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## Redefining the role of public communication in an evolving information ecosystem

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This chapter explores the opportunity for public communication to support better governance, improved policies and services, and greater trust. It illustrates how this function can help strengthen democracy in a context where digital transformation and novel and emerging challenges to information ecosystems are creating new imperatives for better dialogue with citizens. The chapter concludes by elaborating the analytical framework on which the Report is based, unpacking how governments can use strategic and two-way communication for more open and inclusive societies.

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## Introduction

The provision of accurate and timely information, alongside the opportunity for stakeholder participation and feedback, are essential elements of the democratic policy-making process. They are key factors that, at each stage of the policy cycle, can improve its quality, better tailor its outcomes and ensure greater impact. As the government function that provides information, as well as avenues for dialogue and debate between institutions and citizens, public communication plays a critical role in supporting more open and inclusive governance mechanisms.

Communication by governments has often been associated with political actors and processes and as the means to promote partisan agendas and manage reputations through one-way dissemination of information and narratives: in other words, propaganda. While this perception (and practice) persists, it is an outdated approach that undermines the potential for communication to contribute to policy making and good governance. Over recent decades, governments and researchers have increasingly recognised the role of communication as an instrument of policy making<sup>1</sup> (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2018<sup>[1]</sup>; Fairbanks, Plowman and Rawlins, 2007<sup>[2]</sup>; Lovari, Lucia D’Ambrosi and Bowen, 2020<sup>[3]</sup>; Macnamara, 2017<sup>[4]</sup>; Sanders and Canel, 2013<sup>[5]</sup>; WPP Government & Public Sector Practice, 2016<sup>[6]</sup>), one that can enable a two-way dialogue with citizens that generates genuine engagement and supports greater transparency and accountability (WPP Government & Public Sector Practice, 2016<sup>[6]</sup>).

Building on and supporting this shift, this report seeks to analyse how the function is structured and governed in OECD countries and beyond, to understand how it is conducted, and how it may be more effective against the backdrop of an increasingly complex information ecosystem.<sup>2</sup> Going further, this report aims to consolidate the understanding of communication as a pillar of a more open government that safeguards democracy and places citizens at the heart of policies and services, based on the principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation (Macnamara, 2017<sup>[4]</sup>)<sup>3</sup> (OECD, 2017<sup>[7]</sup>).

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 often not clear-cut in practice, and while government communication is inevitably somewhat political in nature, this report explores how institutions can put in place rules, institutions, and processes that support a greater separation between these types of communication. Indeed, such differentiation has grown more important in the context of rising misinformation and distrust toward information perceived as manipulated or politically partisan. The provision of and accessibility to accurate sources of verified information are essential to enable democratic engagement, and are more necessary than ever.

At its core, communication is the discipline of packaging and delivering information strategically to achieve the greatest impact. As such, it relies on continuously evolving practices that, thanks especially to technological innovation, are becoming increasingly effective at delivering tailored messages to – and gathering feedback from – larger and more diversified audiences. Communication is not strictly the domain of government; rather, organisations and individuals in all sectors across the media and information ecosystem practice it and interact. Importantly, these actors have a prominent role in contributing to the evolution and innovation of the field, developing new practices that governments can learn from in turn. The specificity of government communication however is important to keep in mind, particularly as regards to the dedicated accountability and feedback loops that apply to it and that differ from the ones applied in the private sector.

Transformations linked to digital technologies, as well as to changes in the production and consumption of media, have created new imperatives for public communication and unleashed unprecedented opportunities for its application. In parallel, growing challenges of misinformation and disinformation<sup>4</sup> present severe implications for democracy and governance. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the role of public communication as a core component of good governance (OECD, 2020<sup>[8]</sup>;

OECD, 2020<sup>[9]</sup>). As governments around the world adapt to this evolving environment, this report takes stock of the present context and proposes avenues for the way forward in terms of policy reform.

