



OECD Working Papers on Public Governance No. 55

Public communication  
trends after COVID-19:  
Innovative practices across  
the OECD and in four  
Southeast Asian countries

**Carlotta Alfonsi,  
Chiara Varazzani,  
Ethel Hui Yan Tan,  
Michaela Sullivan-Paul**

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/cb4de393-en>

OECD Working Papers on Public Governance

**Public communication trends after COVID-19  
Innovative practices across the OECD and in  
four Southeast Asian countries**

## OECD Working Papers on Public Governance

OECD Working Papers should not be reported as representing the official views of the OECD or of its member countries. The opinions expressed and arguments employed are those of the authors.

Working Papers describe preliminary results or research in progress by the author(s) and are published to stimulate discussion on a broad range of issues on which the OECD works. Comments on Working Papers are welcomed, and may be sent to OECD Directorate for Public Governance, OECD, 2 rue André-Pascal, 75775 Paris Cedex 16, France; e-mail: [gov.contact@oecd.org](mailto:gov.contact@oecd.org).

This document, as well as any data and any map included herein, are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area.

Authorised for publication by Elsa Pilichowski, Director, Public Governance Directorate

© OECD (2022)

---

The use of this work, whether digital or print, is governed by the Terms and Conditions to be found at <http://www.oecd.org/termsandconditions>

# Public communication trends after COVID-19

## Innovative practices across the OECD and in four Southeast Asian countries

Carlotta Alfonsi, Chiara Varazzani, Ethel Hui Yan Tan, Michaela Sullivan-Paul, OECD Public Governance Directorate

---

Reflecting on the experiences of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, this OECD working paper illustrates selected international trends that are driving innovation in the practice of public communication across the OECD to make it more inclusive, responsive and compelling. These include advanced uses of “big data” and analytics to power precise, targeted communication, collaboration with trusted third-party messengers in diverse communities, and the application of behavioural insights (BI) to communication. In turn, these trends can help promote the use of public communication for policy, openness and dialogue. The paper reflects on the implications of these international trends for four countries in Southeast Asia, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. It looks at local lessons from the pandemic response and identifies avenues for adopting global good practices more widely. The paper focuses on a set of institutional prerequisites, including fostering a culture of innovation in public communication mandates and approaches, ensuring access to specialised skillsets, and strengthening ethical guidance in the use of new technologies and BI.

---

**JEL Classification:** D-83; H-10

**Keywords:** Public communication, Digital, Open Government, Public Governance, COVID-19, Misinformation

# Acknowledgements

This Working Paper was prepared by OECD Public Governance Directorate (GOV), headed by Elsa Pilichowski in collaboration with the OECD Korea Policy Centre (KPC). It was developed under the strategic direction of Alessandro Bellantoni, Head of the Open Government and Civic Space Unit of the Open and Innovative Government Division in GOV headed by Carlos Santiso.

It was co-ordinated by Carlotta Alfonsi of the Open Government and Civic Space Unit, who wrote most of its sections. It benefited from input by Chiara Varazzani, Lead Behavioural Scientist, and Michaela Sullivan-Paul of the OECD Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (OPSI), and by Ethel Hui Yan Tan of the Digital Government and Data Unit. Jung-A (Grace) Lee of the KPC co-authored Chapter 4 and contributed to the analysis throughout with evidence from the Republic of Korea.

The authors would like to thank the teams at Indonesia's Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (Kominfo), Malaysia's Ministry of Communication and Multimedia, Singapore's Ministry of Communication and Information and Thailand's Public Relations Department for their participation and contribution to the research for Chapter 4. Additionally they would like to thank Prof. Yong Yoon, Mai-Linh Hamisultane, Andrée Gorman and Hallie Detrick for excellent research support. Finally, the authors are grateful to James Drummond, Mike Pfister, Conor Das-Doyle, Minju Kim and colleagues in the Open and Innovative Government Division for the helpful comments and reviews.

# Table of contents

Acknowledgements	4
Executive Summary	7
1 Introduction	9
The global transformation of the public communication function in the aftermath of the COVID-19 response	9
Strengthening public communication in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand: lessons from the pandemic	11
Background to the research, analytical framework, methodological considerations	12
2 International trends for more inclusive, responsive and compelling communication	14
1. Data-driven practices powering informed communication	16
2. Third-party messengers to amplify the reach and trustworthiness of communication	25
3. Behavioural insights to turn communication into action	29
3 Building institutional capacity to upgrade public communication and seize innovations to the field	36
1. Embedding an innovative and strategic outlook in the practice of public communication	36
3. Reinforcing ethical standards for the use of data, technology and BI	42
4 Lessons from COVID-19 and opportunities in four Southeast Asian countries	47
Key trends from the public communication response to COVID-19	49
Towards more evidence-based communication in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand	58
Professionalisation, specialisation and ethical standards: areas of intervention for building an impactful communication function	61
References	64
<b>Tables</b>	
Table 3.1. The OECD Framework for Digital Talent and Skills in the Public Sector	40
Table 3.2. Public communicators' perceptions of ethically challenging practices	43
<b>Figures</b>	
Figure 1.1. OECD analytical framework for public communication	12

Figure 1.2. How inclusive, responsive and compelling public communication reinforces the function to make it more effective	13
Figure 2.1. The six dimensions of the OECD Digital Government Policy Framework	16
Figure 2.2. The 12 facets of a data-driven public sector	17
Figure 4.1. Priority strategic issues for public sector and government communicators in the Asia Pacific region	49

## Boxes

Box 2.1. The JRC's Europe Media Monitor and the Competence Centre on Text Mining and Analysis	22
Box 2.2. The architecture of organisational listening	23
Box 2.3. Finland's influencer-led COVID-19 prevention campaign	27
Box 2.4. Collaborating with influential representatives of minority groups to combat vaccine hesitancy in the United Kingdom	29
Box 2.5. BI-informed counter-disinformation practices	31
Box 2.6. The Dutch government's CASI framework for BI in public communication	33
Box 2.7. Impact Canada's behaviour change communications content for COVID-19	34
Box 3.1. Digital and innovation training programmes for civil servants	40
Box 3.2. Ethics and integrity in Principle 7 of the AMEC Barcelona Principles 3.0	44
Box 3.3. Collaborative process for the development of Algorithmic Transparency Standards in the United Kingdom	45
Box 4.1. Risk communication as a pillar of Malaysia's national COVID-19 approach	51
Box 4.2. Recommendations for Thailand to deliver better in the digital age	52
Box 4.3. Indonesia's nation-wide mobilisation of COVID-19 behaviour change ambassadors	55
Box 4.4. South Korea's COVID-19 infodemic management	57
Box 4.5. REACH citizen engagement unit in Singapore	61

# Executive Summary

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, communication has taken centre stage around the world as a means to implement policy and help steer societies out of an unprecedented crisis. In the early months, it was vital to instruct citizens to stay at home and quell anxiety. It also served to ensure a steady supply of information on the evolution of the health situation and related government measures, while mitigating the spread and impact of mis- and disinformation on the virus. Once vaccines became available, public communication served to reduce hesitancy and move people to action to get their jobs.

Delivering these potentially life-saving messages to every group in society at such a pace and scale was an almost unprecedented challenge. Partly as a result of this, the pandemic served as a catalyst to accelerate the adoption of emerging practices that can make public communication more effective as an instrument of government and a vehicle for dialogue with citizens. The practices discussed in this paper reflect international trends for the growing uses of data and insights, including on behaviour, that enable communicators to develop more precise approaches. Emerging trends also include the enlisting of third party messengers as vehicles for official information.

Although the above practices have been gradually adopted by many institutions over recent years, pandemic-related examples highlight their specific value to strengthening the function. This paper identifies three main ways public communication is benefiting from such innovations:

- Practices for data- and insights- driven communications and the use of community messengers and influencers can serve to improve how **inclusive** communications are of diverse groups in society. They help to identify under-served groups and the barriers to information. These insights then serve to reach them with more tailored messages or via relatable, trusted voices that are more likely to resonate than mainstream channels and content.
- The datafication of communication additionally helps make it more **responsive**. Communicators have easier access to more frequent, precise and rich analytics on what information citizens are looking for that help them promptly respond to demand and adjust their strategies. Practices for social and organisational listening, which triangulate different sources of feedback and interactions with the public, are facilitating two-way communication in the place of top-down dissemination of information.
- The application of behavioural science and cognitive psychology in this domain is instead helping to engender more **compelling**<sup>1</sup> communications. Behavioural Insights (BI) inform the design of content that is more effective at encouraging compliance with policy or service uptake, for example. But they also help communicators account for the cognitive factors, barriers and biases shaping how people navigate an increasingly complex, crowded information ecosystem.

The ongoing transformation of this ecosystem, with the proliferation of digital platforms and the spread of mis- and disinformation, makes it increasingly challenging to ensure citizens are exposed to quality

---

<sup>1</sup> The term compelling is used in this paper to describe communication's ability to motivate and inspire action, and to overcome barriers, biases and inertia. It does not refer to forceful instructions or any constraint to autonomy of choice.

information and equipped with the facts to deliberate on policy matters and participate in public life. This context raises the urgency to upgrade to newer and more sophisticated approaches that enable governments to communicate more effectively. Governments will therefore benefit from seizing the above innovations in the field and consolidating effective approaches deployed during the COVID-19 pandemic. This will help them fulfil the potential of public communication as an instrument for better policies, improved public trust and good governance.

Embracing these approaches and opening to future innovations require building capacity across departments. Institutions need to be agile and data and insights-driven. They ought to match more ambitious strategies with access to necessary skills and specialisations. Finally, they must rely on sound ethical standards and their application. Some emerging technologies practices carry risks of misuse, which makes their ethical use an imperative for communicators. As for any public communication, their use ought to be in the service of the public good and compliant with democratic principles of transparent information and debate.

## Insights and takeaways from communication responses to COVID-19 in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand

The paper dedicates a special focus to public communication in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. These four Southeast Asian countries stood among those praised for their early responses to the pandemic, thanks to rapid mobilisation of crisis protocols and deployment of innovative digital solutions for contact tracing and live information. Public communication has been an important component of this success. Likewise, these countries offer noteworthy approaches for inclusive communication to combat the virus, catering to ethnically and linguistically diverse groups and bridging digital literacy gaps between generations and urban and rural populations.

Although very different between them, the four countries have opportunities to consolidate the gains made throughout of the pandemic. The emerging trends discussed in this paper can support this goal, but governments will need to address some structural issues to be well-placed to seize these innovations.

Firstly, the COVID-19 response has demonstrated the potential of a strategic role for public communication. However, the function is still often seen more as a means to disseminate information than as a vehicle for engagement and policy impact. Governments tend to pay disproportionate attention to traditional media although news consumption has shifted to online channels, especially direct messaging apps. Conversely, to succeed in such a transforming environment, communicators would benefit from developing more strategic approaches, grounded in data and evidence and tied to overarching policy goals.

These four Southeast Asian countries are recognising the importance of data and insights and investing in these essential elements of strategic communication. However, they are yet to adopt more widely the technologies and advanced methods described in this paper. Likewise, the application of BI to policy has risen during COVID-19, but interviews in the four countries suggested it has lagged in their communications.

With some exceptions, communication departments also remain under-skilled, especially in the realms of digital technologies, big data and automation that are driving innovation and efficiencies in the profession. The gap in skills and specialisations matches a gap in the availability of ethics guidance and training, which is a prerequisite to the effective adoption of technologies, data and BI. These tools carry risks for misuse, especially when they are used by untrained staff unfamiliar with the potential implications for citizens' rights and wellbeing.

These same challenges are often found in OECD countries, and highlight a common path towards strengthening the function and unlocking possibilities for more effective public communication.

# 1 Introduction

## The global transformation of the public communication function in the aftermath of the COVID-19 response

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a watershed moment for the role of public communication in policy and governance. Overnight, governments around the world instituted sweeping lifestyle changes, ranging from lockdowns, to social distancing and mask wearing, and more recently have encouraged vaccination against the virus. Many of these emergency (and now recovery) measures urged by the public health crisis have been implemented in good part thanks to public communication.<sup>2</sup>

Over the past two years, countries around the world mobilised exceptional resources to get information and data into the hands of citizens, protect them from false and misleading content, and steer societies out of an unprecedented crisis (OECD, 2020<sup>[1]</sup>; OECD, 2020<sup>[2]</sup>).

In many ways, the pandemic has accelerated the uptake of and experimentation with communication methods that have the potential to make this key function more impactful for achieving policy objectives and strengthening trust in government.

Making communication more effective as a policy instrument is especially urgent in the context of the transforming information ecosystem.<sup>3</sup> This is characterised by rapid digitalisation and the proliferation of communication platforms and marketplaces across connected devices. In these digital spaces, every individual or organisation can be a consumer and publisher of content, and a producer or procurer of data. The information people are exposed to can be determined largely by algorithms designed around a set of human behaviours and informed by the data these behaviours produce. This shift in how information and content are produced and shared has been accompanied by the escalation of information disorders, where getting messages across to the public is complicated by the proliferation of rumours, harmful content and misinformation (OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>).

---

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this publication, 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.

<sup>3</sup> This is understood as the combination of communication, information and media governance frameworks (i.e. institutional, legal, policy, regulatory, etc.) as well as principal actors (i.e. governments, traditional and social media companies, journalists, citizens, etc.).

Digitalisation, data, mediated communication, and behavioural science offer novel opportunities for governments to make their communication more **inclusive** of diverse groups in society, **responsive** to stakeholder needs, and more **compelling** to the public it aims to inform and inspire to action for public good.

Over recent years, and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, several trends have emerged that increase the potential for the public communication function to pursue more ambitious goals in support of policy and governance objectives:

1. **Increasingly large amounts of data have become available, accessible and easier to analyse, share and re-use**, on anything from real-time trending topics of online discussion, to precise characteristics and preferences of ever-narrower segments of the public, to the performance of various types of content. In public communication, this has opened the door to more informed, tailored strategies built around the intended audiences. These data equip communicators with the evidence they need to design communications that are better at reaching and informing larger, more diverse publics. Access to big data and analytical technologies also lower barriers to listen to citizens at scale to better understand and address their needs.
2. Lessons from the pandemic response included greater realisation about the limits of governments' own channels to reach many groups amid low levels of public trust. For this reason, **many governments and organisations have also increasingly relied on third-party messengers** – whether online influencers, popular public figures, or community-based stakeholders – to amplify the reach and trustworthiness of official information. Alongside “direct” government-citizen communication, “mediated” communication from trusted figures is a powerful way to tailor the message to audience specificities and reach even disengaged segments of the population.
3. Alongside the above trends, **behavioural science has established itself as an important component of communication** for policy impact and its adoption has widened with the onset of the pandemic – although it continues to have room for further growth. Notably, during the COVID-19 crisis, more research and practice has been conducted on cognitive factors and aspects relating to people's consumption of information and their finite attention, which affect what messages are retained or acted upon.

Many of these practices are not wholly new, and are perhaps more established in the private sector and marketing fields, for example (Hagelstein, Einwiller and Zeffass, 2021<sup>[4]</sup>; Wiesenber, Zeffass and Moreno, 2017<sup>[5]</sup>). Nonetheless, recent cases discussed in this paper demonstrate that these same practices are consolidating and being adapted in the public sector.

The aftermath of the pandemic offers an opportunity for reflection on the role of public communication and on how to fulfil its potential, so that the good practices adopted over this exceptional period are consolidated and sustained for the long term. Multiple global challenges, notably the transformation of lifestyles and economies urged by the health crisis and the green transition, require better dialogue across society to guide collective action. Governments around the world will be well served by taking on board lessons from the pandemic for innovating and strengthening their communication functions.

Seizing the opportunities brought by these trends in the practice of communication calls for public reform and transformation to equip

public institutions with the necessary expertise, capacity, mandate, and guidance.

Gathering and analysing data or designing behavioural communication are specialised tasks that require skills and dedicated training that at present are not sufficiently available in OECD member and partner countries (OECD, 2021<sup>[6]</sup>; OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>). Similarly, both the handling of data, including personal data, and the application of behavioural methods require the availability of appropriate practical guidelines to ensure they are conducted in compliance with available regulation and other ethical standards and in the respect of citizens' rights and shared values. Addressing these governance and institutional prerequisites forms part of a larger endeavour to strengthen public communication as a core government function and an enabler of a more open and connected government. This endeavour is elaborated in depth in the OECD report *Public Communication: the Global Context and the Way Forward* (2021, here after "the report on Public Communication"), and builds on the OECD *Recommendation of the Council on Open Government* (2017<sup>[7]</sup>). It similarly fits into broader efforts that governments are undertaking to transition towards higher levels of digital maturity in the public sector, as elaborated in the OECD *Recommendation of the Council on Digital Government Strategies* (2014<sup>[8]</sup>), *on Enhancing Access to and Sharing of Data* (2021<sup>[9]</sup>) and captured in the six dimensions of the OECD *Digital Government Policy Framework* (2020<sup>[10]</sup>).

### Strengthening public communication in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand: lessons from the pandemic

Many Southeast Asian (SEA) countries emerged among those who better managed the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, thanks namely to better preparedness and the learnings from the experience with combating the SARS virus (Caballero-Anthony, 2021<sup>[11]</sup>; Kambli et al., 2021<sup>[12]</sup>; Clavier and Ghesquiere, 2021<sup>[13]</sup>). In this region too, public communication was an essential element of the pandemic response. Indeed, in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, the crisis served as a catalyst to deploy co-ordinated, strategic whole-of-government communications in unprecedented ways. It also helped to experiment with new approaches to get information to the most remote corners and hard-to-reach groups of each country. This experience has yielded important lessons, which combined with insights from global new trends can offer guidance on how to strengthen public communication for the long term.

Despite their diversity, these four Southeast Asian countries share a number of common challenges in relation to the public communication function. Although starting at different levels, they are on a similar trajectory towards higher maturity in their communications.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, they are pursuing numerous initiatives to digitalise their public sectors and services, and make them more agile through improved governance and capacity (OECD/ADB, 2019<sup>[14]</sup>). Both areas have gained urgency as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. These countries also share the difficulty of communicating with very diverse publics, who often speak different languages, identify with a variety of cultures, are distributed across diverse geographies, and enjoy varying levels of access and literacy in digital technologies. The emerging trends discussed in this paper are especially valuable to adapt practices to address such challenges.

To this end, the analysis of public communication in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand highlights several good practices and areas of reform. Together with the findings relating to structural elements, skills and ethics, this analysis can serve as an initial roadmap to consolidate a shift towards more inclusive, responsive and compelling communication across the four countries.

---

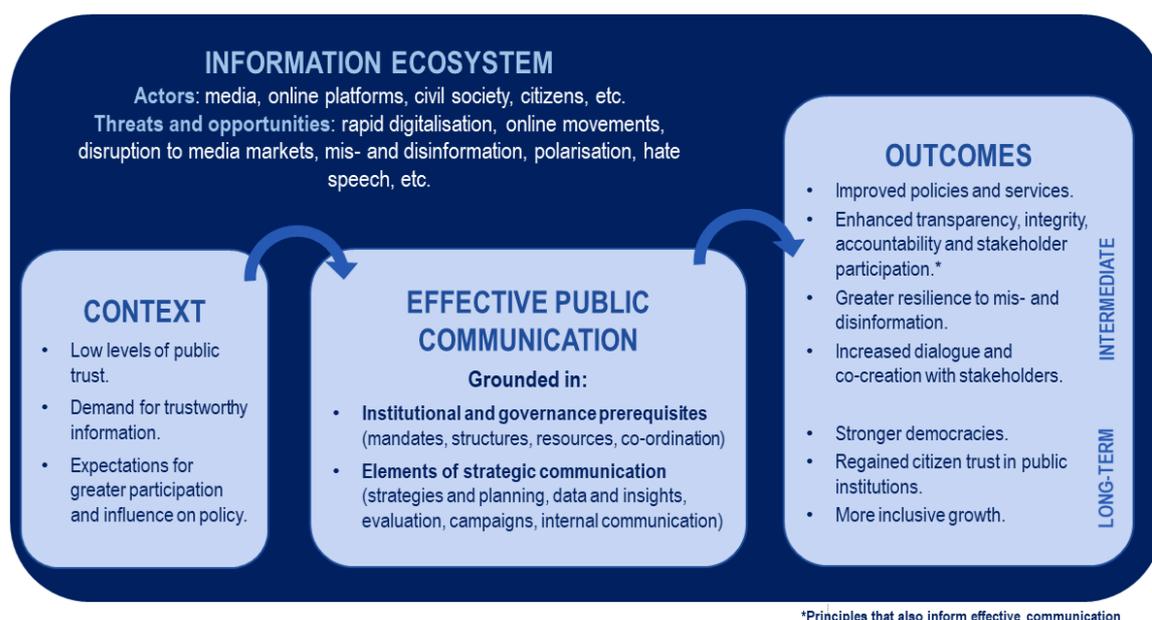
<sup>4</sup> Based on insights drawn from qualitative interviews with officials from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.

## Background to the research, analytical framework, methodological considerations

This working paper builds on the OECD Open and Innovative Government Division's analysis of public communication and information ecosystems, drawing on the Division's established policy work on open government, digital government and public sector innovation. It builds on previous research conducted for the OECD report on Public Communication (OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>) to explore selected themes that evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic and provide analysis and takeaways for four Southeast Asian countries that have participated in the research.

