

# Governance Alert: Strategic Government Communications

IPD circulates summaries of recent articles, papers, reports or speeches on significant developments in public sector governance and public policy. This is a brief round-up of some of the material it has gathered on the issue of strategic government communications.

## Background

Recent natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina and the tsunami in 2004, and terrorist attacks like the London bombings, have highlighted the significance of communications as a part of crisis management. Communications is also an essential element of many aspects of public policy such as public consultation and nation-branding. It is increasingly being recognised as a core government function. However, many governments have yet to fully integrate strategic communications into the policy development process; to put in place appropriate coordination mechanisms; or to acquire and develop the necessary professional skills.

## OECD

This OECD paper discusses the evolving role of central government offices (e.g. PMO, Cabinet Office) and argues that communicating with the public, the legislature and the media is a key strategic government function which should be coordinated by a central office. It concludes by raising two major questions. First, given the universal desire for better government communications, how large should this function be? Second, how tenable is the conventional distinction between (apolitical) "public information" and (political) "government communications"?

*Simon James and Michal Men-Gera, A Comparative Analysis of Government Offices in OECD Countries (OECD Papers 4.6, 2005) 12, 20-22, 24.*  
<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/32/5/34228432.pdf>

## The United States

The 9/11 Commission highlighted the important role US public diplomacy plays in improving the image of the US abroad, especially with anti-American sentiment increasing worldwide. A Government Accountability Office report states that recent initiatives to coordinate US public diplomacy efforts have failed and that no national communication strategy exists—the exception is a committee to coordinate public diplomacy efforts focused on Muslim audiences, whose results have been somewhat controversial. The report recommends that the Director of the Office of Global Communication be responsible for a national strategy.

The report also emphasises the value of engaging the private sector in public diplomacy as it has "an advantage in marketing and public relations skills, perceived independence and credibility, and resources". So far, such attempts have met with limited success. The report recommends that the Secretary of State develop a strategy to engage the private sector beyond international exchanges e.g. by encouraging more social investment programmes abroad.

*US Government Accountability Office, US Public Diplomacy: Interagency Coordination Efforts Hampered by the Lack of a National Communication Strategy (Washington DC: April 2005).*  
<http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d05323.pdf>

## Canada

The Government of Canada has a comprehensive Communications Policy that aims to ensure that communications across

the public service are well coordinated, effectively managed and responsive to the diverse information needs of the public. The wide-ranging policy guidelines include risk and crisis communication; media relations and engagement; coordination and collaboration among public institutions; and the roles and functions of ministers, press spokespersons and heads of communications. Specific policies are also aligned to relevant laws of Canada. For instance, crisis and emergency communications must be read and applied with the Emergency Act; and the balance of diverse needs in communications must adhere to the requirements of the Multiculturalism Act.

Canada's approach shows that a good communications strategy emphasises shared responsibility within agencies, and promotes cooperation and collaboration amongst them. Several lessons can also be drawn: Firstly, national values should undergird the policy. In Canada, these include care, respect and fairness, and are emphasised through means that ensure all segments of society are represented and reached. Secondly, the ethos of public service should be clearly articulated in the policy. In Canada's case the values are (i) Responsible government – the quality and delivery of information, as well as stewardship of resources; (ii) Openness and engagement – partnering citizens, private organisations and the media in policy formulation and assessment; and (iii) Coherence – maintaining a distinct and consistent government identity, and fostering inter-agency coordination, especially for government-wide messages and themes. Thirdly, agencies should walk the talk and integrate communications into their own business processes and management structures.

*The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, Communications Policy of the Government of Canada, 2004.*  
[http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pubs\\_pollsipubs/comm/comm\\_e.asp](http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pubs_pollsipubs/comm/comm_e.asp)

### The United Kingdom

In 2004, the United Kingdom appointed Howell James as its first Permanent Secretary (Government Communications). In an interview for *Ethos*, he highlighted the need for professionalism and explained the benefits of integrating strategic communications into policy development from the beginning, especially with regard to consulting the public. He also discussed some of the difficulties of government branding noting that government tend to be replete with

'badges', but relatively weak at building their brands.

Risk communication is one aspect of communications for which that the UK has developed tools. In July 2001, it established the Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS) to improve the UK's resilience against disruptive challenges. The CCS has produced a report and tool-kit on developing risk management and communication strategies. It addresses diverse stakeholders' reactions and needs in coping with risk situations, as well as their role in managing them in collaboration with the Government. The report provides insight into the public's judgement, attitudes and expectations from the government in times of crisis. It also highlights how the actions of the media trigger reactions to risk, and should be involved early and effectively to prevent risk from spiralling into crisis.

Key takeaways from the British experience of risk communication are about openness, inclusiveness and a two-way communication process involving the public and all stakeholders. Early actions to engage the public in decisions about risk can help ensure smoother implementation of policies to tackle risks. Providing clear and accurate information about the nature of risk can help people to make realistic assessments of the risk they face, and where appropriate, to make informed judgements on how to handle the risk themselves. It can in turn foster a climate of empowerment, reassurance and reduce the risk of rumours, scares and panic situations.

*UK Civil Contingencies Secretariat, Cabinet Office, Communicating Risk, 2004.*  
<http://www.ukresilience.info/risk/communicatingrisk.pdf>

### Conclusion

Several general lessons emerge from this brief environmental scan. One, a co-ordinated approach to communications is important: a national communication strategy can help to ensure that messages from different agencies are consistent and mutually reinforcing. Two, strategic communications could be strengthened by reaching beyond the public sector. Singapore could consider how to involve the private sector and NGOs. Three, as public services are not traditionally experts in communications and the related areas of marketing and branding, it is important to improve the quality and sophistication of these skills and associated policies and strategies. Risk communication, for

instance, is a specialised field which may require different skills from other types of communications. Finally, any national communication strategy must be congruent with the country's national and public service values such as transparency, inclusiveness and engaging the public.

*Material for this alert was provided by IPD staff: Patricia Lam, Tham Su Fern and Wendy Wong. ■*