Despite the importance of public communication in an increasingly connected world, international comparative analysis on this subject remains scarce and research on its application and impact shows considerable gaps. A compilation of 15 country case studies by Sanders and Canel (2013<sup>[5]</sup>) provides one of the most comprehensive analyses of international approaches for structuring and conducting this function to date. Notably, the authors emphasise the scarcity of data and primary evidence as a challenge. Recent literature has been expanding the evidence base on how governments provide information to their citizens, how they receive and listen to feedback, and how their communication affects citizens' perceptions and attitudes (Kim and Krishna, 2018<sup>[10]</sup>; Macnamara, 2017<sup>[4]</sup>). Much of the literature concerning this function is also included in more practical types of publications, such as handbooks and guides (Luoma-aho and Canel, 2020<sup>[11]</sup>). Additional literature on the links between communication and governance has tended to focus on its role in development programmes in low-income settings,<sup>5</sup> while a larger volume of literature relates instead to the field of political communication and associated practices.<sup>6</sup>

Based on a first-of-its-kind survey of 39 Centres of Government<sup>7</sup> and 24 Ministries of Health from 46 OECD member and non-member countries plus the European Commission, this Report presents the most comprehensive international perspective on the status quo of public communication. Building on previous literature and on engagement with a global community of practitioners (the OECD's Experts Group on Public Communication formed in 2019, as well the OECD Working Party on Open Government), this Publication seeks to identify how this function can be reformed and conducted more strategically to better advance good governance, open government objectives and to support policy making as well as service design and delivery.

### ***A key instrument for public policy and services***

Public communication has a crucial role to play to support the design and delivery of policies and services. Indeed, it is a primary vehicle through which citizens learn about government action and comply with its indications. Accordingly, 84% of CoGs and 67% of health ministries surveyed by the OECD confirmed that raising awareness of policies is the leading objective of this function.<sup>8</sup> Beyond raising awareness, however, strategic communication is an essential tool for policy implementation, particularly for those that rest on compliance and behaviour change. Notably, campaigns are a widely used tool for this purpose and their impact is well documented (see Chapter 7).

Perhaps no single event has demonstrated the role of this function for supporting policy implementation more immediately than the COVID-19 pandemic (OECD, 2021<sup>[12]</sup>).<sup>9</sup> Over the course of 2020 and 2021, the response to this crisis has depended in large part on the ability of governments to instruct all citizens to adopt certain behaviours and sustain a society-wide effort to navigate unprecedented challenges. During the early stages of the pandemic that saw entire nations moving into lockdowns, official notifications were essential to implementing emergency measures and to guiding and reassuring citizens at a highly uncertain time. As societies moved from crisis-response mode to adapting to life with the virus, massive campaigns informed by behavioural insights (or BI) encouraged people to follow instructions on social distancing and mask wearing to contain the spread of COVID-19. In 2021, communication efforts also sought to build confidence in vaccines to ensure widespread immunisation and quash the pandemic (OECD, 2021<sup>[13]</sup>; OECD, 2020<sup>[9]</sup>). Overall, effective communications have been instrumental to the implementation of key policies to manage the pandemic.

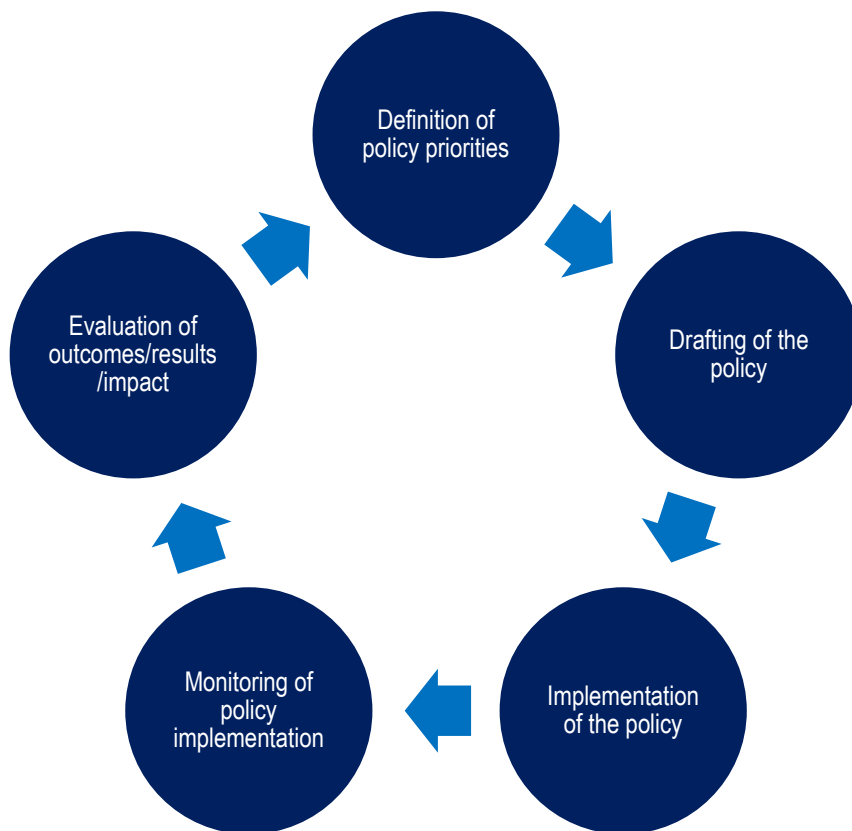
Whether at a time of crisis or under “business as usual”, communications play a key role in public institutions' abilities to deliver the policies and services that contribute to society's well-being. However, as illustrated above, there is a significant opportunity to not only inform, but also engage wider audiences in shaping such policies and services. This is an important step to help restoring public trust amidst prevalent perceptions that regular citizens have little influence over policy making. According to the 2020 Edelman