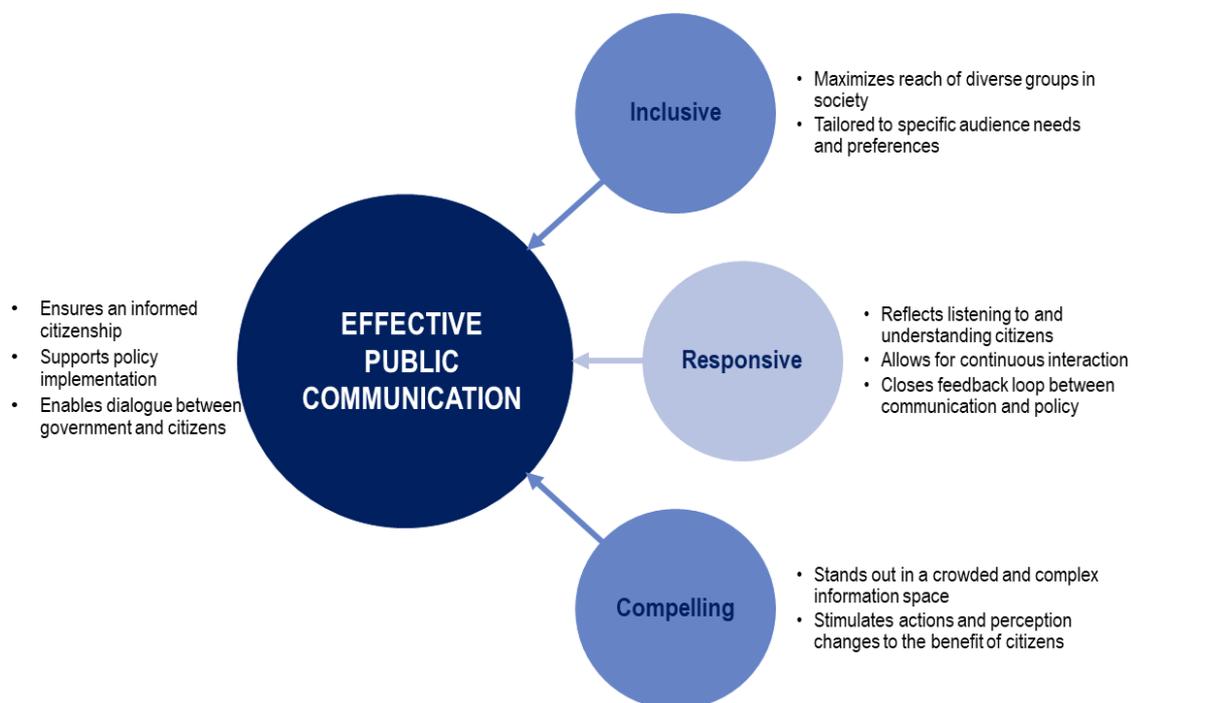
The analysis in this paper uses as a starting point the OECD's analytical framework on the contribution of public communication to improve policies and public governance illustrated in Figure 1.1 (OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>). Building on this overarching framework, the paper looks at specific criteria and qualities that contribute to making public communication effective as a means to achieving the intermediate and long-term outcomes listed in the below framework. To this end, the relationship between inclusive, responsive and compelling communication and the overall effectiveness of the function, as understood in the framework, is sketched out in Figure 1.2 and expanded in Chapter 2.

Figure 1.1. OECD analytical framework for public communication



Source: OECD Report on Public Communication (2021)

**Figure 1.2. How inclusive, responsive and compelling public communication reinforces the function to make it more effective**



The research for this working paper relied primarily on the review of literature, third party surveys and case studies. The mapping of emerging trends and practices was significantly guided and enriched by discussions held with public communicators from OECD member and partners during three meetings of the OECD Experts Group on Public Communication (EGPC) held between September 2020 and June 2021. The OECD additionally conducted bilateral informal discussions between the OECD Secretariat, subject experts and practitioners, and received case studies from EGPC members.

The chapter and findings relating to the experiences and context of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand benefited from discussions during the seminar “Innovating public communication: A roadmap to leverage digital transformation and BI in public communication in Southeast Asia”, held by the OECD Secretariat in collaboration with the OECD Korea Policy Centre on 27 May 2021. The OECD additionally conducted in-depth online fact-finding interviews with public communication practitioners and relevant public officials from the four countries in the region throughout the second half of 2021.

## 2 International trends for more inclusive, responsive and compelling communication

Over the last decade, OECD member countries have undertaken important changes to keep up with a rapidly transforming information ecosystem. This shift has brought public institutions to communicate increasingly through digital channels, whether owned, paid or earned,<sup>5</sup> alongside traditional ones such as the news media. These same channels have likewise unlocked new possibilities for using communication beyond informing citizens. It serves as a practical tool for implementing policy, or listening to and understanding citizens in order to better serve them and engage them in public life.

More impactful communications have benefited significantly from the ongoing evolution of practices for gathering and applying evidence to the design, fine-tuning and evaluation of communication approaches. This has occurred primarily through the application of behavioural science to the field and the expanded gathering and use of data, thanks to large amounts of information generated from people's use of social media, web browsers and mobile apps.

Technological change is without doubt a primary driver of new demands and possibilities for how governments communicate. Yet, fully reaping these opportunities calls for understanding the digital transformation of public communication in a holistic fashion in addition to the mere adoption of technologies. Indeed, such adoption offers great potential, but it is not an end in itself (OECD, 2021<sup>[15]</sup>). What matters most is that digitalisation is channelled towards solving challenges faced by communicators and institutions, and that it expands the possibilities for communicating more effectively.

This analysis identifies three attributes for public communication to attain that can be supported by a set of emerging practices observed at the international level and discussed in this section:

- **Inclusive.** Societies cannot truly prosper if some are left behind or underserved by public policies and services (OECD, 2021<sup>[17]</sup>). This has translated into dedicated efforts to ensure that policy-making is inclusive by design. Similarly, a one-size-fits-all public communication that ignores differences in how various societal groups consume news and information, or which messages will resonate with whom, is likely to be limited in reach and impact. Designing communication to better suit diverse publics is, therefore, a priority for governments.

Whereas, prior to the advent of online and social media, tools to understand audiences and target content at them were limited and costly, today communicators have access to troves of data and insights and the means to connect with citizens directly (Wiesenberg, Zeffass and Moreno, 2017<sup>[5]</sup>). This enables them to design communications strategically in a way that serves multiple

---

<sup>5</sup> Owned channels include ones the relevant institution controls, such as its website or app; paid channels include sponsored content on platforms and third-party channels; earned channels relate to the organic reach resulting from audiences' sharing and engagement with content.

groups and can ensure it reaches intended audiences. Innovations concerning new uses of data and algorithms, but also non-technological approaches to leverage trusted intermediaries as messengers, are expanding opportunities for more inclusive communication.

- **Responsive.** Governments are used to communicate based on their own agendas, according to internal objectives, and traditionally see the role of communication as one of informing and occasionally persuading (Sanders and Canel, 2013<sup>[18]</sup>; Macnamara, 2017<sup>[19]</sup>). Today such an approach tends to be seen as too narrow, and there is greater emphasis on meeting citizens' expectations for transparent information and engagement (Macnamara, 2017<sup>[19]</sup>). Increasingly, governments are pursuing two-way communication, where they are both sender and receiver of messages, as a means to attain a form of continuous dialogue with citizens and stakeholders (Johnston and Lane, 2021<sup>[20]</sup>).

Innovations tied to digital channels, their direct and interactive formats, and their generation of ready-to-analyse data, allow governments to listen to citizens and to respond to them. Responsiveness in this sense can refer both to answering an individual query, as it can refer to reframing communication activities based on an understanding of public preferences and demands for information at an aggregate level. As one of the core drivers of trust identified by the OECD (2017<sup>[20]</sup>), responsiveness is also necessary to help restore public trust in government and open an avenue for citizen participation into policymaking (OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>).

- **Compelling.** Along with the acknowledgement of public communication's role as an instrument for policy making and implementation comes the need to ensure it can contribute to achieving its stated objectives. Amid a growing tendency for many to experience information overload from a saturated information ecosystem (Horrigan, 2016<sup>[22]</sup>), simple exposure to a message is not necessarily sufficient even to raise awareness. In this context, efforts to inform, change perceptions, and prompt people to action in the pursuit of policy compliance and the public good can be greatly improved through the application of behavioural science.

Behavioural insights, or BI, are a powerful tool that nowadays is found in nearly all fields of public policy. BI is equally applied to the design of communication, but its use remains scattered and often based on assumptions rather than evidence (OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>). Instead, through experiments and testing, governments could benefit from precise insights to design more compelling communication that can cut through the noise and resonate with people to inspire positive actions.

However, whether given communications can be compelling depends on more than how they are designed. Trust towards the source of the information is especially important. Understanding how the drivers of trust identified by the OECD (2017<sup>[20]</sup>) can be integrated into the development of communication strategies and initiatives will therefore support greater public receptiveness and, in turn, compliance. This is an important aspect that will be expanded on in future work on public communication.

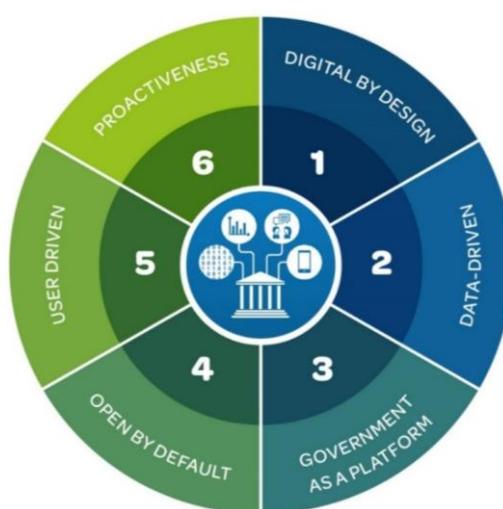
Building on the three priorities above, this analysis highlights how some public institutions across the OECD and beyond are upgrading their communications to be more inclusive, responsive, and compelling. Many advances towards these three attributes have been visible around the world, particularly in the context of responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has increased the urgency to reach and engage all of society. However, as discussed in Chapter 3, there continue to be important gaps in implementation and in the institutionalisation of the function that prevent these new practices from becoming mainstream and fully realising their potential.

This chapter therefore illustrates emerging trends for data-driven digital communication, the use of third-party messengers, and the application of BI, and highlights how these can contribute to more inclusive, responsive and compelling public communication.

## 1. Data-driven practices powering informed communication

Leveraging data as a strategic asset is one of the most transformative elements that is opening up new possibilities for public communication – making it more inclusive, responsive and compelling. This is visible at all stages in the design and delivery of communication activities, and is especially important to have a more precise understanding of who the interlocutors and audiences are and how they interact with their governments' communications in order to achieve the intended objectives (Wiesenberg, Zerfass and Moreno, 2017<sup>[5]</sup>; Zerfass, Hagelstein and Tench, 2020<sup>[22]</sup>). The OECD Digital Government Policy Framework identifies a “data-driven” public sector, as one of the key six dimensions for digital government maturity (Figure 2.1).

**Figure 2.1. The six dimensions of the OECD Digital Government Policy Framework**



Source: (OECD, 2020<sup>[10]</sup>), "The OECD Digital Government Policy Framework: Six dimensions of a Digital Government", *OECD Public Governance Policy Papers*, No. 02, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/f64fed2a-en>.

In the path towards becoming a data-driven public sector, policy makers should not just treat data as the means for or the product of digitalisation – but rather, make conscious efforts to govern data well with trust and generate public value from publishing, sharing and re-using data (Figure 2.2). Evidence among OECD member countries demonstrate that more mature digital governments adopt a strategic and transformative approach in opening and using valuable data to drive positive public outcomes through policy-making and public service design and delivery (OECD, 2020<sup>[23]</sup>; OECD, 2020<sup>[24]</sup>).

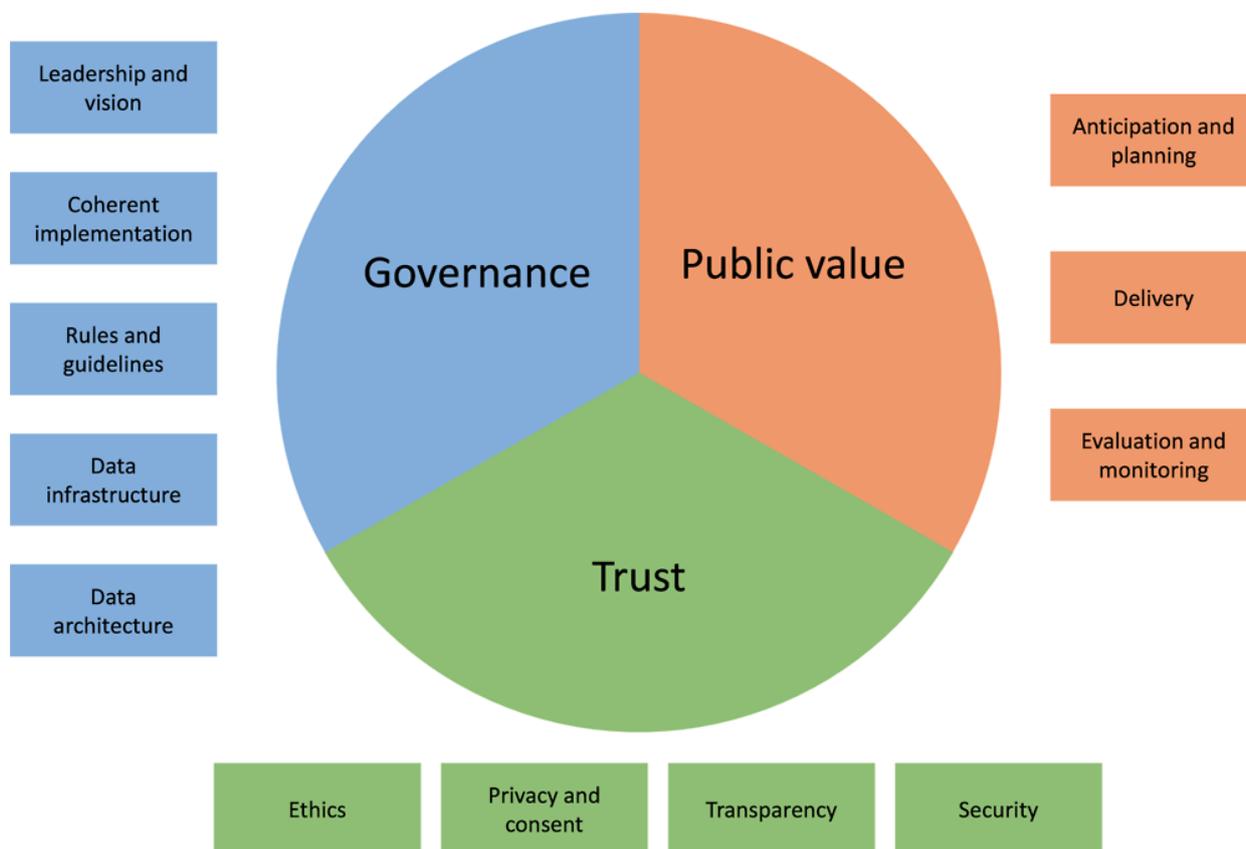
Quality data that is available, easily accessible and re-usable by stakeholders is especially necessary to make communication strategic and impactful in a growingly crowded and complex information ecosystem (OECD, 2020<sup>[23]</sup>). From a behavioural and cognitive standpoint, due to the high volumes of information that people are exposed to each day and the limits to attention, governments are in competition with all other voices in the ecosystem to get their messages across to the intended recipients (Lewandowsky et al., 2020<sup>[25]</sup>).

For this reason, understanding the demand for information and the characteristics of different publics is instrumental to designing communications that are relevant and tailored, and ultimately more likely to resonate with each audience group. Indeed, communication is more effective when it is more diversified and targeted to different citizens. On the other hand, an undifferentiated approach targeting a “mainstream”

public risks not getting the message to the intended audience and leaving behind some societal groups, particularly vulnerable and underserved ones (Fletcher et al., 2020<sup>[26]</sup>)

Building on these priorities, the following practices highlight how data is at the core of emerging approaches that make public communication more inclusive and responsive.

**Figure 2.2. The 12 facets of a data-driven public sector**



Source: OECD (2019), *The Path to Becoming a Data-Driven Public Sector*, OECD Digital Government Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/059814a7-en>.

### ***Use of Big Data and algorithms to support strategic communication***

Big Data, along with innovations for automating some analytical and tactical<sup>6</sup> tasks, has been acknowledged as a crucially important innovation for strategic communications for some years (Wiesenberg, Zeffass and Moreno, 2017<sup>[5]</sup>; Zeffass, Hagelstein and Tench, 2020<sup>[22]</sup>). Leading definitions of Big Data identify it as “the Information asset characterized by such a High Volume, Velocity and Variety to require specific Technology and Analytical Methods for its transformation into Value” (De Mauro, Greco and Grimaldi, 2016, p. 122<sup>[27]</sup>).

In the context of this paper, Big Data underpins most of the practices discussed and it is especially central to all digital communication as a key factor determining its efficacy as an avenue for enhanced reach and

<sup>6</sup> Meaning, for example, the publication of content or the generation of responses by bots, routine monitoring, etc.

engagement. For instance, data on audiences, text and audio-visual content or different aspects of interactions with owned channels are especially valuable to communicators. Algorithms are increasingly better at extracting insights on qualitative metrics such as sentiment,<sup>7</sup> and many software and online platforms are facilitating the automated distribution and targeting of content across mobile, email, or social media.

Recent research has summed up the potential of Big Data in communication across the following key dimensions (Wiesenberg, Zerfass and Moreno, 2017<sup>[5]</sup>):

- 1) Planning and strategy development based on insights;
- 2) Measurement and evaluation of activities;
- 3) Ongoing monitoring and analysis to inform real-time actions;
- 4) Automation of routine tasks across monitoring and content dissemination and targeting (especially paid content), including its adaptation (such as translation).

For the most part, communicators do not develop bespoke analytical tools and algorithms to gather or process data. Rather, they rely on an expanding market for software-as-a-service (SaaS) tools such as CrowdTangle, Brandwatch or Talkwalker, and built-in analytics of the main web and social platforms (OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>; Zerfass et al., 2016<sup>[28]</sup>). This is in part a result of the convenience and sophistication of the available tools for routine purposes but is also due to the technical proficiency in data science and costs that developing such tools requires. Indeed, evidence from a large 2016 survey of professionals in Europe found these skills to be scarce across all sectors and even a relative lack of familiarity with the concepts of big data and artificial intelligence (AI) (Zerfass et al., 2016<sup>[28]</sup>; Zerfass, Hagelstein and Tench, 2020<sup>[22]</sup>).

As some researchers have warned, this results in a large share of communicators using these tools as “black boxes”, without a sufficient understanding of the algorithms and data that power them (Wiesenberg, Zerfass and Moreno, 2017<sup>[5]</sup>). These observations raise implications both for the skills and training of communicators to adopt these technologies correctly, and for their ethical uses by governments. Both issues are discussed in greater depth in Chapter 3 of this paper.

While pre-pandemic research pointed to a relative gap in the adoption of these technologies in communication (Zerfass et al., 2016<sup>[28]</sup>; Wiencierz and Röttger, 2019<sup>[29]</sup>), with the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, many governments have accelerated their use of Big Data across a number of functions, including public communication, and have made it an important element of their responses.

Korea was one country where the use of data has been praised for its effectiveness in enabling contact-tracing and testing or checking the availability of masks, all via mobile communications and dedicated apps (Tworek, Beacock and Ojo, 2020<sup>[30]</sup>). Korea’s MindsLab, the Ministry of Health and Welfare and the Agency for Disease Control and Prevention developed a tool to track and visualise the routes of individuals who had tested positive to COVID-19 to help people understand if they had been at risk of infection.<sup>8</sup> When it came to COVID-19 vaccinations, some groups (e.g. pregnant women) were particularly concerned about getting vaccinated. This resulted in briefings by medical experts as well as dealing with specific concerns

---

<sup>7</sup> Sentiment is commonly used as a proxy measure of how an individual or group perceive an issue or message of interest, as expressed through content they produce. Automated processes based on techniques such as word association serve to extrapolate the sentiment inherent in a social media post for example.

<sup>8</sup> For details about the COVID-19 Korea Dataset & Comprehensive Medical Dataset & Visualizer see: <https://github.com/ThisIsIsaac/Data-Science-for-COVID-19#covid-19-korea-dataset-with-patient-routes-and-visualizer> (accessed 28 February 2022)

through targeted communication specifically tailored for these groups. Other tools like Naver Map and Kakao Map involved partnerships with local tech companies to develop joint solutions for providing live data and information on resources and facilities for patients.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, Open Government Data (OGD), particularly on infections, personal protective equipment stocks, and other pandemic-related metrics, has also been instrumental in guiding communications with specific populations and regions within countries (OECD and The GovLab, 2021<sup>[31]</sup>). Examples include public dashboards on infection and vaccination data, like the one built by the French *Service d'Information du Gouvernement* (SIG) with Etalab and the Ministry of Health, embedded in the government's COVID-19 online hub.<sup>10</sup>

The above examples highlight the intersection between communication and policy implementation, where data served primarily as the content of the communications, as well as informing its delivery. Conversely, additional practices highlight the uptake of sophisticated uses of Big Data for analytical purposes, to inform the actions of communicators with precision and high frequency.

