and agencies. They could address structural aspects of communication, such as hierarchy of decision making and approval protocols, and define the responsibilities of public communicators vis-à-vis politically appointed advisors to keep the functions distinct.
- Reforms tied to the 2018 draft Digital Transformation Strategy should mandate that each public entity creates an institutional profile on at least one channel of communication, such as a webpage or social media profile (determined by the intended use and audience, and by the capacity for effective management to avoid dormant profiles) for citizen-centred information.
- On internal communication, the passing of the ATI Law Implementation Decree in August 2020 offers an opportunity to develop an internal campaign to raise awareness of obligations for each institutions and promote uptake of its provisions among the civil service in an effort to entrench a culture of transparency in the public sector. Such a campaign could be led by OMSAR as head of the technical anti-corruption commission, in co-ordination with the network of public communicators and key government stakeholders.

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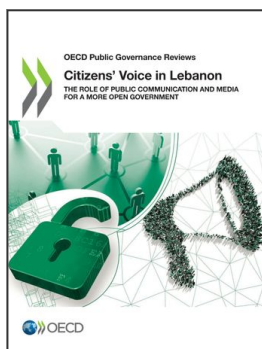
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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Additional guidance on institutional use of social media can be found in Mickoleit, A. (2014<sup>[6]</sup>), "Social Media Use by Governments: A Policy Primer to Discuss Trends, Identify Policy Opportunities and Guide Decision Makers", *OECD Working Papers on Public Governance*, No. 26, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/5jxrcmghmk0s-en>.

<sup>2</sup> These and other campaigns are featured on the website of the Ministry of Public Health: <https://www.moph.gov.lb/en/Pages/11/1393/awareness-campaigns>.





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