Trust Barometer, 48% of respondents from 28 countries, including 15 OECD members feel that the political system is not working for them (Edelman, 2021<sup>[14]</sup>). According to the OECD's 21-country *Risks that Matter Survey* (OECD, 2018<sup>[15]</sup>), about 60% of respondents feel that the government did not incorporate the views of people like them when designing social policy.

To this end, it is important that communication is integrated at varying degrees at each stage of the policy cycle (see Figure 1.1), and not just upon the approval of the policy, with communicators involved in the policy-making process from the onset. Enabling a two-way flow of information and feedback can favour responsive and improved policy making (OECD, 2020<sup>[16]</sup>). The listening component of communications for example can also yield invaluable information to help design policies. However, research suggests that lingering views of communication as an auxiliary function, rather than a strategic one to policy, as well as perceptions that it carries risks, remain obstacles to expanding its role (Fairbanks, Plowman and Rawlins, 2007<sup>[2]</sup>; Sanders and Canel, 2013<sup>[5]</sup>; WPP Government & Public Sector Practice, 2016<sup>[6]</sup>).

The value of public communication for policies and services is not limited to engaging external stakeholders. The seeming disconnect between communication and policy is also reflected in the ways communicators collaborate internally with policy or service development teams (WPP Government & Public Sector Practice, 2016<sup>[6]</sup>). OECD survey data for CoGs shows that less than half (49%) report working "very often" with such teams. Other recent surveys of practitioners reinforce the notion that there is room to better integrate the policy and communication functions. For example, a common challenge raised relates to communicators often lacking access to sufficiently high levels of decision making, or are included at the end of the policy cycle to disseminate or "sell" pre-designed outcomes (WPP Government & Public Sector Practice, 2016<sup>[6]</sup>).

**Figure 1.1. The five stages of the policy cycle**



Source: OECD (2016<sup>[17]</sup>), *Open Government: The Global Context and the Way Forward*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264268104-en..>

Internal communication addressed to civil servants and employees across the public sector is another crucial asset to the implementation of policies and delivery of services. When conducted strategically, internal campaigns and regular information exchanges can contribute to driving desired changes in culture and fostering a more effective and cohesive public sector (see Chapter 7).

In addition to the contribution of communications for better policies and services as described above and as detailed in Chapter 7, it also plays a crucial role in nurturing more open societies, as described in the section below.

### **Communication as a pillar of a more open government**

Across the world, OECD member and non-member countries have been increasingly implementing initiatives to build more open and inclusive societies. A decade of lessons from these efforts is explored in the 2016 OECD report *Open Government: The Global Context and the Way Forward* and synthesised in the first international legal instrument on this area: the 2017 OECD *Recommendation of the Council on Open Government* (hereafter “the Recommendation”) (OECD, 2017<sup>[7]</sup>). This Report builds on these two foundational documents.

Although the contribution of communication to the open government principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation is often not fully recognised, the Recommendation includes several provisions that reflect its strategic importance (Box 1.1).

#### **Box 1.1. Provisions relating to communication in the OECD Recommendation on Open Government**

Provision 1: “take measures, in all branches and at all levels of the government, to develop and implement open government strategies and initiatives in collaboration with stakeholders and to foster commitment from politicians, members of parliaments, senior public managers and public officials, to ensure successful implementation and prevent or overcome obstacles related to resistance to change”.