Recently, some governments have adopted or scaled approaches for data-driven real-time analytics, particularly in efforts to identify popular topics of discussion and questions, and to spot and react to rumours. The United Kingdom's Government Communication Service (GCS) has introduced a Rapid Response Unit as an auxiliary team to support around-the-clock monitoring and analysis of trends in public discourse. Its dashboards were also displayed in multiple government offices outside communication teams and used in briefings to the Prime Minister (Aiken, 2018<sup>[32]</sup>).

In the United States, communicators within the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) similarly introduced a monitoring system to identify and track public debate and queries on the COVID-19 virus and related vaccines across a number of sources. These insights served to ensure messages and responses were available and visible on search engines and online platforms to prevent rumours and misinformation from exploiting so-called *information voids*.<sup>11</sup>

A similar approach is in place in the Canadian government's dedicated COVID-19 digital communications unit, which has emphasised its objective as catering to, and even predicting, the evolving information needs of the public throughout the pandemic. This effort was based on Big Data gathered from users' journeys on the official website and combined with search engine trends and call centre data.<sup>12</sup> These examples of *social listening*, as they are known in the field, form part of a demand-driven and citizen-centric approach to communication, engagement and services, enabled by greater contextual awareness, as discussed below.

As a complement to their application for understanding informing actions and strategies, Big Data and algorithms are increasingly showing potential for automating the personalisation and tailoring of content. The proliferation of chat bots is one such example of an AI based solution that enables institutions to interact with and provide specific information to citizens. This has been a trend since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with examples found across countries including Croatia, Estonia, France, Mexico,

---

<sup>9</sup> Adapted from case study provided to the OECD by the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare.

<sup>10</sup> For details see: <https://www.gouvernement.fr/info-coronavirus/carte-et-donnees> (accessed 6 January 2021)

<sup>11</sup> Bilateral discussions of the OECD Secretariat with the CDC and guidance included on the CDC's webpage on addressing vaccine misinformation: <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/health-departments/addressing-vaccine-misinformation.html>

<sup>12</sup> Informal bilateral discussions of the OECD Secretariat with the Privy Council Office of Canada.

Panama and the United Kingdom (OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>). These bots served primarily as assistants to help citizens navigate the available information on the health situation and the related measures affecting them, from vaccination and testing appointments to entitlements for benefits and assistance. In South Korea, the Virtual Assistant Service was one such chat bot set up by the Ministry of Health and Welfare to guide people to relevant information, provide alerts and help infected patients treat symptoms at home through a range of popular apps and channels.<sup>13</sup>

These examples demonstrate a potential scalable use of chat bots and automated messaging on social media platforms as important assets to guide citizens towards the information and services they need (OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>). This is especially the case when these tools benefit from continuous analysis and improvement based on user experiences and needs. Such tools can in turn contribute to a more user-driven approach and ultimately to greater responsiveness of public communication.

The prolonged global health crisis and the greater emphasis on online interaction in the era of social distancing have been catalysts for accelerating government's use of technology across the board. In public communication this has heightened the urgency to seize the opportunities provided by Big Data and algorithms to support a more evidence-based, responsive and fast-paced communication. This trend has also manifested in additional emerging practices discussed below.

### ***Listening practices to understand demand for information and engagement***

Communication is made of both speaking and listening (Johnston and Lane, 2021<sup>[19]</sup>). Although traditionally government communication has been found to mostly consist of speaking, a growing body of literature and practice of organisational listening is expanding this two-way definition to the realm of public communication (Macnamara, 2017<sup>[18]</sup>). In this domain, *listening* can be understood as a combination of activities and practices that aim to collect, process and understand a range of inputs from stakeholders. This can include different forms of direct feedback, such as comments, complaints and responses to consultations, and even indirect feedback, such as comments on relevant issues made on open public platforms (anonymised and within the boundaries of privacy regulations) (Goot, 2016<sup>[33]</sup>; Macnamara, 2017<sup>[18]</sup>; OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>). As highlighted previously, this is an area where data and automation offer unprecedented opportunities for scaling and improving outcomes.

Communication cannot be responsive nor, arguably, effective, without a measure of listening. This is also core to citizens' perceptions of reliability and to building and maintaining trust in institutions. Indeed, "it is fundamental for strategic communication to expand the traditional goal of influencing stakeholders and to integrate a view from the outside in organizational decision-making" (Wiesenberg, Zerfass and Moreno, 2017, p. 109<sup>[5]</sup>). As we have seen above, the practice of social listening is becoming more widespread in government, although it is less clear to what extent the insights from these exercises are transferred beyond communications units on to policy and programme teams.

It is important to note the iterative aspect of listening in communication as an essential element of enabling responsiveness and reliability of public institutions. Indeed, listening ought to be understood not only as a fixed, time-bound activity that occurs when an institution is seeking insights or feedback. Instead, as per the examples mentioned in the previous section, it is important that listening also occurs as a continuous effort to learn, adjust and respond, both with more relevant communication and with informed policies (Johnston and Lane, 2021<sup>[19]</sup>; Macnamara, 2017<sup>[18]</sup>; OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>). This continuity of interaction is what enables two-way communication. In this sense, listening efforts can also be seen as complementing the increase of participation initiatives, such as consultations and deliberative processes (OECD, 2020<sup>[34]</sup>), to feed a dimension of public feedback into day-to-day government actions.

---

<sup>13</sup> Adapted from case study provided to the OECD by the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare.

The COVID-19 pandemic has generated new urgency for listening to citizens as entire nations around the world adapted to unprecedented restrictions, remote work and virtual socialising. These circumstances have made it important not only for governments to understand the issues different groups have been facing, but also to give citizens a direct avenue to voice concerns and be heard.

This has been the case in Finland, where the Open Government team within the Ministry of Finance collaborated with local government and CSOs to hold the “Lockdown Dialogues”. These consisted of 232 sessions organised by multiple entities that involved over 1,600 individuals over the spring of 2020 to discuss the effects of the pandemic and connect with communities across the country and abroad (Ministry of Finance, 2020<sup>[35]</sup>). A distinctive feature of these dialogues is that they were open-ended discussions which goal was to listen, without an intended outcome or a pre-defined policy to deliberate on. While this may not be the appropriate approach for designing other types of participation initiatives,<sup>14</sup> an important aspect of listening is to be open to what the interlocutor, in this case citizens, wants to talk about (Macnamara, 2017<sup>[18]</sup>).

Conversely, several governments use surveys to get regular snapshots of public attitudes and needs. For example, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Welfare, the Korean Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA) carried out monthly and fortnightly surveys on aspects such as pandemic perceptions, compliance with COVID-19 prevention measures, concerns and issues with mental health and adaptation to new living conditions.<sup>15</sup> Integrating these findings with other sources of reliable data allowed the KDCA to adjust messaging and activities around the present needs of audiences. For instance, the KDCA was able to identify fears of stigmatisation and accusations of infection tied with the possibility of testing positive to the virus, to which it responded with messaging of social solidarity. Likewise, an uptick in feelings of depression led to empathetic messaging and information on seeking mental health support. The KDCA additionally brought on board a “Communication Group of Citizens” as a representative grouping to offer insights and test planned communications.<sup>16</sup>

Another open-ended approach is found in the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), one of the largest citizen participation endeavours to date. Although the CoFoE platform is narrowed to citizen proposals relating to a broad range of policy topics, it is non-prescriptive in its design and is made to be entirely driven by citizens’ inputs (European Union, 2021<sup>[36]</sup>). In this sense, it can be understood a large-scale listening exercise to what citizens across 27 countries want and see as the role of the European Union on a range of key issue areas.

A feature that stands out about the CoFoE and its platform is the technology that makes it possible to process and analyse thousands of text-based entries in 24 languages, and also makes it possible for speakers of each of these languages to engage with propositions by speakers of other languages. This relies on AI-powered text mining, thanks to methods and programmes developed by the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre (JRC) and illustrated in Box 2.2 (Macmillan, 2021<sup>[37]</sup>). Through this platform, the JRC can gather, cluster and analyse similar or related citizens’ propositions, weigh their popularity based on other users’ interactions with them and even extract sentiment or emotion.

As illustrated in this case, text mining technology is a promising asset for conducting large scale listening and an important competence that governments can develop to build better two-way communication and

---

<sup>14</sup> To the contrary, the OECD *Good Practice Principles for Deliberative Processes for Public Decision Making* (2020) highlight that such processes ought to have a clearly formulated objective linked to a defined problem. See: <https://www.oecd.org/gov/open-government/good-practice-principles-for-deliberative-processes-for-public-decision-making.pdf> (accessed on 10 January 2022)

<sup>15</sup> Adapted from case study provided to the OECD by the KDCA.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

policy. As the media ecosystem shifts towards a greater use of multimedia content, including videos, images, podcasts and the like, it will be increasingly important to keep up with technological innovation that go beyond mining of text-based content to include these formats. Beyond listening exercises, this will also matter for the evolution of monitoring the spread of mis- and disinformation.

### Box 2.1. The JRC's Europe Media Monitor and the Competence Centre on Text Mining and Analysis

Since 2002 the European Commission's JRC has developed and operated the Europe Media Monitor (EMM) service to feed vital contextual information to communicators and policymakers. The EMM provides a number of openly accessible products and briefings that draw from thousands of online media sources in over 70 languages to provide rapid insights into a wide range of issues. This is powered by proprietary software that uses advanced computational methods for automating the extraction and processing of text-based inputs. The analysis of this aggregation ultimately rests with human analysts, but this scale of information processing would be impossible without machines.

Building on the success of the EMM, the JRC established a dedicated Competence Centre on Text Mining and Analysis as a transversal resource that helps facilitate the application of this technology to a range of projects. Capitalising on in-house advanced data science and programming skills, the Centre develops and refines custom-made tools for text mining and analytics that go beyond what is available from third-party analytics services. The centre's tools are designed to extract and cluster information from all types of online content across websites, social media, open and proprietary documents in a format that makes them simpler to analyse and use for decision-making. Some of the key functions include: "Lexical analysis, Text categorization, Machine learning, Statistical machine translation, Text clustering, Summarization, Sentiment analysis, Semantic information extraction" (Goot, 2016, p. 9<sub>[33]</sub>). Beyond customisation and development of internal skills, part of the value of keeping this centre in-house also rests with ensuring the proper handling of personal and sensitive data in compliance with relevant regulations.

This technology is ultimately very promising for enabling large scale organisational listening. The Centre operates on the premise that "[b]oth the printed press and, increasingly, the online media can be seen as a proxy for, and leader of, public opinion, complemented by opinion polls and focus groups. Social media adds to this mix." (Goot, 2016, p. 5<sub>[33]</sub>). Harvesting this information can therefore make communication, policy and decisions more attuned and responsive to public attitudes.

Source:; European Commission, Knowledge for Policy, [https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/text-mining/about\\_en](https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/text-mining/about_en) (accessed 10 January 2022); Europe Media Monitor, <https://emm.newsbrief.eu/overview.html> (accessed 10 January 2022)

As the above examples indicate, organisational listening also goes hand in hand with citizen engagement and innovative citizen participation initiatives. In practice, these activities are often handled by different teams, departments and even ministries, with a measure of siloing of data and insights, and the risk of duplication and consultation fatigue (Macnamara, 2017<sub>[18]</sub>; OECD, 2017<sub>[7]</sub>; OECD, 2020<sub>[10]</sub>). While there often are legacy and practical reasons for the separation of these related functions, it is important to consider that these siloed approaches often reflect internal institutional structures that are not always understood by citizens. Instead, the latter have come to expect a unified approach in tandem with their perception of the government as a unitary interlocutor (OECD, 2020<sub>[10]</sub>).

To address this issue, the government of the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) has initiated an integrated platform hosted by the Department of Customer Service. The Department itself was established in 2019 to oversee a wide range of government agencies. Its mission is to provide improved quality in the

provision of services and better experiences for citizens as customers.<sup>17</sup> As part of this goal, it relies actively on two-way communication with its stakeholders.

To facilitate this interaction with citizens and improve pre-existing public consultation practices, in 2020 the Department started piloting a centralised digital platform called “Have Your Say”. The platform is mobile-friendly and provides a range of interactive tools that simplify options for providing feedback beyond the traditional email and phone submissions of previous systems. Importantly, it serves as a one-stop-shop for all consultations and engagement initiatives, with the Department of Customer Service co-ordinating to eliminate duplication and make data and insights gathered re-usable. The Department also conducts continuous communications with stakeholders, including reporting progress on issues they had provided input on, demonstrating responsiveness. As a result of these improvements, the platform has reportedly increased the average rate of engagement to 37% from the 10% industry benchmark.<sup>18</sup>

The global COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the importance of listening to all citizens for responding to their evolving needs for information and update policy accordingly. As societies recover from the pandemic and make important decisions about the future they want to build, channelling the attitudes and preferences of citizens will only become more necessary. Expanding the capacity for organisational listening will be imperative not only to communications but to all public functions. To this end, Box 2.3 illustrates the architecture of listening proposed by Macnamara (2015<sub>[38]</sub>).

### Box 2.2. The architecture of organisational listening

The theory of organisational listening proposed by Professor Jim Macnamara (2015<sub>[38]</sub>) proposes methods for public institutions to gather and internalise public feedback from citizens so that it can be the driver of two-way communication and of responsive policies and services alike. Implementing organisational listening requires an adequate “architecture”, a number of structural pre-requisites that enable governments and institutions to conduct this with impact. These elements are:

- “Culture for listening
- Politics of listening to be addressed
- Policies for listening
- Structures and processes for listening
- Technologies for listening
- Resources for listening
- Skills for listening
- Articulation to decision-making and policy making”

Source: Presentation by Professor Macnamara at the 2021 OGP Summit session “Communication as listening: emerging practices to understand citizens and design responsive public communication”, 15 December 2021; <https://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/fass-organizational-listening-report.pdf?no-cache>

<sup>17</sup> For more information about the NSW Department of Customer Service, see <https://www.nsw.gov.au/customer-service/who-we-are> (accessed on 10 January 2022).

<sup>18</sup> Adapted from case study provided to the OECD by the NSW Department of Customer Service.

### ***Audience insights, segmentation and targeting***

The real and potential impacts of Big Data and automation are especially important to the realm of audience insights, segmentation and targeting. Indeed, Holtzhausen (2016<sup>[39]</sup>) notes these as the primary uses for Big Data in strategic communication. Knowing the publics that institutions are aiming to reach, including some of their demographic and psychographic characteristics, is a prerequisite to the relevance and effectiveness of communication.

The advent of the internet and Big Data has evidently revolutionised the ability to learn new aspects of diverse publics and especially to measure the performance and outcomes of certain digital communication activities (OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>). For the purposes of this analysis, however, one of the core advantages that these innovations bring is the ability to facilitate greater inclusiveness by tailoring messages and content based on the diverse needs and preferences of diverse publics. This is especially valuable to ensure underserved and vulnerable groups are benefiting from information and opportunities for engagement.

However, inclusiveness is the product of a conscious endeavour by communicators to understand which groups are not sufficiently reached and which means of communication can remedy these shortcomings. Simply adopting data-driven segmentation of audiences and targeting does not per se lead to communication that is more inclusive. Research has shown that, on the contrary, algorithms tend to suffer from inherent biases that can make them prone to discrimination and exclusion (Holtzhausen, 2016<sup>[39]</sup>). Considerations about biases and the implications of the uses of personal data, paid media and targeting are equally important, and are discussed in greater depth in Chapter 3 of this paper.

The OECD report on Public Communication (2021<sup>[3]</sup>) has highlighted that governments' focus on audience research, targeting and inclusion could be improved. Data from 63 public institutions highlighted gaps in the gathering and use of insights on audiences, a task that benefits most from Big Data and automated analytics. The survey showed that the frequency of this activity is often "ad-hoc" (the frequency selected by the largest share of respondents). Just 27% of the Centres of Government and 17% of the Ministries of Health surveyed reported conducting this activity at least on a quarterly basis. The study similarly revealed that targeting diverse demographic groups is not a very widespread practice, and as many as a quarter of Centres of Government and 14% of Ministries of Health surveyed do not target any specific societal group with their communication.

This stands in contrast with the popularity of paid content on social media, which was noted as the primary means of delivering campaigns by 63% of Centres of Government and one of the top-three communication channels by 44% of them. Social media sponsored content is valuable precisely for its ability to target specific categories of users, most importantly those who are identified as least likely to be reached via mainstream media or owned channels. Among them are notably young people, whose media consumption habits are different from older generations (Reuters Institute, 2021<sup>[40]</sup>), but also ethnic and linguistic minorities, and those who tend to be disengaged from policy and political issues.

These diverse information needs and consumption patterns make a measure of targeting necessary for inclusiveness, whether with paid content or through influential intermediaries, as discussed in the next section. In the same vein, these diverse needs make it important to adopt an *omni-channel* approach that takes into account the portion of the population that lacks the means or skills to access digital channels (OECD, 2020<sup>[10]</sup>).

The COVID-19 pandemic has put inclusion in the spotlight as governments realised that containing the spread of the virus depended on everyone abiding by often-changing rules on distancing, mask-wearing, vaccines and contact-tracing. Reaching all citizens and communities with this public health guidance became instrumental to this goal.

Conducting listening activities and audience research has been a starting point for identifying who may not be reached by the current communication approaches and what the barriers are for accessing information. This has been the case in New South Wales, for example, where a number of approaches were used to

identify priority audiences.<sup>19</sup> Communicators there relied on localised COVID-19 infections data to geo-target advertisements with key health guidance during the Delta variant wave. Additionally, audience insights highlighted areas with high density of culturally and linguistically diverse communities, especially in large metropolitan areas, that may not understand existing communications due to linguistic barriers. This led to a push for multi-language live interpretation for the daily briefings and amplification through community-based messengers. This inclusive omni-channel effort also involved delivery of guidance via pre-recorded messages and posters in stores and factsheet inserts in food packages delivered by not-for-profit organisations, for example.

Audience research and segmentation has also been instrumental in the context of vaccine campaigns and efforts to bolster vaccine confidence. Insights revealed that concerns and distrust of vaccines were especially pronounced in religious and racial minorities in several OECD member countries, including the United Kingdom, United States and Australia among others.<sup>20</sup> These required tailored approaches that both addressed the specific causes of vaccine hesitancy and were delivered through channels and messengers that had better reach with such groups, as illustrated in the following section.

## 2. Third-party messengers to amplify the reach and trustworthiness of communication

The advent of digital and social media has had important repercussions on the way information is shared and consumed. Most notably it has challenged the role of traditional media as the main information gatekeepers and ushered a transition from a “one-to-many” mass communication model, to a “many-to-many” networked model of communication (Jensen and Helles, 2016<sup>[41]</sup>; OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>). As a result, regular people alongside governments, businesses, organisations, and public figures, have gained the means to publish content and communicate directly with potentially vast audiences. Today, many individuals have built large online followings to become some of the most influential voices on a wide range of subjects. Over recent years, these so-called “influencers” have become staples of consumer communication and marketing strategies by brands worldwide.

For nearly two decades digital technologies ushered a shift from communicating predominantly via the news media to communicating on owned websites and handles directly with the public. More recently, the role of intermediaries has been growing again and influential profiles on social media have become important channels for strategic communication. In turn, influencers, public figures, experts, and community leaders with standing among diverse publics have emerged as important messengers for government policy. Similarly, businesses, employers, civil society actors and, of course, the media have amplified government messages to their stakeholders.

This phenomenon has been especially visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, where a wide range of prominent actors helped amplify health guidance and support vaccination campaigns with hard-to-reach segments. In particular, their engagement has been an asset to bridge a gap in public trust towards both government and major sources of information (OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>).

Low trust has been widespread in most OECD member countries for at least a decade, with only 51% across member countries trusting their governments (OECD, 2021<sup>[42]</sup>). However, disengagement or distrust tend to be more pronounced within specific groups, such as youth or minorities, but also the

---

<sup>19</sup> Adapted from case study provided to the OECD by the NSW Department of Customer Service.

<sup>20</sup> See for instance: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-report-shows-improving-vaccine-confidence-among-ethnic-minority-groups> (accessed on 17 January 2022); <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/vaccine-equity.html> (accessed on 17 January 2022)

politically polarised. In turn, this makes large segments of society harder to reach and convince through mainstream channels such as the media. Indeed, the Reuters Institute identified a growing trend for “news avoidance”, or the intentional turning away from news sources, which at the height of the pandemic affected 25% of surveyed respondents in the United Kingdom (Fletcher et al., 2020<sup>[26]</sup>).

Where government communications struggle with reach and credibility among certain groups, collaborative efforts to amplify messages from trusted voices can be instrumental to making communications inclusive and effective. The intermediary power of third-party messengers can be especially useful in efforts to counteract mis- and disinformation, although in a similar vein, high-profile figures are sometimes among the factors boosting the spread of dangerous rumours (Ahmadi and Chan, 2020<sup>[43]</sup>). The following practices illustrate how governments are leveraging trusted messengers to amplify their reach among disengaged, hard-to-reach and marginalised groups for a more inclusive communication.