Provision 6: “Actively communicate on open government strategies and initiatives, as well as on their outputs, outcomes and impacts, in order to ensure that they are well-known within and outside government, to favour their uptake, as well as to stimulate stakeholder buy-in.”

Provision 7: “Proactively make available clear, complete, timely, reliable and relevant public sector data and information that is free of cost, available in an open and non-proprietary machine-readable format, easy to find, understand, use and reuse, and disseminated through a multi-channel approach, to be prioritised in consultation with stakeholders”.

Provision 8: “Grant all stakeholders equal and fair opportunities to be informed and consulted and actively engage them in all phases of the policy-cycle and service design and delivery. This should be done with adequate time and at minimal cost, while avoiding duplication to minimise consultation fatigue. Further, specific efforts should be dedicated to reaching out to the most relevant, vulnerable, underrepresented, or marginalised groups in society, while avoiding undue influence and policy capture”.

Provision 10: “While recognising the roles, prerogatives, and overall independence of all concerned parties and according to their existing legal and institutional frameworks, explore the potential of moving from the concept of open government toward that of open state”.

Source: OECD (2017<sup>[7]</sup>), Recommendation of the Council on Open Government, <https://www.oecd.org/gov/Recommendation-Open-Government-Approved-Council-141217.pdf>.

There are multiple ways that communication can support each of the open government principles. First, it can enhance active transparency ((understood as the obligation of public institutions to disseminate information without citizens having to request it). Public communication largely takes place on the platforms and channels that most stakeholders access daily for news or to connect with one another, like newspapers, television, and social media. By packaging government information for widespread consumption and delivering it to the public where they are most likely to see and engage with it, communicators can ensure such content reaches the widest possible audiences. In this way, communication complements and potentially expands the reach of policy or legal frameworks, such those related to Access to Information, that are designed to disclose information both proactively and reactively. In practice, they often rely on users purposely seeking out specific government data or documents. Communication can then connect with a wider audience in a way that can make these disclosures more relevant and visible. However, the function's support to transparency is ultimately contingent upon its ability to share information unhindered and without manipulation (Fairbanks, Plowman and Rawlins, 2007<sup>[2]</sup>). For this reason, policies or measures that require transparency in public communication and distance the latter to the extent possible from potential political interference are important to ensure it serves this objective.

Communicating both internally within the government and externally can also contribute to greater public sector integrity. This is defined as “the consistent alignment of, and adherence to, shared ethical values, principles and norms for upholding and prioritising the public interest over private interests in the public sector” (OECD, 2020<sup>[18]</sup>). As a vehicle for raising awareness and promoting norms related to integrity and fight against corruption, public communication effectively support efforts to build a whole-of-society culture of integrity (OECD, 2017<sup>[19]</sup>). Indeed, initiatives to promote related values and behaviours include campaigns to encourage whistle-blowing within the public sector, as well as ones that focus on preventive actions, as documented in later chapters.

However, beyond communicating *for* integrity, communicating *with* integrity is essential to ensure this function is conducted in the service of citizens and in line with open government objectives. To this end, several governments have adopted ethical guidelines and other measures that regulate the work of communicators and their responsibilities to help ensure the trustworthiness and reliability of information (see Chapter 2).

Communication also plays a key role in promoting accountability. By communicating relevant information, media, citizens and stakeholder groups can scrutinise the actions of governments and voice their feedback (2017<sup>[20]</sup>). Governments also employ communication to respond to public scrutiny, justify their actions or explain how they aim to rectify their approaches to better meet citizens' expectations. This is especially important in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which governments have imposed measures that limit certain personal freedoms and implemented decisions rapidly and in some instances opaquely. In this environment, clear and open communication is a key enabler of accountability as is elaborated further in Chapter 7.

Besides fostering greater accountability, communication can serve as a platform for understanding and addressing wider needs and concerns. Through organisational (Macnamara, 2016<sup>[21]</sup>) or social listening practices,<sup>10</sup> including by monitoring and analysing audience comments and attitudes online and offline in increasingly precise ways, governments can be well-positioned to respond appropriately to citizens' feedback. More continuous and committed efforts to listen to and understand public sentiment, and to look beyond the headlines of influential media, can thus contribute to greater accountability and responsiveness (Macnamara, 2017<sup>[4]</sup>).