### ***Influencer campaigns***

Brands and marketing agencies have long relied on partnerships with celebrities and prominent individuals to publicise products with particular customers. Leveraging the popularity of photo and video-based social media in particular, many influencers have built large followings and made a career out of their social media presence thanks to such commercial partnerships. In turn, influencer marketing and communications has become an industry of its own.

Although the term “influencers” can be often associated with viral TikTok dances and Instagram trends, their roles and publics can be quite diverse, which makes some of these individuals key voices on a range of topics. A survey of young people has identified that social media influencers are widely trusted because of their perceived authenticity (Revlon-Chion, Bolat and Liang, 2020<sup>[44]</sup>). The study suggested that whereas celebrities tend to keep their lives private, some social media influencers create more intimate bonds with their followers by sharing personal experiences, which accounts for some of their ability to influence buying choices or behaviours (Revlon-Chion, Bolat and Liang, 2020<sup>[44]</sup>).

As elaborated in previous sections, thanks to data and analytics governments have identified the limits to the reach and acceptance of their communications, especially among specific segments of the population. The pandemic has in turn accelerated the use of paid and unpaid collaborations with influencers and public figures to amplify health guidance and public services, promote compliance with lockdowns, support vaccine uptake and engender a sense of national solidarity. A significant example of nation-wide influencer campaign comes from Finland, where the government enlisted a specialised agency to support with getting messages across to all citizens (Box 2.4). These campaigns and collaborations provided examples of inclusive communication as they often strived to reach young people or minorities through messengers and content that were more likely to resonate with them.

As a particularly difficult group to reach and win over with mainstream channels and messages, youth were a primary target for campaigns mediated by third party messengers. In Korea, several initiatives targeted young audiences, including a government collaboration with child influencers on YouTube and a UNESCO partnership aimed at students. Having found a steep rise in cases among people in their 20s and 30s, the KDCA and Health Ministry of Health and Welfare launched a social media campaign that involved celebrities and influencers to induce people not to go to nightclubs or crowded places.<sup>21</sup> These initiatives involved a mixture of K-pop stars, music and dancing to relay messages about social distancing in a light-hearted way (Abidin et al., 2020<sup>[45]</sup>).

Similarly, at the outset of the pandemic in Japan, the Tokyo region governor discussed social distancing and staying at home with one of the country’s most prominent YouTubers, adapting the narrative to appeal

---

<sup>21</sup> Adapted from case study provided to the OECD by the KDCA.

to young audiences (Osaki, 2020<sup>[46]</sup>). The Singapore government similarly created viral campaigns including a rap using the creole language Singlish that stars an old favourite local 1990s sitcom character to transmit public messages on COVID-19 measures and encourage the public to get vaccinated (CNA, 2021<sup>[47]</sup>). In Italy, large-scale campaigns were rolled out by the government during the lockdown and later to support the vaccination campaign. These involved an eclectic range of celebrities, athletes and public figures and were disseminated widely across all channels (OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>). Likewise, the British government engaged with a number of young celebrities and influencers to promote the National Health Service test-and-trace programme (Rahman, 2021<sup>[48]</sup>).

In all of these examples, it emerges that the value of collaborating with influencers and celebrities does not rest solely with their reach, but also with the personal appeal and the potential to tap into different emotions and inspire. This is a key element to combine with the rational presentation of facts to engender trust and align with values and attitudes of diverse societal groups (Tworek, Beacock and Ojo, 2020<sup>[30]</sup>).

### Box 2.3. Finland's influencer-led COVID-19 prevention campaign

In the spring of 2020, in response to the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid spread of misinformation, the government of Finland enlisted the specialised communication agency PING Helsinki to activate its vast network of social media influencers. About 1800 influencers were invited to join the campaign #faktaakoronasta (i.e. “coronafacts”), receiving daily and weekly briefing packs via email with key messages, facts, content and sources to link in their posts. Participating influencers also received communication guidance and coaching via a webinar series, to be better equipped to post on the complex topic of COVID-19.

Many of the influencers engaged did not have especially large followings but were often considered stronger voices because of their standing in a particular field or community. The influencers were not remunerated, and many noted taking pride in participating out of a sense of civic duty.

The government made explicit the initiative's intent for inclusion and wider reach, with an emphasis on those who are difficult to reach through traditional media and methods.

Source: PING Helsinki (2020), <https://pinghelsinki.fi/en/combating-coronavirus-together-by-sharing-reliable-information/> (accessed on 17 January 2022); Politico (2020) Finland taps social media influencers during coronavirus crisis, <https://www.politico.eu/article/finland-taps-influencers-as-critical-actors-amid-coronavirus-pandemic/> (accessed on 17 January 2022).

### ***Bringing on board expert and community voices***

The growing trend for intermediated public communication is not limited to established or “professional” influencers nor to social media. During the COVID-19 pandemic there has been an unprecedented emphasis on broadening the range of messengers who have standing with different segments of the public, from the international level down to the specific community, and whose voices are most trusted. This trend has made the COVID-19 communications response a truly whole-of-society effort that served to further inclusion.

The role of scientists and medical experts has been one of the most prominent across the world. Their expertise and credibility has been a catalyst to position them as leading spokespeople for governments' health measures in several countries (OECD, 2020<sup>[2]</sup>). A study across six countries found that the Chief Medical Advisor to the United States President, Dr. Anthony Fauci, ranked as the most effective messenger to support the call for social distancing, trusted over a government spokesperson and two celebrities (Abu-Akel, Spitz and West, 2021<sup>[49]</sup>). Likewise, Germany's leading virologist, Professor Christian Drosten, emerged as one of the foremost sources of information on the health situation by launching a daily (now

bi-weekly) podcast, which has since acquired millions of subscribers. The success of the podcast has been attributed to the ability of Drosten to unpack complex scientific concepts in an accessible manner without oversimplifying them (Tworek, Beacock and Ojo, 2020<sup>[30]</sup>).

However, not all scientists and doctors are equally versed in communication. Scientific rigour and the uncertainty over developing scenarios have made communicating around the COVID-19 pandemic especially difficult. Indeed, diverging opinions and explanations of the science by experts and doctors have occasionally created confusion and fuelled misinformation (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021<sup>[50]</sup>). To support scientific experts and doctors to communicate effectively and enlist their support to reach wider groups, some governments have developed specific guidance and tools. The United States' CDC, for example, has developed a wide range of resources to support stakeholders on the ground with promoting vaccine confidence, including a *COVID-19 Vaccination Toolkit for Health Departments and Other Public Health Partners* (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021<sup>[51]</sup>). The toolkit can empower these stakeholders to be spokespeople to the reach of key policy messages with wider and diverse groups in society. However, it also serves to harmonise messaging and ensure information is being presented consistently to avoid risk of misinformation or confusion.

This approach has been expanded by the CDC for use beyond public health professionals to support outreach among racial minorities by members of the community. Indeed, as alluded above, audience research revealed that African American and Hispanic communities experienced higher levels of vaccine hesitancy. The research also identified the underlying causes of this phenomenon, which can be addressed through tailored communication in-person and at the community-level (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021<sup>[51]</sup>). The same finding was common to ethnic or marginalised minority groups in many other countries as per the examples that follow.

As a result, dedicated targeting efforts have been prominent in the context of COVID-19 vaccination campaigns, relying significantly on a wide range of messengers to reach communities less likely to trust government spokespeople or sources. In the context of a broader effort for inclusive communication that involved multi-lingual content and partnerships with multicultural media outlets, communicators from the United Kingdom have enlisted ethnically diverse messengers that ranged from community stakeholders, to doctors and scientists, to celebrities (see Box 2.5).

A similar approach was used in COVID-19 prevention communications in NSW, where a dedicated working group tasked with reaching linguistically diverse communities led efforts involving a series of community leader videos as well as direct distribution lists that can target businesses, organisations, and individuals to amplify messages to their networks.<sup>22</sup> In Canada, the Digital Citizen Initiative leveraged civil society groups to strengthen the public's resilience against disinformation on COVID-19, while a study highlighted the role of Chinese and Vietnamese Canadian CSOs as messengers with emphasis on their deep understanding of their communities (Kambli et al., 2021<sup>[12]</sup>).

The examples above illustrate how many stakeholders, regardless of the size of their following or reach, can serve as a powerful channel to amplify government messages. The trend for broadening the range of voices that contribute to public communication's inclusiveness and impact is set to grow as the information ecosystem becomes more fragmented, dispersed, and hampered by mis- and disinformation. Pursuing such an inclusive approach to communication will also serve to democratise this function and bring stakeholders into decisions, as the ability to recruit willing messengers will increasingly depend on their buy-in on the policies they would advocate.

---

<sup>22</sup> Adapted from case study provided to the OECD by the New South Wales Department for Customer Service.

### Box 2.4. Collaborating with influential representatives of minority groups to combat vaccine hesitancy in the United Kingdom

The United Kingdom's government has undertaken a large-scale effort to build confidence in COVID-19 vaccines, which over the course of a few months has achieved a share of 93% of the adult population with positive sentiment towards them. However, insights pointed to a more pronounced hesitancy lingering among ethnic groups, as high as 30% among Black British adults.

To address disparities between vaccination rates between such groups, the Government has undertaken several targeted communication initiatives to reach ethnic minorities on tailored channels and in large part via messengers from the same communities they were aiming to engage.

A leading component was a social media campaign to debunk vaccine misinformation via community and local networks, which was shared with over four million people. Medical and scientific experts from ethnic minority backgrounds were also recruited to share information about the vaccine and debunk rumours. In particular, a Muslim doctor from Yorkshire addressed religion-based concerns in a series of widely shared videos.

The role of religion and the influence of religious leaders at the congregation level has been recognised in prior vaccination drives. In this case, the government brought together faith leaders and doctors from minority backgrounds to urge their peers to promote vaccine uptake.

This outreach via members of the target communities was combined with partnerships with influencers and celebrities from the same minority backgrounds to amplify tailored messages.

Source: (HM Government, 2021<sup>[52]</sup>)

## 3. Behavioural insights to turn communication into action

Applied behavioural science and the related discipline of behavioural insights (BI) have gained popularity in governments, with applications spanning a wide range of public policy areas. This field has long highlighted how people tend to behave according to biases and barriers that influence their decision making (OECD, 2019<sup>[53]</sup>). The same cognitive biases influence people's choices in how they consume information and what messages or imagery triggers them to shift their behaviours. An understanding of these often-unconscious factors is increasingly important to developing systems of communication that cut through the constant stream of information people are exposed to online and offline.

Given the significant role of information in shaping individuals' perceptions, behaviours, attitudes, and preferences, it is no surprise that BI is an increasingly critical component of public communication. BI on patterns of information consumption and engagement have for instance revealed that people's attention is drawn more easily by a combination of audio-visual presentations instead than plain-text content only (Shahbaznezhad, Dolan and Rashidirad, 2021<sup>[54]</sup>). Simplifying the language, reducing the amount of information, and using a combination of text, audio, and visual presentations are proven ways to improve comprehension when providing information to heterogeneous groups of individuals with different emotional states (Pham, 2007<sup>[55]</sup>)<sup>[OBJ10BJ]</sup>. These elements are core to designing communication that is compelling to the intended audiences and therefore more effective in reaching its objectives.

Whereas the above elements speak to the need for the design of content itself to be behaviourally informed, BI is also crucially applied in the conduct of communication initiatives aimed at behaviour change in citizens (OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>). This is perhaps one of the areas where the integration of communication and

policy delivery is most visible. The implementation of COVID-19 public health measures and related guidance on hand-washing and mask-wearing rested overwhelmingly on instructing citizens to change their behaviours, but also convincing them of the necessity and value of doing so (Drummond, Shephard and Trnka, 2021<sup>[56]</sup>). These cases add to a growing body of practice that employs methods and insights from behavioural science to formulate communications as part of a broader holistic approach to policy-making that acknowledges people's triggers, barriers, and other factors impacting their actions and decisions to encourage compliance with policy. These practices are illustrated below.

### ***Understanding biases to design behaviourally-informed communications***

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified and highlighted the challenges posed by the present media and information ecosystem where competition for users' eyes in the attention economy is high. Behavioural and cognitive sciences have been acknowledged as central not only to the design of the solutions (as discussed below) but also in the understanding of the underlying problems.

Issues of information overload, anxiety induced by dramatic news content, and the confusion generated by enduring uncertainty around evolving scientific evidence have soared since the outbreak of the pandemic (OECD, 2020<sup>[2]</sup>). Understanding the cognitive and behavioural context of audiences became an imperative to design communications that did not confuse or overwhelm, and that clarified known risks without alarming. Amid the challenges of responding to this unprecedented crisis in the internet age, many governments struggled to achieve this balance when communicating measures around masks, quarantine rules, and rare vaccines side effects. For example, after recognising the challenge of messaging fatigue and misunderstanding of health guidance as elements of non-compliance among the public, the government's pandemic response team in Ireland, set up a dedicated Subgroup on Behavioural Change. This was a result of listening activities and analysis of perceptions, values and norms that influenced people's inclination to act on the messages, something the Subgroup sought to address (OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>).

As the experiences from the pandemic response demonstrated, behavioural science challenges assumptions about human rationality and decision making, while highlighting the underlying barriers and biases that prevent people from taking certain actions that would be in their interest (OECD, 2019<sup>[53]</sup>). The same factors apply to choices in how people consume information or the barriers in accessing it, which messages or imagery trigger them to retain certain facts, increase their willingness to accept the information, and even induce them to change their behaviours. A number of well-documented biases and behaviours have interacted with people's actions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (West et al., 2020<sup>[59]</sup>). These provide important insights for communicators to consider and attempt to mitigate.

Human psychology and behavioural biases do have an influence on the way people navigate the media and information ecosystem. Using behavioural science as a framework of analyses, we can develop an enhanced understanding of the cognitive traits that influence individuals' trust, belief formation and choices which subsequently affect how, when, and why they consume the information they do (Pennycook and Rand, 2021<sup>[60]</sup>). To this end, BI can be an asset for refining and testing communications that acknowledge the above-mentioned biases, and that can even be purposely used to change people's behaviours. The following paragraphs illustrate this, offering a selection of potential barriers that are subject to testing and evaluation in varying contexts and environments

Firstly, cognitive dissonance can arise when individuals are overwhelmed and uncomfortable in the face of high volumes of inconsistent or even conflicting information. This can lead to feelings of anger, frustration, or anxiety, and can cause individuals to reject or avoid new information in order to evade making a decision altogether (Sweller, 1988<sup>[57]</sup>). Conversely, optimism bias can instead induce people to underestimate the likelihood of certain threats or risks occurring, causing them to act in a way that is counterintuitive to their best interests, such as dismissing the risks of contracting COVID-19 despite evidence of this likelihood (Sharot, 2011<sup>[58]</sup>).

Confirmation and anchoring bias can exacerbate the rapid spread of false and misleading content. Confirmation bias refers to the tendency of discarding information that does not confirm our prior beliefs while anchoring refers to the tendency to rely too heavily on the first piece of information encountered, causing people to dismiss the validity of additional information that may be inconsistent with the first message (Furnham and Boo, 2011<sup>[59]</sup>). These biases are part of a broader list of cognitive barriers that make efforts to debunk falsehoods more difficult, giving priority to sensitizing people to assess the veracity of information before they become exposed to it (OECD, 2022<sup>[60]</sup>). Anchoring is also associated with availability bias, which occurs when individuals disproportionately rely on the most readily available information, which causes people to lean on outdated, inaccurate or irrelevant data to form their perceptions (Banerjee and Nunan, 2019<sup>[61]</sup>). Consequently, behaviourally-informed interventions, such as debunking, pre-bunking and content labels,<sup>23</sup> are being deployed to counteract exposure to mis- and disinformation by overriding known biases (see Box 2.6). Related to these biases are also features of content that can be powerful in moving people to change perceptions or act on a piece of information. Appeal to emotions like shock and anger, but also to values and the social validation are powerful drivers of message acceptance or even behaviour change (Pham, 2007<sup>[55]</sup>; Guadagno et al., 2013<sup>[62]</sup>) (see, for example, the appeal to shared values in Canada’s COVID-19 vaccines behaviour change campaign in Box 2.8 below). Some of these common behaviours and biases are integral to the design of social media platforms and their algorithms for example, which news feeds, notifications, and like buttons are features designed to be “addictive” and maximise time spent on the platforms (Lewandowsky et al., 2020<sup>[25]</sup>; Hao, 2021<sup>[63]</sup>).

### Box 2.5. BI-informed counter-disinformation practices

#### Debunking false and misleading information

Debunking, or rebutting, a false claim requires speed, accuracy and a careful consideration of the context. One factor to consider regarding whether debunking a falsehood might be appropriate regards measures of engagement (i.e. that show it is gaining traction with users and being shared) over simple counts of views. Debunking should be applied strategically and guided by the prevention of harm. Considering where in the “life-cycle” of media manipulation the misinformation falls will be important to target responses appropriately (Donovan, 2020<sup>[64]</sup>). To that end, establishing and regularly recalibrating guiding thresholds for debunking can facilitate decision-making in this respect.

A growing body of behavioural science and cognitive psychology literature indicates that content to debunk a falsehood should include the following elements: stating the accurate fact upfront, noting what was incorrect and explaining why, reinforcing the fact (Chan et al., 2017<sup>[65]</sup>). This can be more effective when integrated into existing communication strategies and messaging on relevant topics.

In line with the above approach, the Debunking Handbook 2020 (Lewandowsky and et al., 2020<sup>[66]</sup>) was compiled by a group of academic experts to offer guidance on when and how to debunk false content. NATO (2021<sup>[67]</sup>) similarly published a best practice guide on fact-checking and debunking.

<sup>23</sup> For instance, these include warning messages with links to verified information sources that are automatically applied by social media platforms to posts that mention certain key words relating to a topic vulnerable to misinformation.

### Pre-bunking likely falsehoods to increase resilience

Pre-bunking is an approach that consists of inoculating the public to potential mis- and disinformation. At its core, pre-bunking is about “warning people of the possibility of being exposed to manipulative misinformation, combined with training them in advance on how to counter-argue if they did encounter it,” with the idea that such activities will reduce susceptibility to misinformation (Roozenbeek and van der Linden, 2021<sup>[68]</sup>).

Pre-bunking has been applied in the context of dedicated games, such as “Go Viral” developed by Cambridge University. It is now being adopted by social media platforms to warn users about false claims they might encounter on all posts relating to vulnerable topics (Ingram, 2020<sup>[69]</sup>).

The same techniques can be integrated in proactive communication, by noting common deceptive tactics (without re-stating any rumours) and pre-emptively stating facts and arguments, similarly to the guidance on debunking. Pre-bunking activities are strengthened if implemented in tandem with filling information voids.

Cambridge University’s Social Decision-Making Lab, in collaboration with the United Kingdom’s government, developed the Go Viral! (Lewsey, 2021<sup>[70]</sup>) game as a pre-bunking tool against COVID-19 related misinformation. Drawing on the same principles, First Draft has developed a 10-step practical guide to pre-bunking for journalists and communicators (Garcia and Shane, 2021<sup>[71]</sup>).

Source: Debunking Handbook 2020, <https://www.climatechangecommunication.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/DebunkingHandbook2020.pdf>; NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence, 2021, [https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/nato\\_stratcom\\_coe\\_fact-checking\\_and\\_debunking\\_02-02-2021-1.pdf](https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/nato_stratcom_coe_fact-checking_and_debunking_02-02-2021-1.pdf); Go Viral! <https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/goviral>; First Draft, 2021, [https://firstdraftnews.org/articles/a-guide-to-prebunking-a-promising-way-to-inoculate-against-misinformation/?mc\\_cid=244c5eba4d&mc\\_eid=be43181caa](https://firstdraftnews.org/articles/a-guide-to-prebunking-a-promising-way-to-inoculate-against-misinformation/?mc_cid=244c5eba4d&mc_eid=be43181caa)

Although communicators and policymakers commonly think of biases as affecting their target publics, they are themselves not immune from them. An emerging body of literature has highlighted that cognitive biases also affect decision makers’ ability to adequately grasp administrative challenges and opportunities, making any resulting policy or decision vulnerable to the same biases held by the people who design them (Drummond, Shephard and Trnka, 2021<sup>[56]</sup><sup>[66]</sup>). A study has found that policymakers are prone to making wrong assumptions about how people will act (Hallsworth and Egan, 2018<sup>[72]</sup><sup>[66]</sup>). They do so, for instance, by inaccurately projecting their own preferences, beliefs and values onto the public targeted by a given policy, or by misjudging attitudes, barriers and behaviours of the intended beneficiaries. Likewise, they are susceptible to act based on how information is presented to them. (Hallsworth et al., 2018<sup>[73]</sup><sup>[66]</sup>).

In the realm of public communication, this can point to the need for greater awareness of how communicators themselves can lean on their own experiences and biases, starting with their choices of what evidence to gather to inform their decisions or relying on assumptions about audiences instead. This could cause them to misjudge how messages will be received, or place undue attention on the same communication channels and media outlets they consume over those most relevant to the audiences, for example. As such, policymakers may want to consider introducing mechanisms embedded within policy process that identify and reduce the impacts of personal biases on policy design and outcomes such as providing training on cognitive biases or introducing checkpoints that prompt self-regulation of personal bias.