Additionally, public communication is an asset for enabling and expanding opportunities for the participation of individuals and stakeholder groups in policy making and for broadening the reach of such initiatives. Alongside the rise of consultative, deliberative and other innovative participatory processes, communication serves an important role in publicising these opportunities to citizens and providing necessary information about the content of their engagement for them to input constructively in the

process. It can also relay the outcomes of processes to a wider public, strengthening the legitimacy of the initiative and closing the feedback loop (OECD, 2020<sup>[16]</sup>; OECD, 2019<sup>[22]</sup>).

Beyond these structured settings, public communication can provide an avenue for informal and continuous participation in democratic discourse. Digital channels, primarily social media, can facilitate direct interaction between institutions and large numbers of citizens. In doing so, they open up possibilities for engagement on an “always on” basis, rather than limiting it to designated initiatives instigated by the government to meet specific needs at a given time (Macnamara, 2017, p. 13<sup>[4]</sup>). If integrated within policy cycles, this type of two-way communication can further contribute to shaping policy outcomes.

Finally, and in addition to external communication, communicating internally is of equal importance to foster a more open government. Indeed, internal communication is a crucial tool to raise the awareness of public officials across the government on the importance of related reforms, understand potential concerns and to secure their buy-in of such efforts. Indeed, the OECD Recommendation (OECD, 2017<sup>[7]</sup>) urges adherents to “take measures, in all branches and at all levels of the government [...] to foster commitment from politicians, members of parliaments, senior public managers and public officials, to ensure successful implementation and prevent or overcome obstacles related to resistance to change”.

Although public communication can support open government principles in the ways discussed above, whether and how that potential is realised depends on the mandates countries set, the institutional mechanisms and practical constraints that empower or inhibit communicators. This potential is often unfulfilled, and findings in this report suggest there is broad scope to expand the function’s role to better serve open government and good governance objectives. A conscious effort in this direction is necessary, as challenges presented by a complex information ecosystem and low institutional trust increase the urgency of strengthening how the public connects with their institutions. Furthermore, the risk of communications being used as a political tool is an important one to take into account, requiring the establishment of adequate safeguards and checks and balances.

Furthermore, successful public communication equally requires a thriving civic space. Civil society, special interest groups, academia and representatives of the private sector are some of the most important groups informing and shaping debates on policy matters and as such they must be free to meet, discuss and express their opinions. In addition, as an essential pillar of this space, a free, independent, and diverse media sector facilitates the unrestricted flow of information and the open exchange of opinions and ideas. These stakeholders are essential to the resilience and viability of the information ecosystem. As such, they are also among the key groups with which public communicators engage.

## **The implications of a rapidly changing information ecosystem on how governments communicate**

Public communication does not happen in a vacuum: the context in which it occurs is core to understanding the challenges and opportunities it faces. Indeed, the analysis of its role for policy and governance mechanisms is made urgent by shifts in the information ecosystem that have transformed the function over the past decade and raised important implications for democracy. The technological revolution that has connected the world through social media has given rise to online social movements and simplified the creation and sharing of content and data. Such changes have also facilitated, however, the spread of mis- and disinformation, contributed to undermining the role of traditional information gatekeepers, and have fundamentally changed how governments communicate. Whereas until the early 2000s a so-called “one-to-many” model of communication prevailed, this has shifted today to a “many-to-many” model (Jensen and Helles, 2016<sup>[23]</sup>). Anyone can be both a producer and a consumer of information, and anybody with an internet connection has the potential to engage with and influence public debates.

Traditionally, governments had largely relied on traditional media to amplify official messages to reach citizens. With the advent of digital channels, this approach has gradually lost its primacy to direct institution-to-individual communication via online platforms that bypass traditional media (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2018<sup>[1]</sup>). This shift has also enabled a broader scope for governments to communicate about more diverse policy issues targeted to more specific audiences, as traditional media tend to concentrate on “newsworthy” subjects and political affairs, often under-reporting less mainstream issues (Lovari, Lucia D’Ambrosi and Bowen, 2020<sup>[3]</sup>). The unprecedented volumes of data that promise to make communication ever more precise, combined with the direct, unmediated access to vast and diverse publics, are some of the opportunities and challenges that have emerged.