### **Methods and applications of BI in communications for policy implementation**

For several years now, communication has become an important vehicle for the application of BI in policy. Communicators have drawn on the disciplines of behavioural and cognitive science to apply their methods

in developing campaigns and initiatives that seek to prompt certain actions among audiences that comply with policy objectives. Indeed, about a third of the Centres of Government surveyed in the OECD report on Public Communication (OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>) noted that changing behaviours in line with policies and regulations was a primary objective of their digital activities. It is important to note that leveraging BI does not suggest changing individuals' behaviours against their will but rather, empowers individuals to pursue their best interests by adapting a human perspective to communication strategies that align with human behaviour.

Translating policy objectives into effective behavioural communication interventions entails a level of expertise and competences to design and test interventions based on scientific evidence. Behavioural experimentation uses mixed research methods including randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and experimental surveys to compare the results of different behaviourally-informed messages or interventions. These insights help narrow gaps between people's intentions and their actions, for instance, by producing data on how individuals actually behave and make decisions based on the information they are presented with. To facilitate the application of BI, a number of governments have developed toolkits and frameworks to guide communicators in obtaining and applying such evidence, as is the case in the Netherlands (Box 2.7).

### Box 2.6. The Dutch government's CASI framework for BI in public communication

Acknowledging the demand and value of expanding the use of BI in communications, the Dutch Public Communications and Services within the Ministry of General Affairs developed the Communication Activation Strategy Instrument (CASI) for communicators in 2020. The framework outlines six steps for integrating BI elements in their planning: intake, policy analysis, goal setting, target group analysis, strategy definition, and implementation. Each step is accompanied by an objective, planning sessions, discussion points, and examples to support the progress of each phase.

The framework encourages users to consider the relationship between individuals' behaviours and overall policy objectives, highlighting how communications is crucial in linking the two. The CASI manual illustrates practical behavioural aspects within the steps of traditional communications planning, translating complex concepts from cognitive and behavioural sciences and psychology into actionable practices that support public sector goals. In doing so, it demonstrates the relative simplicity of mainstreaming some aspects of BI in public communications.

Although the toolkit is designed for facilitators with some familiarity with behavioural science, each step is presented in a way that allows anyone regardless of background to understand the possible inputs from BI to communication planning.

Source: CASI Manual, 2020, <https://www.communicatierijk.nl/vakkennis/casi/documenten/publicaties/2019/03/08/handleiding-casi>

Throughout the pandemic, governments applied these research methods to get insights on attitudes, perceptions and behaviours to identify ways of supporting policy implementation through more compelling communications. The Dutch government for example launched a large-scale study to gather insights on citizens' awareness, attitudes, and behaviours throughout the pandemic. This included longitudinal surveys and interviews with Dutch citizens, in their 18<sup>th</sup> survey wave at the time of writing, as well as social listening, to compare changes in attitudes towards, and compliance with, pandemic-related measures. Analysing trends and identifying underlying problems on a recurring basis helped public health officials fine-tune their messaging and adapt measures according to evolving priorities (Dutch National Institute for Public Health and Environment, 2022<sup>[74]</sup>).

Canada's Impact and Innovation Unit, in the Privy Council similarly launched a 16-wave longitudinal study at the beginning of the pandemic, testing the attitudes and behaviours of approximately 2000 Canadians from across the country. The research analysed in particular how changes in risk perception may relate to the consumption of knowledge and misinformation, the relationship between awareness of specific measures and risk perceptions, as well as reactions to government announcements and programs to manage the public health situation (Impact Canada, 2022<sup>[75]</sup>).

This evidence formed the basis of continuous updates in communications approaches linked to behaviour change, and the campaign illustrated in Box 2.8 demonstrates how this was tested and implemented in practice. Similar interventions were proven successful in the United States in the context of COVID-19 vaccine reminders (Dai et al., 2021<sup>[76]</sup>) and discouraging people from traveling around public holidays (Breza et al., 2021<sup>[77]</sup>). Overall, by combining communication expertise with behavioural methods, government campaigns and messages have been improved to be more compelling and achieve measurable effects against policy objectives that depend on citizens' compliance.

### Box 2.7. Impact Canada's behaviour change communications content for COVID-19

Since the outset of the pandemic, Impact Canada, which houses the country's BI team, has been developing communication material that draws on BI and is tested for effectiveness in driving desired behaviours to stop the spread of the virus.

Over two waves of the campaign in early 2020, Impact Canada rolled out content that was intended to reinforce compliance with social distancing by appealing to a collective mission and demonstrating the desired behaviours in a range of familiar contexts. Under the hashtag message of "#StayHomeSaveLives" it developed behaviourally-informed content and visuals that were shared in over 250 posts by public communicators in over 30 departments across the government. They rested on the following behavioural elements:

- "Emphasizing collective action, moral responsibility, civic duty"
- "Including concrete call to action (i.e., clear and actionable language)"
- "Demonstrating efficacy of physical distancing"
- "Demonstrating adaptiveness and emphasizing a sense of control during physical distancing"
- "Making social norms and desired behaviour salient"
- "Leveraging dynamic norms (i.e., information about how other people's behaviour is changing overtime)"
- "Evoking emotional response"
- "Demonstrating efficacy of virtual connections"

These campaign materials are accompanied by ongoing testing to reinforce the data-driven quality of the exercise and ensuring its efficacy.

Source: Impact Canada, 2020, <https://impact.canada.ca/en/challenges/covid-communications/campaigns>

In light of the resources and expertise required to fully integrate BI in the work of government, several countries have begun to integrate BI within teams and dedicated units, with the first Behavioural Unit established within the United Kingdom's Cabinet Office in 2010. As of 2016, the European Commission had mapped 30 countries whose governments were already applying BI to inform policy (Joint Research Centre, 2016<sup>[78]</sup>) More recently, the OECD counted 180 units (Observatory of Public Sector Innovation,

2022<sup>[79]</sup> , with more than 50% of these units created in the last 4 years, with the COVID-19 pandemic having potentially accelerated this growth (OECD, 2020<sup>[80]</sup>).

The OECD report on Public Communication (2021<sup>[3]</sup>) illustrated the adoption of BI across this function, with a majority of the institutions surveyed noting behaviour change as one of the top objectives of their communications strategies. As much as 63% of Centres of Government, and 57% of the Health Ministries surveyed for the report also noted engaging with behavioural practitioners and experts within government or academia. Going forward, facilitating greater access to behavioural expertise and providing more guidance on simple applications of BI will serve to consolidate its use to contribute to compelling and impactful public communication.

Although much of the behavioural research already mentioned collectively suggest that adapting a behavioural perspective is a necessary step for understanding how individuals engage with information ecosystems, there is less comparative research that can point to the contextual conditions that contribute to our understanding of how cognitive barriers relating to information consumption vary from country to country. As an innovative tool for public policy, BI has made its advancements predominately in Anglo-Western countries such as Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom or the United States. As such, behavioural experimentation and data is limited in its current capacity to speak to a larger trend in human behaviours. While research has proved the effectiveness of behavioural interventions in enhancing the outcomes of public communications, additional research is required in more diverse contexts.

# 3 Building institutional capacity to upgrade public communication and seize innovations to the field

Governments around the world have been looking to reform their communication functions to be fit for the digital age, as part of larger drives towards public sector innovation and the digital transformation of government (OECD, 2020<sup>[10]</sup>; OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>). The emerging practices discussed in Chapter 2 of this paper highlight the potential for inclusive, responsive and compelling communication as a powerful instrument of government. However, they also highlight the need for skilled and agile offices, as well as raise important ethical considerations about the uses of personal data and BI so that both are leveraged within the respect of privacy and in the public interest.

Overall, the consolidation of the emerging practices and new methods described above requires some priority steps to equip the relevant institutions to succeed. This section therefore elaborates on a set of three main governance requirements that apply both to OECD countries and the four SEA ones analysed in the following Chapter. These focus on the update of working cultures within communication units to embrace the use of evidence, innovation and more ambitious objectives; their access to technically advanced and specialised staff; and the introduction and application in practice of sound ethical guidance to accompany and guide the trustworthy adoption and use of new tools.

## 1. Embedding an innovative and strategic outlook in the practice of public communication

Seizing innovations in communication and staying abreast of the transformations in the information ecosystem can be facilitated by strategic and organizational changes that support a more agile function. Indeed, for at least a decade, public communication has been undergoing a transition from a traditional (or *tactical*) model, centred around press offices and one-way dissemination of information, to a more modern and *strategic* model. The latter sees objective-driven and evidence-based communication as a means to solve policy problems and is centred around dialogue with citizens (Sanders and Canel, 2013<sup>[17]</sup>; OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>). Such a model benefits considerably from innovations to the practice of communication, such as those urged by the COVID-19 pandemic that are discussed in Chapter 2.

This transition requires adaptation not only in the means and practices of public communication, but also in terms of the purpose and mandate for the function, to fully reflect its potential. For instance, despite the onset of social media and its enabling of greater interaction, the OECD report on Public Communication found that governments still tend to use these channels as vehicles to disseminate information rather than changing their approaches to optimise the platforms' features to support engagement (OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>).

### ***Building openness and capacity for innovation***

The experiences of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic shed light on the importance of a strong communication function, capable of supporting the achievement of both governance and policy goals. As the world shifts from emergency mode to a “new normal”, the recovery phase provides an opportunity to integrate or consolidate the international trends discussed in this paper to complement the ongoing modernisation of this key function.

To continue progressing towards public communication maturity and build capacity to fulfil more ambitious objectives for the function, governments could benefit from taking a holistic view of organisational structures and working methods, with a focus on developing a culture of innovation and agility. This will help further the transition towards a strategic approach to communication and position them to better navigate present and future transformations of the information ecosystem.

Overall, shifting towards a strategic model of communication requires for the mandates, policy or legal frameworks governing the function to be updated to reflect this new outlook. It also requires a change in the culture and practices within the institutions, in particular on the part of senior officials, whose objectives and approaches influence the shape of the communications of the structures they lead (WPP Government & Public Sector Practice, 2016<sup>[81]</sup>; OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>).

Resistance to change within organisations is often a significant barrier to adopting new working methods and introducing new practices. For this reason, a culture of innovation and agile teams are important assets for transforming public communication to keep up with an evolving field. Resistance can originate for various reasons, whether habit or a lack of buy in towards the changes. However, difficulties with the uptake of new technologies can often be a significant factor (Zerfass, Hagelstein and Tench, 2020<sup>[22]</sup>).

To this end, the OECD *Recommendation of the Council on Agile Regulatory Governance to Harness Innovation* (2021<sup>[82]</sup>) contains helpful principles for governments to create the conditions for such agile and innovative shifts. In particular, the Recommendation highlights the need for “[d]eveloping or adapting governance frameworks [...] so that they are forward-looking by developing institutional capacity and assigning clear mandates accordingly, conducting systematic and co-ordinated horizon scanning and scenario analysis, anticipating and monitoring the [...] implications of high-impact innovations, and fostering continuous learning and adaptation” (OECD, 2021<sup>[82]</sup>).

Innovation often involves the introduction of such technologies that can create efficiencies and improve outcomes. However, these can often imply new skillsets, periods of adjustment and replacement of old familiar tools (Zerfass, Hagelstein and Tench, 2020<sup>[22]</sup>). For example, Dutch officials behind an internal drive to grow the use of data for monitoring and evaluation of digital communication channels have encountered resistance along these lines. In particular, they recognised unfamiliarity with the methods and tools in question and fears over maintaining compliance with data privacy regulations as factors for a relatively lower “data maturity” compared to the private sector.<sup>24</sup> This pattern is common to other European countries, for example, where adoption of Big Data in public communication lags behind that in the private sector (Zerfass et al., 2016<sup>[28]</sup>; Wiencierz and Röttger, 2019<sup>[29]</sup>). Such lag persisted despite wide recognition of Big Data’s importance among practitioners surveyed in the European Communications Monitor (Zerfass et al., 2016<sup>[28]</sup>), for example.

Overcoming barriers to change and innovation necessitates clear purpose and leadership. Firstly, adopting new technologies and tools should not be end goals, but rather the means through which governments become more open, user-driven and proactive in their communication. Likewise, governments should not be technology-driven when innovating public communication, but rather outcome-driven. Technology in this sense can be seen as one means among many to support the end-goal of inclusion and

---

<sup>24</sup> Based on OECD discussions with Netherlands government communication officials held in September 2021.

responsiveness. In the context of the four SEA countries analysed in the following chapter, for example, this means in particular bridging the long-term trajectory in the uptake of digital communication with the current digital literacy levels and the prevalence of remote communities or age groups that lack access to such channels.

To ensure efforts stay the course, the purpose of innovation and the way it is pursued are best outlined in internal strategies or roadmaps that consolidate a shared vision. Any such documents can also serve to define how new approaches support the mandate for public communication to fulfil more ambitious roles in government (OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>).

The role of leadership is similarly core to successful organisational changes and the adoption of new practices and technologies. This relates to careful planning for their introduction through adequate staffing and capacity building for example (see section below). However, ongoing support from management and instructing project champions to lead implementation have also been recognised as key factors for success (Zerfass, Hagelstein and Tench, 2020<sup>[22]</sup>). Leadership is necessary to accompany the roll out of a strategy or roadmap, by emphasising a clear need and demand for the changes in question, rewards and recognition for positive efforts, and being ready to troubleshoot eventual challenges.

In sum, to be well-placed to embrace emerging trends for more effective communication, governments could take action to:

- Build a culture of innovation across leadership and teams;
- Strengthen the role of evidence in the practice of communication;
- Integrate communication more closely in the policy cycle.

A forthcoming OECD analytical framework for the assessment of public communication capacity across institutions will serve to detail the aspects of the function that can further these goals.

## 2. Fostering skilled teams and access to specialists across disciplines

Over the past two decades, the communication profession has been thoroughly transformed along with the digital revolution noted in the introduction to this paper. New practices and competencies have given life to a wide range of specialisations within the profession itself, as well as increasing its reliance on expertise in other related disciplines ranging from data science and artificial intelligence, to behavioural science, to search engine optimisation (SEO), and user experience (UX), web and graphic design.

The above discussion of emerging practices to support more effective communication demonstrates the need for specific skillsets and expertise. One of the prerequisites for building a mature communication function is therefore the availability of skilled professionals within communication structures, and access to specialists across government, who are qualified to cater to the evolving needs of institutions.

To seize the opportunities from innovations in the field, governments will need to invest in building capacity and skills of communication offices beyond essential competencies and increasing access to specialists across disciplines. In particular, interventions should target digital, analytical and data science skills; access to behavioural science expertise; and professional training across essential communication competencies.

### ***Bridging gaps in digital competencies***

As is the case in many other domains, the digitalisation of communication channels and the data revolution has sparked the proliferation of a range of sub-domains across social media, websites and apps, analytics, and beyond. Each of these sub-domains comes with a specialisation that government communication units need to acquire in order to effectively leverage the opportunities of these new channels. They ought to

ensure, at a minimum, that institutional messages are reaching the public in a crowded and complex information ecosystem, but also maximise these technologies' potential to transform one-way communication into an interactive and continuous dialogue with citizens in the ways illustrated in the previous chapter of this paper.

When it comes to skills for digital communication<sup>25</sup>, it is important to have a sufficient baseline across teams at large. Given how ubiquitous digital channels are in the field, it is necessary that all communicators have a minimum level of digital literacy and proficiency in using digital tools in their work. A good understanding of new technologies and openness to adopting them is key to modernising public communication, as discussed above. It can also support creative solutions to communication problems and management challenges alike (Wiencierz and Röttger, 2019<sup>[29]</sup>).

While analysis from the OECD report on Public Communication (2021<sup>[3]</sup>) showed that governments are placing increasing emphasis on digital communication competencies,<sup>26</sup> surveys of communicators from all sectors highlight that there continues to be a shortfall in the familiarity and proficiency with some core digital technologies (Macnamara et al., 2021<sup>[83]</sup>; Zeffass et al., 2016<sup>[28]</sup>). Encouragingly, the European Communications Monitor highlighted for instance that, as of 2016, 54% of professionals from the continent had at least some understanding of Big Data, with 7% showing advanced knowledge. However, the survey found that levels of familiarity did not translate into adequate competencies and technical skills to use Big Data and algorithms in their work, which would be desirable given their ubiquitous applications (Zeffass et al., 2016<sup>[28]</sup>; Wiesenber, Zeffass and Moreno, 2017<sup>[5]</sup>).

The above surveys demonstrate that communication departments around the world are missing a solid baseline of digital literacy and skills. Based on this evidence, it is not surprising that over three-quarters of the Centres of Government and four-fifths of the Ministries of Health surveyed by the OECD in 2020 recognised human resources as a top factor hindering the effective execution of communication activities (OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>). In light of the evolution of both technology and the profession itself, this makes training and upskilling teams an urgent priority.

Recognising the value of a digitally-savvy and innovation-minded civil service, some countries have focused on developing these competencies across their public sectors through dedicated trainings, as illustrated in Box 4.2. These examples illustrate elements of the *OECD Framework for Digital Talent and Skills in the Public Sector* (2021, pp. 16-17<sup>[6]</sup>), which is structured around three pillars represented in Table 4.1. The framework underlines that it is paramount for all civil servants to have a baseline of digital government user skills (i.e. recognising the potential of digital transformation; understanding users and their needs; collaborating for iterative delivery; trustworthy use of data and technology; data-driven government) in order to take part in the digital transformation. The Framework also notes the added value of diverse and multidisciplinary teams to deliver public services and messages that reflect the diversity of the societies they are aimed at.

---

<sup>25</sup> These encompass a range of competencies including social media monitoring and management, audience analysis and social listening, web and app development, paid online campaigns, online community management, graphic design, etc.

<sup>26</sup> Through the "Understanding Public Communication" Survey (2020), the OECD gathered and reviewed examples of institutions' competency frameworks and desired candidate profiles.

**Table 3.1. The OECD Framework for Digital Talent and Skills in the Public Sector**

<b>1. Create an environment to encourage digital transformation</b>	The context for those working on digital government and the environment required to encourage digital transformation.
<b>2. Skills to support digital government maturity</b>	The required skills to support digital government maturity, covering all public servants, in particular professionals and those in leadership roles.
<b>3. Establish and maintain a digital workforce</b>	The practical steps and enabling activities required to establish and maintain a workforce that encompasses the skills to support digital government maturity.

Source: Adapted from the OECD Framework for Digital Talent and Skills in the Public Sector (2021)

### Box 3.1. Digital and innovation training programmes for civil servants

#### Slovenia's "Innovation Training" and digital literacy programmes for public servants

Slovenia's Ministry of Public Administration runs "Innovation Training in Public Administration". This training aims to change the approach to workflow, problem solving and designing better solutions through effective communication. The programme is actively changing the administrative culture to implement higher quality state functions and digital services. The programme is performed in person and remotely (OECD, 2021<sup>[6]</sup>). Similarly, Slovenia's Administration Academy at the Ministry of Public Administration launched a new "Digital literacy training programme for public servants" in 2019. This programme follows the DigComp Framework for Citizens with 21 competences in five areas. The objective of the training programme is to enable civil servants to use information and communication technologies in a creative, safe and critical way (OECD, 2021<sup>[6]</sup>).

#### Germany's Digital Academy

- In 2021 the Federal Academy for Public Administration, a German governmental body overseeing professional development of civil servants, launched a new Digital Academy. The Academy is a platform for both online and in-person learning and development, with a focus on equipping the public sector with the skills to thrive in a digital workplace and society.
- The Academy is intended to support a culture change and openness to innovation as well as digital skills identified in the country's 2021 Digital Plan. As a result, trainings include both practical and technical competencies across big data and AI as well as organisational and management skills for digital leadership, agile project management and digital government services design. In this way, the Academy seeks to prepare civil servants for current and future changes to the workplace and to the work of government. Trainings cater to different levels of digital literacy and proficiency and are complemented with peer-supported coaching and interactive components to build on traditional lecture-style learning.

Source: The OECD Framework for digital talent and skills in the public sector (2021); Apolitical (2021), <https://apolitical.co/solution-articles/en/future-proofing-the-public-sector-through-digital-and-innovation-skills-training>; [https://www.digitalakademie.bund.de/DE/Home/home\\_node.html](https://www.digitalakademie.bund.de/DE/Home/home_node.html)

### ***Mechanisms to foster more specialised and advanced communication competencies***

Whereas strengthening digital skills across whole departments is necessary for the overall transformation of the communication function, governments ought to ensure that they also develop specialised staff or teams, which are necessary to conduct tasks of a more advanced and technical nature. For instance, data

science, statistics and research methods are important skills for communicators conducting analysis, insights gathering, and evaluation. Conversely, web design and SEO skills will be required for communicators managing institutions' web presence. Whereas some familiarity with all of the above competencies is desirable for the average communicator, it would be difficult and costly to develop proficiency in all of them.

Consistently with this approach, a growing number of governments have been organising their communication departments by creating specialised teams within them. For instance, a majority of Centres of Government surveyed for the OECD report on Public Communication (2021<sup>[3]</sup>) had dedicated digital communications teams in place, typically with up to 10 staff. Similarly, areas such as counter-disinformation and campaigns have become sub-disciplines that often benefit from dedicated staff with the required technical and substantive expertise.