At the same time, digital platforms have altered patterns in people’s consumption of information and raised demands on their attention. The latter has become a resource that technology companies sell to advertisers. In turn, the design of online platforms and their algorithms, and the massive increase in the volume of information served to increase competition for what content people pay attention to, while making focus more superficial (Lewandowsky et al., 2020<sup>[24]</sup>). As governments compete with all other information sources for the public’s attention, cognitive and psychological factors such as information overload can undermine the efficacy of even well-crafted content (Qiu et al., 2017<sup>[25]</sup>).

Online and social media have also heightened the pace at which information travels, accelerated the news cycle, and enabled a wider range of actors to drive discussions on policy issues. Taken together, digital technologies have produced a complex information ecosystem that has made it more challenging for official messages to “cut through the noise”. Cumulatively, these changes require considerable adjustments to practices, public officials’ skills, and even to how communication is organised, if governments are to make the most of the digital transformation and ensure it can promote better governance.

The deep changes brought on by the digitalisation of communication channels are not limited to governments. Traditional media markets have been upended by the rise of social media platforms over the past decade. Besides forcing changes in their way of operating, online platforms have also undermined the business model of news outlets, by shifting advertising spending to leading technology companies (Wieser, 2020<sup>[26]</sup>). Over the same period, research has documented a decline in local newspapers (Nielsen, 2015<sup>[27]</sup>). In parallel, low-quality and low-cost websites have proliferated that provide sensationalised content and clickbait headlines over thoughtful and investigative reporting. This trend bears worrisome consequences for the health of the information ecosystem and its role in sustaining democracy (Matasick, Alfonsi and Bellantoni, 2020<sup>[28]</sup>).

Indeed, among the most disruptive consequences of the rise of online platforms and the relative decline of journalism is the growth in information disorders, such as rapidly spreading mis- and disinformation, as well as harmful content and hate speech (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017<sup>[29]</sup>). These phenomena predate the digital age, but the design of social media algorithms has amplified their spread (Lewandowsky et al., 2020<sup>[24]</sup>). Increasingly hostile and fragmented information landscapes pose a new hybrid threat to countries, as explored, for example, by the OECD High Level Risk Forum, and challenge their ability to develop and implement policy and facilitate democratic engagement.

The ability for governments to use the communication function to promote constructive democratic spaces is critically threatened by widespread mis- and disinformation. When falsehoods spread extensively and rapidly on issues of public policy, official messages are drowned out, creating significant challenges for public communicators to get key information out to all groups in society. Whether in the context of elections, health crises, migration or climate change, mis- and disinformation cast evidence and facts into doubt, sow distrust, and work against policy goals (OECD, 2020<sup>[30]</sup>).



## **Addressing information disorders amid a crisis of public trust**

The challenge of misinformation both builds on and aggravates a deeper-seated crisis of institutional trust. Although COVID-19 and the responses to it caused measures of trust in government to fluctuate in 2020 and 2021 (Edelman, 2021<sup>[14]</sup>), before the pandemic they had stood low for years. In 2019, only 45% of citizens across the OECD said they trusted their government (OECD, 2019<sup>[31]</sup>).

Confidence in information is especially low, no matter the source. The 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer measured record lows in four main categories of information providers, with social media being trusted by only 35% of respondents across 22 countries (Edelman, 2021<sup>[14]</sup>). In 2020, a 40-country study estimated that only 46% of the public have confidence in the news they choose to consume (Reuters Institute, 2020<sup>[32]</sup>). Worryingly, research has noted an increase in the phenomenon of news avoidance, whereby citizens often deliberately turn away from information, which can signal disengagement with policy issues (Skovsgaard and Andersen, 2019<sup>[33]</sup>; Fletcher et al., 2020<sup>[34]</sup>).

Rising political polarisation seems to feed into this trend, as trust in media sources can be linked to the extent to which they reflect an audience's political views (Reuters Institute, 2020<sup>[32]</sup>). Social media platforms may exacerbate the issue, as algorithms prioritise emotional content, potentially helping to amplify polarising content and speech (Smith, 2019<sup>[35]</sup>). Indeed, research from Europe and the United States suggests that internet and social media use affects levels of trust and further polarises pre-existing political beliefs (Klein and Robison, 2019<sup>[36]</sup>; Ceron, 2015<sup>[37]</sup>).

At such scale, these information disorders risk leading to the fracturing of societal beliefs, and loss of trust not only in government, but towards other groups in society that share different views. This context impedes constructive democratic debate and makes it difficult for citizens to come together and make collective decisions based on a set of commonly agreed facts.

Restoring a healthy information ecosystem requires a systemic and holistic approach, including considerations for regulatory, civic and media policy responses (Matasick, Alfonsi and Bellantoni, 2020<sup>[28]</sup>). The public communication function has the potential and the responsibility to play a significant role in this endeavour by both reacting to and preventing the spread of problematic content, as is further elaborated in Chapter 6. To this end, the OECD has developed *Principles of Good Practice for Public Communication Responses to Help Counter Mis- and Disinformation* (OECD, forthcoming<sup>[38]</sup>). These draw on a comprehensive set of practices and interventions aimed at strengthening the capacity of institutions and the resilience of the ecosystem in the face of this challenge (see Chapter 6).

### *Public communication's potential for rebuilding trust in government*

Beyond the context of the present crisis in trust and misinformation, effective public communication can play a key role in helping to rebuild confidence in governments. Public communication that is transparent, respectful of the values of honesty, integrity and impartiality, and conceived as a means for two-way engagement with citizens can lead to greater trust (Matasick, Alfonsi and Bellantoni, 2020<sup>[28]</sup>; OECD, 2020<sup>[30]</sup>).

Trust is the foundation on which the legitimacy of public institutions is built. It is a multifaceted concept but its influence on the outcomes of public policies is significant and tangible: it helps support social cohesion and the implementation of policy that requires behavioural responses from the public (OECD, 2020<sup>[39]</sup>). This makes building trust a priority for governments. While policy substance and tangible outcomes are ultimately critical in shaping trust, it "is often a subjective phenomenon, based as much on interpretation or perception as on facts" (OECD, 2017, p. 16<sup>[40]</sup>). Citizens often form perceptions based on the information they are exposed to, and these may be swayed in an environment where high-profile political affairs receive more airtime than the policies and day-to-day government work that keeps services running.

Effective public communication can thus help shape perceptions that the government is responsive, reliable, and acts according to values of integrity, openness, and fairness, the key drivers of trust identified by the OECD (2017<sup>[40]</sup>). Indeed, half of the CoGs in the OECD survey selected strengthening trust as a top objective of their communication. These same drivers of trust ought to guide the design and delivery of communication, furthermore, so that it is not used as a reputation management tool, but rather practiced in the service of citizens.

## **Towards a more effective public communication function**

The above context reinforces the important role that public communication can play in delivering improved policies and services, contributing to open government objectives, better governance, and ultimately strengthening democracy. Building on the definition at the start of the chapter, therefore, public communication is considered “effective” when it is oriented towards advancing the principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation, and is conducted in the service of more responsive and inclusive policies and services. An increasingly complex and challenging ecosystem, characterised by information disorders, further magnifies the imperative for governments to communicate effectively with stakeholders and citizens to strengthen democracy.

Moving beyond the conception of communication as the passive dissemination of official messages requires appropriate policies, institutions and practices that can optimise the function’s potential to serve its strategic potential. The following chapters consider how it is structured, governed and conducted across OECD countries and beyond; identify the reforms and changes that can help governments fully leverage the function; and explore avenues for future analysis and research.

This work is guided by an analytical framework built around key policy catalysts that can bring about a set of medium- and long-term outcomes, grounded in the OECD Recommendation on Open Government. These catalysts can be summarised into two pillars (Figure 1.2) that consist of:

1. Institutional and governance prerequisites. These include official mandates, legal and administrative structures, as well as human and financial resources that support well-defined, integrated, and co-ordinated communication activities across the public sector.
2. Core elements of strategic communication. These are based on objective-driven strategies, grounded in evidence (drawing on data and audience and behavioural insights), and monitored and evaluated at all stages. Strategic communication is based on core competencies that cover media relations, campaigns and other specialisations. When applied well, these competencies can evolve the function from an information dissemination tool to a lever of more inclusive and responsive governance, and a platform for two-way communication.

Figure 1.2. OECD analytical framework for public communication



Note: This analytical framework presents the current setting and issues for policy to solve, the policy catalysts grouped into pillars of effective public communication and interacting with the open government principles, and the intermediate and long-term outcomes the catalysts aim to produce. This is set against the backdrop of a complex information ecosystem, which interacts with the policy catalysts posing both threats and opportunities to their efficacy.