With the understanding that mainstreaming certain specialised competencies requires a long-term and large-scale investment in training and human resources, governments can resort to shorter-term strategies to ensure that they are fit to seize innovations and emerging practices in the field of communication. One such approach is to build capacity and expertise centrally, and make such expertise available to support other institutions horizontally where they lack skilled staff. The examples noted in Chapter 2 about the European Commission JRC's Text-Mining Competence Centre and the United Kingdom's Rapid Response Unit illustrate this well. In both cases, the institutions developed highly specialised and sophisticated teams tasked with supporting actions in relation to AI-powered media analysis, and responding to false narratives respectively. Both teams are located in central institutions, but have a mission to support all departments in their organisations with substantive and technical expertise (Aiken, 2018<sup>[32]</sup>; Goot, 2016<sup>[33]</sup>).

Such an approach is especially relevant to less mature economies, such as some of the SEA countries in this study, that are rapidly modernising and digitalising their public sectors but can face resource and budget constraints. In interviews with the OECD, Singapore's MCI recognised that the country has long adopted a "hub and spoke model", whereby the Ministry's communication team serves as the central capacity and co-ordinating entity and supports the activities of smaller communication teams across other line ministries.<sup>27</sup> In this regard, it has invested in a department of over 200 staff, building expertise gradually from the centre out to the rest of the government instead of seeking to mainstream certain specialisations across the board.<sup>28</sup> Besides providing direct assistance and capacity to ministries agencies, it also works on building capacity through a programme of inter-ministerial staff rotations and internally run trainings. The MCI also developed communities of practice as peer-to-peer platforms for exchange and learning that complement formal learning and foster greater co-operation as a key factor for the success of this "hub and spoke model".

The same approach of centralising expertise to make it available for the whole-of-government is often found in the BI domain. OECD research that finds three broad models for deploying BI expertise: central steering units that provide access to expertise across government, a departmental model for applying BI to a given department's policy area, or ad hoc uses in certain policy situations (OECD, 2017<sup>[84]</sup>). Countries often have one or more models in place, with various stages of maturity. This wide variety of types, location and depth of expertise can create misalignment between where BI expertise is located and where it may be needed (OECD, 2020<sup>[80]</sup>), such as with behaviourally-informed communication.

As discussed in Chapter 2, BI units have been proliferating in governments around the world, and the OECD report on Public Communication (2021<sup>[3]</sup>) noted that about a quarter of Centres of Government had access to BI experts from other government units or departments, compared to one eighth who had such

---

<sup>27</sup> Based on OECD fact-finding interview with Ministry of Communications and Information representatives, 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Based on OECD fact-finding interview with Ministry of Communications and Information representatives, 2021.

expertise within their team. Similarly, these units have focused on building practical toolkits and guidance for BI application by any communicators regardless of their level of training in BI.

Notwithstanding the benefits of a central or hub approach to organising capacity and expertise, ensuring wide availability of the necessary talent and skills for public communication will remain an important challenge. As the field continues to evolve rapidly, many governments struggle to keep up with transformations to the job descriptions of communicators and to anticipate the competencies needed over the long term (OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>). Investing in regular training and professional development of communicators, both on core skills and according to a set of specialisations, will remain highly important to empower them to embrace innovations and new practices for a more strategic and impactful function.

### 3. Reinforcing ethical standards for the use of data, technology and BI

Although the new tools and practices illustrated in this paper promise to make communication more effective to the benefit of government-citizen dialogue and better policies, they are not without risks. Without setting in place the necessary safeguards for ethics, integrity, privacy, transparency and security in the digital age, governments can expose the public to more harm than good and affect public trust in government.

Risks are vast. Non-transparent use of sponsored content or influencers can mislead citizens as to the underlying source or motives behind the information they are exposed to. In a similar vein, poorly designed applications of BI can exceed their intended purpose and interfere with people's autonomy and ability to choose, amounting to manipulation. The collection and use of data from untrusted sources to inform communication interventions can also impact the results delivered by data-intensive projects. Leveraging user data for targeted information campaigns can also potentially expose the data to unauthorised and malicious use by other actors. These data-related risks also concern deficient data governance controls at a more technical level and greater oversight at a more tactical one.

The overarching goal of reinforcing public trust through communication ought to go hand in hand with the ways and motives for governments to take up these new tools and practices in communication. To this end, the adoption of these tools and practices must be accompanied by the development of comprehensive and formalised ethical standards, principles and guidelines, and their elaboration into practical documents that can guide their day-to-day application. Guidelines on ethics should then be complemented with periodical training and coaching to ensure their proper integration into daily practice.

#### ***Rising concerns about ethical challenges linked to new practices and technologies***

The proliferation of digital technologies and innovations such as BI in the field of communication has been paralleled with a rise in communicators' concern with ethical questions (Hagelstein, Einwiller and Zeffass, 2021<sup>[4]</sup>; Zeffass et al., 2020<sup>[85]</sup>). A recent survey of public communicators in 44 European countries demonstrated this, with the finding that almost half (46%) reported encountering more than one ethical challenge affecting their day-to-day work (Zeffass et al., 2020<sup>[85]</sup>). As illustrated in Table 4.2, for the most part communicators are most concerned precisely by the types of practices and tools that are discussed in this paper. This is likely due to their novelty or technical complexity, which is potentially a reflection of the above takeaways on the relatively low digital literacy and proficiency levels. In turn, low understanding and competency with these methods increases the risks of unintended mishandling of data or tools.

These widespread concerns are warranted, as new technologies and methods in the field of communication can and do have important implications on the public. Their intentional abuse by private firms, political and state entities alike has been revealed to great public outrage in the context of the Cambridge Analytica scandal and multiple subsequent disinformation campaigns. More recently, studies have documented a growing global market of communications professionals and firms that use

increasingly common practices such as sponsored content and paid influencers to deliberately manipulate and mislead the public (Macnamara et al., 2021<sup>[83]</sup>).

**Table 3.2. Public communicators' perceptions of ethically challenging practices**

Communication competency	Ethical challenge perception, mean values (1 = not challenging; 5 = extremely challenging)	
	Europe	Asia Pacific
Using bots to generate feedback and followers on social media	3.99	3.90
Paying social media influencers to communicate favourably	3.74	3.53
Using sponsored social media posts and sponsored articles on news websites that look like regular content	3.71	3.45
Exploiting audiences' personal data by applying big data analyses	3.70	3.88
Motivating employees to spread organisational messages on their private social media accounts	3.02	3.48
Profiling and targeting audiences based on age, gender, ethnicity, job, or interests	2.86	3.05

Note: Responses by communicators in governmental organisations to the question "Strategic communication and public relations are constantly evolving and introducing new ways of communicating with stakeholders. How challenging are the following practices in your opinion in terms of ethics? Scale 1 (Ethically not challenging at all) – 5 (Ethically extremely challenging)." (Zerfass et al., 2020, p. 29<sup>[85]</sup>; Macnamara et al., 2021<sup>[83]</sup>)

Source: Adapted from European Communications Monitor (2020); Asia Pacific Communications Monitor (2021)

Practices for the use of data and tools such as machine learning and AI, the application of BI, and tapping on influencers and sponsored content, do not in themselves cause harm when they are well designed and well intentioned. However, issues can arise for example where sponsored content, including the compensation of influencers, is not transparently disclosed. With influencers and other intermediaries, concerns also relate to their functional equivalence to the role of journalists (as information intermediaries) but without the ethical and professional standards of journalism (Hagelstein, Einwiller and Zerfass, 2021<sup>[4]</sup>). Algorithms and AI have also been widely demonstrated to be vulnerable to dangerous biases and misuses (OECD, 2019<sup>[86]</sup>). Finally, behavioural change communications can raise concerns about paternalism and restrictions to choice, and even outright manipulation (OECD, 2019<sup>[53]</sup>).

Likewise, the proper collection of data, its processing, storage and handling also carry risks for privacy and for AI-enabled psychological and behavioural profiling or targeting that social media users do not knowingly consent to (Hagelstein, Einwiller and Zerfass, 2021<sup>[4]</sup>; White and Boatwright, 2020<sup>[87]</sup>). Privacy and data protection is one prominent part of data ethics, but this field also encompasses having in place government-wide arrangements to support trustworthy data access, sharing and use, and building transparent data practices and balancing it with innovation (OECD, 2021<sup>[88]</sup>).

Data protection concerns rank especially high in the aftermath of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, and subsequent regulations such as the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) have helped better define the ways in which governments and other entities can collect and use citizens' data responsibly. These ethical challenges refer to ensuring that fundamental human rights, freedoms, autonomy and fairness of data subjects are protected when data (personal and non-personal) are collected, processed, analysed, stored, shared and used. The data subjects need to be reassured that data handlers are exercising responsibility, accountability, integrity and fairness – and are essentially able to trust them.

Perceptions of risk and lack of clarity or guidance on ethical uses of these communication tools and practices can lead public communicators to shy away from them (Hagelstein, Einwiller and Zerfass, 2021<sup>[4]</sup>;

OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>).<sup>29</sup> The downside of this approach is that, as demonstrated in Chapter 2, methods such as audience segmentation and targeting, behaviour change campaigns, and enlisting trusted messengers can support desirable outcomes, namely more inclusive, responsive and compelling public communication. Seizing the benefits of these methods and tools through their responsible use should therefore be encouraged by making the necessary ethical guidance available to communicators.

### ***Standards, guidelines and training for ethics in public communication, BI, data and digital technologies***

As documented in the OECD report on Public Communication (2021<sup>[3]</sup>), ethical standards and guidelines for the profession and codes of conduct for the public sector are widely available. Digital communication and the use of social media are areas where several institutions surveyed by the OECD have been providing new guidance for communicators (OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>). For instance, about two-thirds of the Centres of Government and Ministries of Health in the survey reported having introduced policies, guidelines or manuals on appropriate uses of social media channels. Notably, only a sixth of Centres of Government that adopted guidelines in this domain had included provisions relating to paid content, despite this being a widespread practice (OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>).

Indeed, what this figure suggests is that these documents may not be keeping up with the pace of innovations in the field. It is also unclear whether communicators are widely aware or reliant on them. To the contrary, some research has highlighted that communication practitioners from all sectors reported dismissing available guidance because they find it to be outdated (Hagelstein, Einwiller and Zeffass, 2021<sup>[4]</sup>).

In light of the rapid evolution of the field of communication, and of regulations and policies that touch related elements such as data and AI, governments will benefit from developing mechanisms for periodical reviews of both practical and ethical guidelines. For example, since developing its first set of Barcelona Principles on evaluation in 2010, the International Association for the Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC) has updated these standards twice (see Box 4.3). This is the case in other rapidly changing fields. In the data domain, the United Kingdom's Data Ethics Framework from 2018 was updated just two years later to integrate three overarching principles (i.e. transparency, accountability, fairness) and five specific actions to assist teams to improve ethical standards in their use of data in the public sector (GOV.UK, 2020<sup>[89]</sup>).

#### **Box 3.2. Ethics and integrity in Principle 7 of the AMEC Barcelona Principles 3.0**

In 2020 the AMEC, an international professional body, introduced the third version of its Barcelona Principles concerning the evaluation and measurement of communication activities, updating on two previous issues in the course of a decade.

Principle 7 refers specifically to ensuring ethical practice in the realm of evaluation, stating: "Communication Measurement and Evaluation Are Rooted in Integrity and Transparency to Drive Learning and Insights".

Its provision guides communicators to "Ensure integrity, honesty, openness and ethical practices" with particular attention to the evolution of data privacy regulations and to maintaining transparency across

<sup>29</sup> In bilateral exchanges with the OECD in 2021, officials from the Dutch government also noted a "culture of compliance" as a barrier to the wider adoption of data-driven online communication.

data and methodology, and to a range of sources of bias that can compromise evidence gathering and evaluation.

Source: Barcelona Principles 3.0, AMEC, 10 July 2020, <https://amecorg.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/BP-Presentation-3.0-AMEC-webinar-10.07.20.pdf>

These periodical reviews can be informed by mapping current concerns of communicators, seek to align with most recent international and industry standards, and allow for consultation with stakeholders that can make the resulting guidelines more inclusive and legitimate. The latter approach is especially important to ensure not just the ethicality of certain practices, but also their acceptance by those who are on the receiving end of communications that employ such practices. A good example of such participatory approach to the development of standards is illustrated in Box 4.4 on the process for the United Kingdom's development of algorithmic transparency standards.

### Box 3.3. Collaborative process for the development of Algorithmic Transparency Standards in the United Kingdom

The United Kingdom has long sponsored an “open by default” and transparent approach across the use of data and algorithms in the public sector. Notwithstanding this, the Central Digital and Data Office found that transparency is understood differently in different entities and departments. It therefore set out to develop standards that would guide the design and use of algorithms across the country.

The Office strove to make this process participative and source contributions and feedback from a wide range of expert stakeholders. They included academics and leading experts, civil servants in other departments, and the public, actors who are the ultimate beneficiaries of transparency and related tools. Large portions of the public in particular were found to be unfamiliar with the subject matter and therefore unlikely to be able to scrutinise the use of algorithms in the public sector unless the means to do so were simplified.

Through a joint deliberative public engagement exercise with two civil society organisations, the Central Digital and Data Office obtained a set of recommendations for the design and substance of the transparency standards. These include a recommendation to divide the standards into two tiers that are addressed non-expert audiences and at more advanced stakeholders respectively. Source: Natalia Domagala (2021), <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/stories/strengthening-algorithmic-transparency-in-the-united-kingdom/>

Some essential principles underpin all ethics guidance and can likewise define the review and update of existing documents. In this respect, transparency is a fundamental principle to abide by to ensure all activities can be scrutinised for their ethical compliance and be trusted by the public. This ought to apply across all dimensions of the collection and uses of both personal data and behavioural insights, for instance through experiments.

Transparency is found with near ubiquity in standards, toolkits and guiding documents relating not only to public communication, but also to responsible use of new technologies and data and on BI. For instance, transparency with the public and stakeholders about the intent, purpose, methods and results are common to the *OECD Principles and Best Practices for the Ethical Application of Behavioural Insights in Public Policy* (Forthcoming<sup>[90]</sup>) as well as the *OECD's Good Practice Principles for Data Ethics in the Public Sector* (OECD, 2021<sup>[88]</sup>), the *OECD Privacy Guidelines* (OECD, 2013<sup>[91]</sup>), and the *OECD AI Principles* (OECD, 2019<sup>[92]</sup>).

Indeed, general ethical standards and guidance such as the above-mentioned documents have already been developed for most areas of innovation. However, they have not yet been widely translated to the

practical aspects of the communication function. This adaptation can facilitate the harmonisation of governmental standards, while ensuring they suite the specificities of public communication and are calibrated to the prevalent level of digital literacy and technical proficiency of communicators.

The availability of guidance in itself may not be sufficient to ensure ethics in the practice of public communication, and may need to be integrated more practically across training and capacity building programmes. Indeed, training has been recognised as a primary method to improve ethical conduct in this field (Macnamara et al., 2021<sup>[83]</sup>). However, it is also a less common one according to data from surveys of communicators in both Europe and the Asia Pacific region. As much as 45% of government communicators in Europe and 25% in Asia Pacific countries have never received ethics training. Of those who did receive it, only 14% in Europe and 27% in Asia Pacific<sup>30</sup> attended such training over the previous year (Zerfass et al., 2020<sup>[85]</sup>; Macnamara et al., 2021<sup>[83]</sup>). These findings suggest the importance of increasing the availability and frequency of ethics training as a core element of the professionalization of the public communication function and inextricable from digital and other professional competencies.

In sum, building a strategic and innovative outlook for public communication, in tandem with efforts to upskill teams and units to carry this out in practice, ought to go hand-in-hand with a focus on ethics. This is fundamental to ensuring that these opportunities for inclusive, responsive and compelling communication that come with innovations in the field are compatible with the public interest and do not erode public trust.

---

<sup>30</sup> The figure for Asia Pacific includes communicators from all sectors, not just government.

# 4 Lessons from COVID-19 and opportunities in four Southeast Asian countries

Several countries in Southeast Asia were among the first affected as the COVID-19 pandemic broke out. In many ways, the region's experience with relatively recent epidemics of Coronaviruses, such as the 2003 SARS virus, meant that governments were largely prepared and well positioned to manage the outbreak compared to other parts of the world. This preparedness extended to the domain of health and risk communication, where numerous regional governments, including the ones that are the focus of this paper, stepped up to the challenge and delivered co-ordinated and impactful communications to mitigate the health crisis. Ultimately, the effective use of crisis communication became a key indicator of how well governments responded to the pandemic (He and Li, 2020<sup>[93]</sup>).

As discussed in this Chapter and the next, governments in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand seemed to embrace some of the new trends and practices described above in their communication. Over this period, they offered some notable examples of inclusive, responsive and compelling communication. However, to different degrees, the function remains on a trajectory towards modernisation and maturity that will require reform and investment.

Notably, the function's strategic role for policy, governance and public trust ought to be reinforced. This is a common point to many countries in SEA and beyond: and the OECD report on Public Communication (OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>) similarly highlighted that, around the world, the function is not sufficiently recognised. Likewise, this was identified as a top strategic priority by 31% of government communicators surveyed in 2020 for the Asia Pacific Communication Monitor, who recognised that communication's role in supporting decision-making within their organisation needed to be strengthened (Figure 3.1). A similar share of respondents also pointed to the priority of "building and maintaining trust" (although reduced compared to the previous edition of the survey) (Macnamara et al., 2021<sup>[83]</sup>). Whereas communicators themselves are often proponents of adopting a more strategic vision for the function, international research has also pointed that resistance and misunderstanding of the potential of communications tends to come from higher levels of institutions (OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>; WPP Government & Public Sector Practice, 2016<sup>[81]</sup>; Sanders and Canel, 2013<sup>[17]</sup>). Such lack of buy-in from the top can hinder the integration of communication with policy and limit its role.

Several other challenges, notably structural ones, undermine the longevity of the gains made by the four countries throughout the last two years of COVID-19 communications. With some exceptions, communication departments remain under-skilled. Again, this is not unique to Indonesia, Malaysia Singapore and Thailand, but the countries can be indicative of the wider challenge in the transformation of

the profession. Evidence from a 2020 regional survey of practitioners<sup>31</sup> has identified gaps in the professionalization of communication, particularly with regards to the adoption of digital technologies, big data and automation that were discussed in the previous chapter. Figure 4.1 highlights how prominently concerns about seizing the digital transformation of communication weigh on communicators' minds (Macnamara et al., 2021<sub>[83]</sub>).

Moreover, the four SEA countries maintain a strong emphasis on traditional media in their communication, often through print and broadcast outlets that are state-owned and run (He and Li, 2020<sub>[93]</sub>). However, news media is perceived as declining in importance as a channel of communication, contrasted by the rise of digital channels (Macnamara et al., 2021<sub>[83]</sub>). Mobile messaging apps in particular have become a primary means for sharing information in the region. This transforming media and information ecosystem has given greater room to alternative voices and stakeholders to shape public discourse on policy issues. In turn, this creates new imperatives for governments to adapt to communicating effectively in a more dispersed and diverse environment. To this end, the practices discussed in Chapter 2, particularly in relation to data-driven and informed communication, will be most valuable.

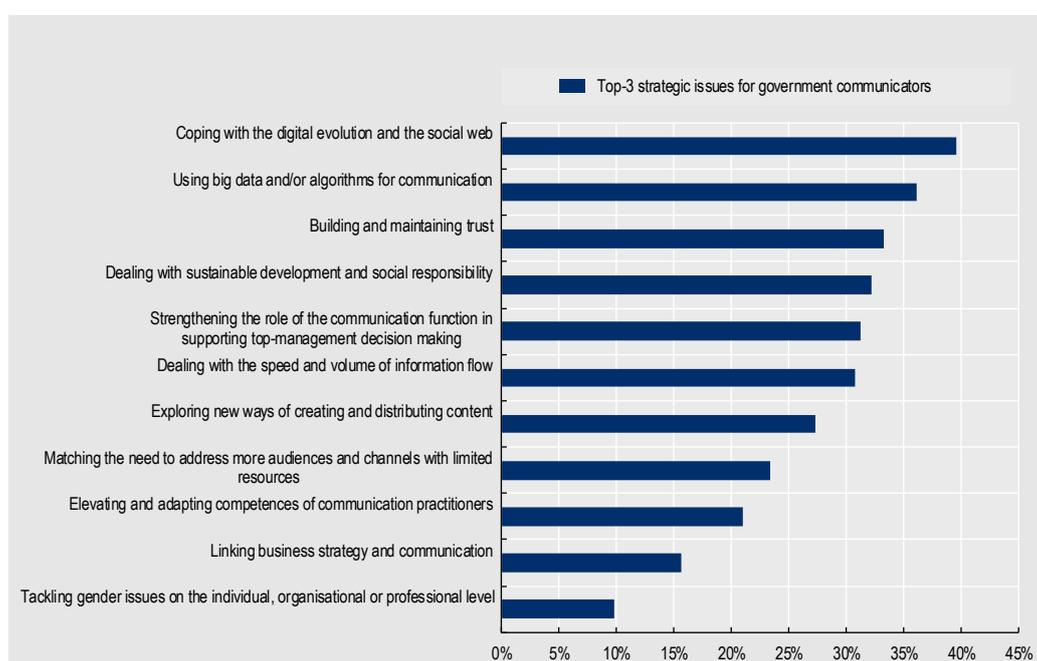
As this chapter elaborates, although these four countries differ significantly, they stand to benefit from conducting communications that are more two-way rather than unilateral, with greater emphasis on engagement and dialogue rather than the simple dissemination of information. With the necessary institutional support and mandate, these governments therefore have ample scope to make their communication more inclusive, responsive and compelling by investing in advanced uses of digital technologies and building capacity to apply BI.