Source: Author's work.

These pillars are essential to building effective communication across governments and public institutions at all levels. However, the continuously changing information ecosystem in which governments engage plays a major role in shaping their approach. This can affect the channels on which it occurs and the format it will have. Similarly, other actors in this ecosystem will complement, challenge and interact with messages. The ability for the function to contribute to a more open government therefore must take into account the broader ecosystem and the external factors that affect its efficacy and influence its priorities.

The following chapters will elaborate further on each of the pillars and elements of the above framework, informed by a 46-country, 63-institutions survey conducted, cleaned and validated by the OECD between February 2020 and January 2021. Further details of the survey and methodology are included in Annex A of this report. This comparative international analysis highlights that the understanding and execution of public communication remains highly varied across countries, even ones with similar levels of maturity. The analysis reinforces the need for international standards in this field and a more strategic outlook for this government function and points to areas for reform and for further investigation.

Going forward, governments can use the analysis in this report to understand how they can reform their communication functions to become more strategic and effective. Future research will need to explore more advanced approaches and applications that enable active listening and two-way dialogue beyond what is prevalent today. In partnership with its Experts Group on Public Communication, established in 2020, the OECD can look toward developing a maturity model for public communication as well as related standards and criteria for the professionalisation of this key government function. These could eventually serve as a compass to design reforms and interventions to fulfil the potential of this area of work for governance and policy.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This tension is an often noted factor in much of the literature on the subject: List relevant literature (WPP engagement report, McNamara LSE paper, Sanders and Canel, 2013; Fairbanks et al. (2007), “Transparency in Government Communication”, *Journal of Public Affairs*, 7: 23-37; Lovari et al. (2020), “Reconnecting Voices. The (New) Strategic Role of Public Sector Communication After Covid-19”, *Partecipazione e conflitto*, Vol. 13(2): 970-989; Canel, M.-J., & Luoma-aho, V. (2019). *Public Sector Communication: Closing Gaps Between Citizens and Public Organizations*, John Wiley & Sons. doi:10.1002/9781119135630

<sup>2</sup> 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, political figures and parties, organisations and citizens).

<sup>3</sup> The OECD defines open government as “a culture of governance that promotes the principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation in support of democracy and inclusive growth”.

<sup>4</sup> Misinformation describes situations where false or misleading information is shared but no harm is intended; the sharer may not even be aware the information is false. Disinformation is when false manipulative and/or misleading information is knowingly shared with the intention of causing harm or influencing the information environment. Disinformation and information influence operations may be spread by foreign or domestic actors (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017<sup>[29]</sup>).

<sup>5</sup> See for example: *The contribution of government communication capacity to achieving good governance outcomes. (English)*. Communication for Governance and Accountability Program (CommGAP) Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group.  
<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/511591468331052544/The-contribution-of-government-communication-capacity-to-achieving-good-governance-outcomes>

<sup>6</sup> See for example: Norris, P. (2001). Political communication. In N. Smelser & P. Baltes (Eds.), *International Encyclopaedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences* (pp. 11631–11640). Amsterdam, the Netherlands: Elsevier.

<sup>7</sup> Centre of government (CoG) is defined as the support structure serving the highest level of the executive branch of government (presidents, prime ministers and their equivalents).

<sup>8</sup> Respondents were asked to select 5 priority objectives; “promote transparency” was tied with “raise awareness of health ministry policies” as the most-selected response. Austria did not provide a response to this question in the CoG survey.

<sup>9</sup> The OECD survey on which this report is based was administered in 2020 to cover the year 2019. Although the responses refer to the pre-COVID-19 era, several respondents have reflected the experience of the pandemic in some of their answers.

<sup>10</sup> Social listening (also referred to as social media measurement), is a practice for gathering insights on audiences' perceptions and engagement with content relating to an organisation or brand, or to a specific issue. It is more advanced than traditional audience research that maps demographic or geographical traits of audience groups at a lower frequency. Indeed, it can provide almost real-time understanding of different audience types' sentiment towards an issue and of trends in online conversations which can help produce more responsive content and refine approaches to communication. Social listening is most commonly conducted through the use of dedicated software that aggregate big data from content across multiple platforms. While many social media and online platforms no longer provide third parties with personally identifiable information on their users, it is the responsibility of communicators not to single out data that can be used to identify or locate a single person in the respect of privacy.





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