Finally, the international practices and trends identified in Chapter 2, combined with the lessons learned across Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand over the last few years, can additionally provide useful insights to countries in the rest of the SEA region who are looking to leverage the function more effectively.

---

<sup>31</sup> The Asia-Pacific Communications Monitor 2020/21 covers surveys of communicators in South Korea, Japan, China (Mainland), Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau (SAR), Vietnam, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, Thailand, India, Australia and New Zealand.

**Figure 4.1. Priority strategic issues for public sector and government communicators in the Asia Pacific region**



Note: Responses to the survey question “Which issues will be most important for communication management/PR within the next three years from your point of view? Please pick exactly 3 items. Percentages: Frequency based on selection as Top-3 issue.” Responses provided by practitioners in South Korea, Japan, China (Mainland), Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau (SAR), Vietnam, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, Thailand, India, Australia and New Zealand. For methodology see [www.communicationmonitor.asia](http://www.communicationmonitor.asia). Source: Adapted from Asia-Pacific Communication Monitor 2020/21, [www.communicationmonitor.asia](http://www.communicationmonitor.asia).

## Key trends from the public communication response to COVID-19

The COVID-19 response across Asia and in some SEA countries in particular has earned international praise and attention. Strategies to face the pandemic relied importantly on a successful mixture of crisis preparedness, nimble deployment of data- and digital-powered solutions, public health education and localised interventions (Clavier and Ghesquiere, 2021<sup>[13]</sup>). The public communication responses from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand largely fit the pattern of this big picture. For instance, Singapore led the way globally with the first Bluetooth contact tracing app, widely replicated in other countries (Clavier and Ghesquiere, 2021<sup>[13]</sup>).

Elements of the international trends described above were also visible across these countries, adapted into local practices that supported inclusion and responsiveness. Overall, these countries’ successes owed to important efforts to:

- Co-ordinating their actions through dedicated structures and governance mechanisms
- Deploying digital tools in tandem with digital communication and engagement
- Pursuing an inclusive effort to bridge digital and physical barriers to reach citizens
- Counteracting the spread of mis- and disinformation on the COVID-19 virus and vaccines

As a result, this section illustrates the main pillars and trends in public communication over the course of the pandemic to understand how this unprecedented crisis affected the function in these four SEA countries. The section notes relevant commonalities and makes connections with some of the international trends discussed in Chapter 2.

### **Communication co-ordination, structures and governance during COVID-19**

At the core of a successful COVID-19 communication response lie robust institutional arrangements with mechanisms for co-ordination and collaboration within the public sector and with external stakeholders, and the capacity for implementation. This has been an important lesson from the fights against COVID-19 for governments in SEA and beyond. It highlighted the importance of establishing solid foundations for deploying communication coherently and consistently for the whole-of-government as the way forward.

Especially in a crisis setting, having the right institutional models and policy levers are essential enablers for the delivery of responses in a timely and integrated manner. Without such structures, there is a risk that actions conducted by separate entities may lack coherence or suffer from delays and duplication. At a time of high anxiety and information overload, as was the case during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, this can undermine the efficacy of communications.

Co-ordination and collaboration both among communicators in different public sector organisations and between communicators and policy teams have been recognised as a primary challenges (OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>). The OECD report on Public Communication also highlighted its centrality in relation both to crisis communication and to the overall governance of the function.

The element of sound institutional set-ups was common to the four countries in this study, where sturdy central structures were already in place (such as Singapore's Ministry for Communication and Information, or MCI, or Thailand's National Committee of Public Relations) or where dedicated central multi-disciplinary units were established or repurposed to lead the effort (such as the National Security Council in Malaysia and the Committee for Handling Covid-19 and National Economic Recovery in Indonesia). In these instances, crisis response teams in the executive and across health ministries were positioned to co-ordinate both communication and policy for the whole-of-government.

Co-ordination has been especially important in a geographically vast and devolved country like Indonesia. There, the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (Kominfo), a central actor in the COVID-19 response, strengthened regional co-ordination mechanisms with 34 provinces and with the army and police which were at the frontline of vaccine delivery efforts later in the pandemic.<sup>32</sup> As part of this centralised role, Kominfo maintained a hub for digital content to provide all institutions with access to communication materials and content for amplification at the national and local levels thereby harmonising the messages being shared by different public entities.

Beyond institutional set-ups, the formulation of government strategies defined the approaches to respond to the pandemic. Here, crisis preparedness protocols enabled some SEA countries to mobilise rapidly. Preparedness and capacity to deploy risk communication became especially important in this context. Notably, communication was recognised as a pillar of the government COVID-19 strategy in Malaysia, (see Box 3.1). Some of the elements in this response, for example, benefited from the presence of the Malaysian Ministry of Health's Crisis Preparedness and Response Centre and its Corporate Communications Unit that provided expertise on risk communication in the context of a public health crisis. Among OECD members, Korea offers an often-cited example of crisis preparedness structures, which had been prioritised in the aftermath of previous public health emergencies (OECD, 2020<sup>[94]</sup>). The KDCA and Ministry of Health and Welfare had developed a manual for crisis management and trained communicators to implement it in the event of an emergency. Preparedness also included establishing provisions to collaborate with telecommunications companies to alert citizens in crises (OECD, 2020<sup>[94]</sup>).

---

<sup>32</sup> Based on OECD fact-finding interview with Kominfo representatives, 2021.

#### Box 4.1. Risk communication as a pillar of Malaysia's national COVID-19 approach

Malaysia's government deployed a six-prong approach to contain the pandemic and its social and economic effects that relied on core public health interventions, movement control, evidence gathering and analysis, community engagement and risk communication.

The Ministry of Health led risk communication in co-ordination with the National Security Council, the Ministry of Communication and Multimedia and Department of Information according to a plan that aimed to:

- Disseminate information by credible sources;
- Acknowledge uncertainty around developing scientific evidence;
- Avoid excessive reassurance and balance messaging with objective presentation of risks;
- Reach all stakeholders including via localised interventions in affected clusters as well as vulnerable groups;
- Co-operate with stakeholders across society, across business, academia, civil society etc.;
- Mobilise communities through engagement and empowerment;
- Strengthen international co-operation and co-ordination.

Communications sought initially to disseminate evolving guidance and facts to curb rumours. Over the course of the crisis, messaging also aimed to reduce anxiety across the population without downplaying the risks of the virus or projecting overdue certainty about what was known at each stage. The plan was implemented and content fine-tuned in line with evidence gathered through sentiment analysis and behavioural studies that were conducted over the course of the pandemic to inform the response.

The plan placed special emphasis on promoting a whole-of-society effort to complement and reinforce government actions, with support and outreach to key stakeholders and community leaders and co-operation with social media platforms and other media outlets.

Source: Presentation by Dr Maria Suleiman of the Malaysian Ministry of Health at the conference "Effective Public Communication for an Inclusive Response and Recovery from Covid-19", on 9 December 2020, available <https://www.oecd.org/gov/open-government/effective-public-communication-for-an-inclusive-response-and-recovery-from-covid-19.htm>

#### ***Integration of digital tools and initiatives with communication***

The use of digital tools and data has been recognised as having played a pivotal role in combating the COVID-19 pandemic in some Asian countries and ensuring public service continuity (Clavier and Ghesquiere, 2021<sup>[13]</sup>; G20/OECD, 2021<sup>[95]</sup>). In this respect, it demonstrated the potential for the four SEA countries in this study to innovate and leverage digital tools, which can be replicated in the public communication domain.

Successes in this domain owe to notable efforts that countries in the SEA region have undertaken towards the digitalisation of their public sectors to support public administration modernisation and effectiveness as a means to improve governance and service design and delivery. The recent OECD *Open and Connected Government Review of Thailand* (2022) illustrates a valuable example of how the country has embarked on this process ([Error! Reference source not found.](#)).

### Box 4.2. Recommendations for Thailand to deliver better in the digital age

#### Public service design and delivery in the digital age

In Thailand, the Digital Government Development Agency is the main provider of infrastructure and the required technical support to build a digital government. It promotes information sharing within the public sector and secures the delivery of public services, information and data to citizens and businesses through government platforms, among others. Yet, Thailand lacks tools such as citizen mailboxes and folders accessible via digital identity, which could help in streamlining communication with citizens and reinforcing transparency and integrity in terms of how public sector organisations use citizens' data.

For this, the government of Thailand should focus on the following:

- Define and implement an integrated approach to digital identity to address legacy challenges, facilitate technical implementation and simplify the access to services.
- Promote a Data as a Service (DaaS) approach for public sector data, such as the identification of priority information for its generation as digital data, for greater interoperability, standardisation and exchange through shared data infrastructures.
- Implement user engagement exercises, promote the adoption of user experience (UX) service design and technology principles and standards, and promote the consolidation of services and the integration of available portals for services and formalities.

Source: (OECD, 2022<sup>[96]</sup>), Open and Connected Government Review of Thailand, <https://doi.org/10.1787/e1593a0c-en>.

Digital technologies provide opportunities for governments to interact directly, responsively and proactively with citizens, and rethink collaboration with civil society and the private sector. Digital maturity in particular was noted as a factor determining the relative success of digital tools and data in managing the pandemic, a factor that extends to the public communication domain (Clavier and Ghesquiere, 2021<sup>[13]</sup>).

Communication forms a core part of efforts for digital transformation and, when integrated within them, offers a means to support a user-centric approach that facilitates seamless interaction with citizens. This in turn can make both the communication and the services more responsive. The OECD *Framework on the Governance of Digital Government* offers an easy-to-use toolkit to self-assess and identify areas for improvements in governing digital that can support governments in pursuing better outcomes, including through communication (OECD, 2021<sup>[15]</sup>).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic response, examples of effective integration between digital services and communication included the likes of portals and pages with descriptive analytics developed in different formats in all of the four countries.<sup>33</sup> These dashboards featured up-to-date graphs, interactive maps and data, including on numbers of active, discharged, and deceased cases, vaccination rates and available appointments, availability of PPE and more.

Singapore's GovTech, the implementing agency of the Smart Nation and Digital Government Office under the Prime Minister's Office, has been at the forefront of swiftly developing digital solutions to support the pandemic in collaboration with public entities across sectors. Their initiatives have included enhancing the

<sup>33</sup> See for example <https://covid19.moh.gov.sg/> and <https://co.vid19.sg/singapore/>, or <https://ddc.moph.go.th/viralpneumonia/eng/index.php>

government's AI-powered chat bot to better address queries relating to COVID-19; dedicated chat bots and platforms to assist businesses with navigating new pandemic-related measures; the community-led contact tracing programme TraceTogether; the FluGoWhere and MaskGoWhere pages, where users could find Public Health Preparedness Clinics and collect publicly provided masks respectively in real-time.<sup>34</sup> In all these cases, solutions served to give key information to citizens and organisations that enabled them to benefit from services and comply with policies. Similar tools have sprung up elsewhere in the region and many countries around the world have imitated approaches introduced by Asia's digital pioneers.

These digital-first solutions, often powered by open government data, were important for presenting timely and transparent information to satisfy public demands to understand the situation and to limit the scope for confusion and rumours to emerge. However, these data and information were only useful if they could be disseminated widely and inclusively. To this end, the four SEA governments resorted to a range of direct digital communication to get the information into the hands of citizens (complemented by offline approaches as illustrated further below).

Direct messaging apps have been one of the most useful channels of communication in this respect. Indeed, a notable digital trend in Asia is the popularity and prominence of such apps as a source of news, even above other social media. In interviews with Indonesian officials, it was even noted that messaging apps are more important as outlets for information in the country than social media, as the latter tends to be used more for entertainment purposes than the sharing of news and important content.<sup>35</sup> This, in turn, raises the urgency for public institutions to be active and effective on these channels.

Consequently, the four governments have turned to the likes of WhatsApp and Telegram to reach their citizens directly with key information throughout the pandemic. Singapore's MCI, in collaboration with GovTech, has been behind the boost in the use of the official government WhatsApp, which as of April 2022 counted over 1.9 million subscribers – almost three times its following on Facebook at the time of writing (Ministry of Communication and Information, 2021<sub>[97]</sub>).<sup>36</sup> The official WhatsApp channel was enhanced to serve a rapidly growing subscriber list and to be inclusive of speakers of the four official languages used in Singapore, English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil. A dedicated COVID-19 infobot powered by AI was also launched in December 2020 on WhatsApp and web to help citizens get information in the four official languages through a one-stop portal at their own convenience (Basu, 2020<sub>[98]</sub>).<sup>37</sup> Being active on these channels has also helped with mitigating the spread of rumours and misinformation, as messaging apps are increasingly prominent vehicles for such content being shared between closed social circles.

Finally, digital communication played a central role in furthering the use of tools and apps for anything from contact tracing to available vaccination centres. As was the case with the implementation of COVID-19 containment measures such as self-reporting and isolation of contact cases, compelling communications are essential to the successful rollout of digital initiatives that depend on users adopting certain behaviours (Clavier and Ghesquiere, 2021<sub>[13]</sub>). Importantly, it was necessary to overcome concerns about privacy and security through transparency, while demonstrating the tools' value and appealing to a sense of civic duty. Behavioural insights that could support these communication objectives, however, emerged as an important gap in the region. Although OECD interviews confirmed that most of the four governments benefit from access to external expertise if not internal behavioural units, their work is less visibly integrated with public communication. Going forward, the integration of digital government initiatives with behavioural

---

<sup>34</sup> All tools and initiatives developed to combat COVID-19 are featured on the Singapore GovTech website: <https://www.tech.gov.sg/products-and-services/responding-to-covid-19-with-tech/>

<sup>35</sup> Based on OECD fact-finding interview with Kominfo representatives, 2021.

<sup>36</sup> Updated with information provided by MCI to the OECD Secretariat, 2022.

<sup>37</sup> Updated with information provided by MCI to the OECD Secretariat, 2022.

considerations and communication will be an important area of experimentation and development for these SEA countries.

### ***Omni-channel and tailored approaches for inclusive communication***

Efforts for inclusion are especially central to the effectiveness of communication in the four SEA countries analysed. These include numerous ethnically and culturally diverse communities, multiple official languages and unofficial dialects, as well as large differences between urban and rural populations, on top of the main demographic characteristics present in all societies. Digital literacy levels and access to internet and mobile devices are not homogenous, making them important factors to consider in determining which communication approaches would be suitable from one audience group to another. The four governments are well aware of these considerations, which were highlighted during interviews with the OECD and are largely reflected in the choice of channels for communication. This is a dimension where innovative and effective approaches are being deployed widely, in alignment with the emerging practices discussed in Chapter 2.

Beyond the diversified use of digital and social media discussed above, interpersonal or “face-to-face” communication through public officials and community messengers has been an important feature of efforts to reach all corners of the region. Although the country has been praised for its digital savviness (Basu, 2020<sup>[98]</sup>), Singapore’s public servants also conducted door-to-door outreach when the pandemic broke out and later to tackle vaccine hesitancy, especially with vulnerable communities and the elderly. Community-level outreach has also played an essential role in Indonesia’s COVID-19 prevention strategy and its highly successful drive for vaccinations. Indeed Kominfo’s campaign demonstrated the value of leveraging messengers to increase reach and impact, especially in a linguistically and culturally diverse setting (see Box 3.2).

The emphasis on local messengers and in-person approaches similarly links to the prevalence of messaging apps and more personalised ways of interacting with known groups. It forms part of an omni-channel way of communicating that effectively bridges between digital tools prevalent in more urban areas and the more localised and personalised communication that fits the cultural and geographic setting. However, this is not without challenges. “Offline” channels and closed ones such as WhatsApp make the gathering of insights and monitoring of communication outputs, outcomes and impact more difficult. At the same time, the more messengers are involved (and the more removed they are from the central coordinating entity overseeing public communication), the harder it is to maintain a consistent narrative and ensure the accurate delivery of information. Looking ahead, strengthening public communication and maintaining inclusion will benefit from integrating “offline” and community-level communications with ways of capturing more precise insights to ensure their impact.

### Box 4.3. Indonesia's nation-wide mobilisation of COVID-19 behaviour change ambassadors

Communicators from Indonesia's Kominfo have led a large-scale effort to promote COVID-19 prevention behaviours (and later the uptake of vaccines) across its over 17,000 islands. The communication strategy involved traditional approaches of media and digital campaigning, but relied most significantly on a localised mobilisation of community-based messengers and advocates who provided unprecedented reach to government messages.

The government's dedicated COVID-19 Response Acceleration Task Force, working with 34 provincial governments and local authorities, enlisted the support of a large number of "behaviour change ambassadors". These were regular citizens who in a voluntary capacity collaborated to spread government health guidance in their communities and secure commitments to adhere to mask wearing, hand washing and social distancing. Each ambassador explained the precautions based on government communication materials and asked fellow citizens to indicate their acceptance of the messages or a commitment to apply the behaviours.

This Task Force helped form local communication networks and teams that were supported in developing tailored approaches for diverse community and offered communication materials developed centrally.

Through a nation-wide communication campaign drawing heavily on face-to-face interpersonal exchanges, they succeeded in recruiting over 82,730 volunteers between October 2020 and March 2021 as behaviour change ambassadors. The local communication networks used a system of train-the-trainer to give coaching to the volunteers and provided them with information materials translated into all the main languages used in each province.

In turn, these ambassadors reached around 50 million individuals across Indonesia's many provinces, securing some 30 million statements of acceptance of the measures and 16 million commitments to adhere to them.

The campaign's approach and the choice of prioritising the use of messengers through in-person outreach owe to insights about how people trust information and where they receive it, considering in particular the digital divide and local trends for the use of digital channels.

Later on, a similar community-driven effort called *Vaksinasi Merdeka* was devised to support vaccinations against COVID-19. Around the country, vaccine delivery was conducted by the police and army at the community level thanks to their existing infrastructure, and involved a volunteer-based system to support the administration of vaccines in the community and registration of appointments and vaccines certificates.

Source: OECD fact-finding interview with Kominfo representatives, 2021.

### **Managing mis- and disinformation on COVID-19 and vaccines**

Across the world, as in these SEA countries, communicating effectively around the COVID-19 crisis and subsequent vaccination efforts has implied managing the spread of mis- and disinformation. Public communication has emerged as a primary tool to combat the so-called "infodemic" from the early days of the pandemic, as the unknown virus unleashed a wave of rumours and speculations amplified by anxiety and fears (OECD, 2020<sup>[2]</sup>). As for other areas of communication, countering mis- and disinformation is a domain where the emerging practices discussed in Chapter 2 are especially relevant.

Public communication strategies varied in terms of the specific actions taken, but OECD interviews with communicators from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand emphasised the role of rapidly disseminating verified information from trusted sources. This is especially the case in Singapore, whose approach emphasises speed and proactivity to get facts in front of citizens before they can be exposed to rumours. Malaysia's Ministry of Communication and Multimedia (MCMC) similarly established *Sebenarnya.my* in 2017, a platform to fact-check viral rumours that has gained in popularity since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak thanks to its debunks on health misinformation.<sup>38</sup> This platform has since been complemented by two new fact-checking agencies, *Faqcheck.org*, and independent civil society-led outfit, and *Mycheck*, under *Bernama*, the Malaysian state National News Agency.

As noted above, open, transparent and up-to-date data portals reduced the ground for rumours to get traction (Clavier and Ghesquiere, 2021<sup>[13]</sup>). Trusted voices, such as influencer and community-based messengers, discussed in the previous section were also an important element to mitigate the spread of misinformation. Such actions are well aligned with international good practices and the principles that underpin them, as identified in the OECD *Principles of Good Practice on Public Communication Responses to Mis- and Disinformation* (2022<sup>[60]</sup>).

Public communication is just one of a range of policy tools that governments have been using to counteract the challenge of mis- and disinformation, along with media and information literacy, support for fact-based journalism and other whole-of-society approaches discussed in the OECD working paper on "Governance Responses to Disinformation" (2020<sup>[99]</sup>). As the scale of the problem continued to grow in recent years, more policy debates have focused directly on regulating content and social media platforms to prevent problematic posts from spreading widely and being amplified by algorithms. Although content moderation efforts have ramped up globally, primarily by social media platforms ensuring users' compliance with their own content policies, international policy debates around information disorders have tended to prioritise the importance of freedom of speech and of expression over the dangers of false and misleading content (Broadband Commission, 2020<sup>[100]</sup>; European Parliament, 2022<sup>[101]</sup>).

In this respect, over recent years, the four governments have tended to introduce more formal laws and measures to moderate conversations online. In some cases these criminalise certain types of speech in a way that has raised concerns among freedom of speech and human rights advocates. In Singapore, the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act of 2019 (or POFMA) enables officials to demand that corrections or fact-checks be issued by media or online pages and accounts who have published content deemed to misrepresent facts or that the content be taken down (Government of Singapore, 2019<sup>[102]</sup>). Interviews with officials have caveated that this legislation is intended for egregious cases and that its aim is to ensure that audiences are exposed to different facts and narratives.<sup>39</sup> In Thailand and Malaysia, recent laws have been introduced that restrict speech deemed to constitute misinformation or disinformation. These provisions can be used to request that content is taken down and social media accounts blocked, with potential for criminal prosecution and prison sentences for those who are found in breach of the laws (Natalegawa, 2021<sup>[103]</sup>).

While the real-world repercussions of mis- and disinformation around COVID-19 inspired increased government efforts to curb mis- and disinformation, observers have warned of the danger for abuse that these laws engender. Indeed, accounts of anti-disinformation laws abuses to suppress dissenting voices or restrict media freedoms have been proliferating across the region (Natalegawa, 2021<sup>[103]</sup>; Sombatpoonsiri and Mahapatra, 2021<sup>[104]</sup>).

For this reason, it is important that any efforts on content moderation online are proportionate, transparent and compatible with the respect of freedoms of expression. In South Korea, a transparent approach to

---

<sup>38</sup> Based on OECD fact-finding interview with Ministry of Communication and Multimedia representatives, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Based on OECD fact-finding interview with Ministry of Communication and Information representatives, 2021.

content moderation has been adopted during the pandemic to strive for a balance between freedoms and risks when moderating problematic online speech on the virus, subject to transparent scrutiny (Box 3.3). SEA governments would similarly benefit from ensuring that content moderation policies are applied with caution and open their enforcement to scrutiny by stakeholders to ensure they do not become means for curbing free speech.

#### Box 4.4. South Korea's COVID-19 infodemic management

Faced with the infodemic on COVID-19, the South Korean government has taken a range of proactive and reactive measures to contain its spread, grounded in public communication and content moderation actions.

A dedicated Cyber Countermeasure Situation Centre was set up by the Cyber Bureau of the Korean National Police Agency in co-operation with the Central Disease Control Headquarters, the Central Disaster Management Headquarters, and the Korea Communications Commission. Under its auspices, the Cyber Bureau instructed its forces to conduct monitoring for mis- and disinformation online in order to moderate and take down problematic content.

Under this policy, content that can qualify for deletion or suppression is circumscribed to specific categories to ensure that this measure does not infringe on freedom of expression, namely: “groundless claims about the disease, defamation of COVID-19 patients, leakage of personally identifiable information, and business interruption led by misleading information about hospital closures.” Any content consisting of expressions of opinions or doubts, including any criticisms of government policy, are exempted from moderation. Clear and legitimate boundaries, combined with transparency that allows for scrutiny over their application, can thus facilitate the moderation of mis- and disinformation in a balanced way that reduces scope for abuse.

In addition to these efforts, public communicators worked with major social media and web platforms to ensure that links to disclaimers and official sources was visible across their pages.

Source: All about Korea's Response to COVID-19 (2020)  
[https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m\\_22591/view.do?seq=35&srchFr=&srchTo=&srchWord=&srchTp=&multi\\_itm\\_seq=0&itm\\_seq\\_1=0&itm\\_seq\\_2=0&company\\_cd=&company\\_nm=&page=1&titleNm=](https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_22591/view.do?seq=35&srchFr=&srchTo=&srchWord=&srchTp=&multi_itm_seq=0&itm_seq_1=0&itm_seq_2=0&company_cd=&company_nm=&page=1&titleNm=)

In sum, the response to COVID-19 and the subsequent vaccination drive have demonstrated the potential for the governments of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand to devise and deliver effective communications to support policy objectives. As interviews conducted for this paper confirmed, in the four SEA countries the transition towards a strategic model of public communication, as defined in Chapter 3 is underway since before the pandemic.

Governments have been strengthening their capacity for communication while keeping up with transformations in the way their citizens consume news and information. On their part, the four countries have been expanding their activities away from a significant reliance on state media, often managed by the same ministries that house the communication function. In parallel, they have adopted more engagement-oriented approaches, but often without adequate strategies or enabling tools to make them core to communication.

In some contexts, such as the Indonesian one,<sup>40</sup> the pandemic acted as a catalyst for the uptake of whole-of-government co-ordination mechanisms and advanced competencies that had previously been sporadic.

<sup>40</sup> Based on OECD fact-finding interview with Kominfo representatives, 2021.

As such, the experiences of dealing with COVID-19 in these SEA countries, similarly to the rest of the world, can serve as a blueprint for prioritising reforms that can consolidate good practices and a more strategic role for communication in government. These priorities for public communication reform are discussed in the following section.

## Towards more evidence-based communication in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand

A key priority to consolidate a shift to a strategic model of communication, and to reinforce its role in government across the four SEA countries, will be to make the function more evidence-based. This will be instrumental to ensure it supports policy objectives beyond the context of COVID-19 as well as to harness the power of data and insights for greater responsiveness and inclusiveness. Without the evidence to back them, communication activities will otherwise remain speculative and distant from concrete goals.

The use of data and insights on audiences is valued across each of the countries in the study, as emphasised in OECD interviews with practitioners in the four governments. The resources and practices that support it, however, highlight potential for integrating newer technologies and advanced methods to make insights and measurement more precise and frequent. Communicators in these countries, instead, often tend to rely mainly on traditional methods to inform and measure their activities, which in turn affects how effective these are.

This point is also mirrored in the broader trends that come out of the Asia Pacific Communications Monitor survey from 2020-21. Most communicators in the region and across sectors rank competencies across data and technology as key ones, yet less than half consider having the necessary skills in these areas, as elaborated further below (Macnamara et al., 2021<sup>[83]</sup>). This finding is even more pronounced among government communicators and poses a structural obstacle to seizing the opportunities of innovation in the practice.

For example, all governments noted using basic demographic and geographic audience segmentation in their communication, with particular attention to the minority languages and digital access of various groups. This is an important method of developing tailored communications that was also noted in Chapter 2. All four countries of this study, indeed, use broad insights on the population to inform the choice of channels and adaptation of content to be inclusive, as illustrated above. However, this audience segmentation along demographic lines could be combined with measurement and evaluation to ensure that such tailoring is effective and that vast resources invested in translation or co-ordination of local messengers, for example, are well used. This practice remains rare among the countries in this study.

Recent practices point to the increase in monitoring and evaluations of communication. The Thai Public Relations Department (PRD) has conducted an exercise to this end, to survey the public on their perceptions of government communications and their preferences in this domain. The dedicated Research and Development unit of the PRD, led this nation-wide qualitative assessment to identify communication preference of Thai citizens.<sup>41</sup> For example, 25% of respondents demanded more informal language and greater use of local dialects in official communications to make it more accessible. Slightly lower shares

---

<sup>41</sup> Based on OECD fact-finding interview with Public Relations Department representatives, 2021. Survey results in Thai are available at <https://plan.prd.go.th/th/content/category/detail/id/15/iid/39249> (accessed on 1 June 2022).

instead demanded more rapid provision of information, a more modern style of communication, informal and “entertaining” content and trustworthy communication.<sup>42</sup>

The Department likewise engages local universities to evaluate its campaigns ex-post.<sup>43</sup> Similar research is also routinely conducted by Singapore’s MCI, which evaluates whole-of-government communications including the effectiveness of government agencies’ digital presence and the use of feedback channels on government platforms. The research also helped to inform audience segmentation and ways to improve messages and initiatives.<sup>44</sup>

The limitation with drawing uniquely on demographic data for insights on the public is that these can often be superficial and infrequent, and do not capture nuanced attitudes of the public on specific issues. Consequently, more and more countries in the region are building capacity for surveying citizens and conducting social listening on digital platforms to aggregate timely insights on public sentiment and trending topics.

For example, the PRD in Thailand conducts listening primarily across government Facebook pages, at the national and sub-national levels, and other key media and channels. Due to the high usage levels of the platform, Facebook is deemed the best one to source insights. However, communicators from the PRD noted that this analysis is conducted manually by staff reading individual user comments and assessing their tone and sentiment.<sup>45</sup> This method raises issues of consistency, since different individuals in the PRD rely on subjective criteria to classify sentiment in the absence of standardised ones. As noted in the first section of this paper, automation and technologies like text mining are becoming more common to speed up these types of tasks and reduce their resource-intensity, while offering increasing levels of accuracy. In Thailand, as in other countries, tools and algorithms trained on local languages are still being developed and improved and do not yet offer full alternatives to manual research.<sup>46</sup>

However, in some cases social listening that relies on digital platforms that are open to analyse (which notably exclude direct messaging apps) can be limiting where these are not widely used to discuss current and social affairs. This was emphasised by Indonesian communicators, who conduct social listening online but tend not to rely on it too much due to low accuracy.<sup>47</sup> Hence, surveys, polls and focus groups, although costlier, less frequent and time-intensive, remain the preferred methods for gathering evidence to shape public communication in the countries of this study. However, combining traditional and new methods of insights gathering can therefore be useful to obtain some low-cost rapid insights, while continuing to benefit from the depth of surveys for more strategic analysis.

The approaches and examples presented above highlight that a positive effort to integrate evidence and data into the practice of public communication is underway. The surveys and listening conducted throughout the previous two years of COVID-19 communications played a role in making communications more effective to keep people healthy and mitigate the effects of mis- and disinformation. These SEA governments’ efforts towards inclusiveness, discussed in the previous section are likewise also notable and relied on a good understanding of how to overcome barriers to reaching even the hardest audiences in society. These examples point to competencies and approaches to consolidate in the aftermath of the

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Based on OECD fact-finding interview with Public Relations Department representatives, 2021.

<sup>44</sup> Based on OECD fact-finding interview with Ministry of Communications and Information representatives, 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Based on OECD fact-finding interview with Public Relations Department representatives, 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Based on OECD fact-finding interview with Public Relations Department representatives, 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Based on OECD fact-finding interview with Kominfo representatives, 2021.

crisis, along with a focus on channelling them towards a more strategic role for communication in government.

### ***From insights and listening for communications to dialogue and citizen engagement for policy***

Notwithstanding some positive examples, across all four countries there is scope to close the loop between policy and communication by improving how the listening and insights gathering by communicators described above feeds into decision-making. Most importantly, closing this loop can enable a two-way communication and facilitate the integration of citizens' views at all stages of the policy cycle (OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>).

In Singapore and Malaysia public surveys are integrated with policy decisions as communicators are tasked with providing public insights beyond communication purposes. This is how the MCI in Singapore, for instance, supports opinion gathering and message testing for the whole-of-government. By working closely with government agencies, it assesses how policies and initiatives resonate with various segments of the population. These insights are then used both to better integrate citizens' preferences into policies, as well as to frame them effectively in the communications around them. Similarly, Malaysia's MCMM, via its Jabatan Penerangan (JaPen) communications office, conducts regular surveys to identify citizens' awareness of, or attitudes towards, issues and policies adopted by the government to inform future decision-making.

In other contexts, however, this feedback loop is limited to the communication function itself. For example, communicators from Thailand noted that although PRD-led social listening reveals useful information for policymakers on citizens' preferences, they often lack the means to feed this information to decision-makers outside the Department.<sup>48</sup> To place these cases in a broader context, research across the Asia Pacific region has found that other countries similarly continue to see more emphasis on the dissemination of information than on two-way communication (Macnamara et al., 2021<sup>[83]</sup>).

Despite this, the analysis of data on public discourse, sentiment and opinions can give way to dialogue and to more ambitious public engagement as a strategic goal of public communication. Singapore offers a good example of leveraging a variety of online and offline communication channels for citizen engagement, as illustrated in Box 4.1. This case demonstrates how social media and digital platforms are useful avenues for citizens to participate and interact with policy debates. However, their successful use requires sufficient capacity and the adoption of innovations that can make it more efficient.

Like their counterparts across the OECD, these SEA governments have an opportunity to leverage the communication function to support greater citizen participation. Beyond making it more responsive, this means opening up channels where citizens can voice feedback and preferences, and have their inputs acknowledged. This is also instrumental to building public trust in government, which a third of the region's practitioners rated as a top strategic issue, according to the Asia Pacific Communication Monitor survey (Macnamara et al., 2021<sup>[83]</sup>).

---

<sup>48</sup> Based on OECD fact-finding interview with Public Relations Department representatives, 2021.

#### Box 4.5. REACH citizen engagement unit in Singapore

Singapore has been conducting efforts to integrate public feedback in government decision-making since 1985 with the creation of the then-called Feedback Unit. Since then, efforts have evolved in particular to expand to a range of digital platforms for “e-engagement”.

Renamed REACH, which stands for Reaching Everyone for Active Citizenry @ Home, the unit has since moved beyond gathering and analysing public opinion and feedback, to provide opportunities for citizens to weigh in on a range of national issues and policies to inform decision-making.

To ensure ease of participation and maximise the channels through which citizens can contribute, REACH is present across channels from email, a dedicated WhatsApp chat and handles on major social media platforms. For in-person engagement, it organises public forums and dialogues and well as holding itinerant “listening points”.

During the pandemic, REACH sought to engage communities directly impacted by the pandemic. REACH worked with partners, such as mobile tech applications foodpanda and Grab, social service organisations, and industry associations to engage healthcare professionals, public transport workers, food delivery riders, teachers, parents, and students. The feedback is channelled directly to the government agencies concerned in formulating both communications initiatives and policies through the pandemic.

Source: <https://www.reach.gov.sg/About-Us/About-Reach>; Based on information provided by MCI to the OECD Secretariat, 2022.

### Professionalisation, specialisation and ethical standards: areas of intervention for building an impactful communication function

The professionalisation of the function and the mainstreaming of more advanced competencies remain an objective to attain across the four SEA countries like in many OECD ones. In these countries, communication offices are often staffed by civil servants without specific communications training, as revealed in OECD interviews. Instead, one of the more common professional and educational backgrounds among communicators tends to be journalism. This is frequently found across OECD members as well and reflects the legacy of the communication function being more or less synonymous with the press office (OECD, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>).

Digital competencies emerged as front of mind in fact-finding interviews with the four countries when discussing professionalization and capacity. This finding is echoed in the Asia Pacific Communication Monitor, which showed that “coping with the digital evolution and the social web” and “using big data and/or algorithms for communication” were the top two strategic issues for 40% and 36% of government communicators respectively, as illustrated in Figure 4.1 above (Macnamara et al., 2021<sup>[83]</sup>).

Familiarity and competencies are at the source of concern with digital technologies. The survey found that technology and data were the most “under-skilled” competency areas among communicators from all sectors, with notable gaps between their perceived importance and the self-rated proficiency of respondents in the same areas (Macnamara et al., 2021<sup>[83]</sup>). Four fifths of communicators from the Asia Pacific region indeed highlighted the need to improve competencies across the board, including over 80% of those surveyed in Singapore and Malaysia. This finding is consistent with takeaways from OECD fact-finding interviews, where training in social media, and digital more broadly, was often quoted as a key priority. In the absence of internal capacity, technically advanced tasks therefore tend to be outsourced to external agencies.

As noted in Chapter 3, investing in training and capacity building on specialised data and digital competencies is a vital step for creating a modern and impactful communication function. In parallel, there is an opportunity to support the mainstreaming of digital literacy and essential skills, by integrating them more explicitly in national plans and strategies for digital government. For instance, the government of Thailand's Digital Government Development Plans aims to build up capacity in the public sector to manage data, information and feedback. This is tied to its objective to better communicate with citizens and other stakeholders throughout the policy and service cycles, among other goals (OECD, 2022<sup>[96]</sup>).

Another notable gap in the group of SEA countries' public communication is evidence drawn from behavioural science methods. With the exception of Singapore, where relevant expertise is included within the MCI, communicators often pursue communications aimed at behaviour changes among the public without embedding BI or methods for evaluating interventions from a behavioural standpoint. For instance, Thailand's PRD noted a big anti-corruption campaign it had conducted featured behavioural elements, but was not designed and tested based on experiments of the kind illustrated above.<sup>49</sup> Whereas the body of evidence in the field of BI specific to the local languages and cultures of the four countries is still emerging, piloting and experimenting with these methods in communication can be a way to identify the necessary adjustments and opportunities it can offer in the region.

However, a lack of specialists and expertise accessible to communicators is one of the key factors behind this limited use of BI. Although across other parts of the government such expertise is generally in place, in the four SEA countries their presence does not translate into regular co-operation in the public communication domain. The work of BI specialists is not always associated with communications and, with the exception of the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents noted that it was rare for behavioural scientists to contribute to this function. This could be partly a product of the relative novelty of these units, the remit that they are given at the outset, or potentially the result of silos that can often exist in government.

Still, the existence of units provide various opportunities for co-operation and collaboration. For example, the Malaysia Productivity Corporation (MPC), a public body for productivity and competitiveness in the Ministry of Trade and Investment (MITI), has been leading an important effort for government-wide integration of BI applied to policy design and delivery practices via their 2021 National Policy on Good Regulatory Practices, to their policy area, and collaborating with various ministries and agencies to implement BI initiatives (Malaysia Productivity Corporation, 2021<sup>[105]</sup>). As they develop expertise and capacity, units like the MPC can serve as important partners to help support, co-ordinate and co-operate in the application of BI to communications in their respective governments.

Finally, the professionalization of communication, particularly when it concerns the application of certain technologies and methods, must be accompanied with adequate measures to ensure its ethical conduct. As discussed in Chapter 3, this is an essential precondition to embracing innovations if the goal is to foster a constructive dialogue with citizens and build trust.

In this regard, the prevalence in perceptions of ethical challenges highlighted in the previous chapter is common across the Asia Pacific region (Macnamara et al., 2021<sup>[83]</sup>). The Asia Pacific Monitor survey, which includes the SEA countries that are the focus of his study, shows that 52% of government communicators faced more than one ethical challenge in their regular work. The figure rose above 60% in Indonesia and Malaysia, for example, highlighting the pervasiveness of these issues in some countries (Macnamara et al., 2021<sup>[83]</sup>).<sup>50</sup> Likewise, as much as 75% of cross-sector communicators from the region reported ethical concerns with the use of bots and Big Data analysis specifically (Macnamara et al., 2021<sup>[83]</sup>).

---

<sup>49</sup> Based on OECD fact-finding interview with Public Relations Department representatives, 2021.

<sup>50</sup> These figures, however, encompass responses from communicators across all sectors not only government.

For example, data privacy is one of the elements across several SEA countries where ethical guidance and transparency can be enhanced. In particular, the development of COVID-19 dashboards and contact-tracing tools in some SEA countries have raised privacy concerns among observers (Clavier and Ghesquiere, 2021<sup>[13]</sup>). Whereas these tools and apps often gather quite sensitive and granular data, they were found in a recent review by the World Bank to seldom include privacy policies or statements detailing the data being collected and their intended use (Clavier and Ghesquiere, 2021<sup>[13]</sup>).

Keeping in mind cultural and contextual differences, governments in the SEA region could look to advance their ethical guidelines by looking at regional and international good practices, for instance through international professional associations and multilateral organisations. By doing so, they can take advantage of the learnings and experiences of peers that have more mature communication functions, and adapt them to the local context. In doing so, they may also be able to anticipate needs for guidance as part of wider efforts to professionalise and institutionalise their communications.

# References

- Abidin, C. et al. (2020), "Influencers and COVID-19: reviewing key issues in press coverage across Australia, China, Japan, and South Korea", *Media International Australia*, Vol. 178/1, pp. 114-135, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X20959838>. [45]
- Abu-Akel, A., A. Spitz and R. West (2021), "The effect of spokesperson attribution on public health message sharing during the COVID-19 pandemic", *PLoS ONE*, Vol. 16/2, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0245100>. [49]
- Ahmadi, A. and E. Chan (2020), *Online influencers have become powerful vectors in promoting false information and conspiracy theories*, <https://firstdraftnews.org/articles/influencers-vectors-misinformation/> (accessed on 3 November 2021). [43]
- Aiken, A. (2018), *Alex Aiken introduces the Rapid Response Unit*, <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20200203104056/https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/news/alex-aiken-introduces-the-rapid-response-unit/> (accessed on 5 January 2022). [32]
- Banerjee, A. and D. Nunan (2019), *Availability bias*, <https://catalogofbias.org/biases/availability-bias/>. [61]
- Basu, M. (2020), *Exclusive: How Singapore sends daily Whatsapp updates on coronavirus*, <https://govinsider.asia/innovation/singapore-coronavirus-whatsapp-covid19-open-government-products-govtech/> (accessed on 28 February 2022). [98]
- Breza, E. et al. (2021), "Effects of a large-scale social media advertising campaign on holiday travel and COVID-19 infections: a cluster randomized controlled trial", *Nature Medicine*, Vol. 27/9, pp. 1622-1628, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-021-01487-3>. [77]
- Broadband Commission (2020), *Balancing Act: Countering Digital Disinformation while respecting Freedom of Expression*, ITU/UNESCO, <https://www.broadbandcommission.org/publication/balancing-act-countering-digital-disinformation/>. [100]
- Caballero-Anthony, M. (2021), *COVID-19 in Southeast Asia: Regional pandemic preparedness matters*, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/01/14/covid-19-in-southeast-asia-regional-pandemic-preparedness-matters/> (accessed on 3 November 2021). [11]
- Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (2021), *COVID-19 Vaccine Equity for Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups*, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/vaccine-equity.html> (accessed on 24 January 2022). [51]

- Chan et al. (2017), “Debunking: A Meta-Analysis of the Psychological Efficacy of Messages Countering Misinformation”, *Psychol Sci*, Vol. 28/11, pp. 1531–1546, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797617714579>. [65]
- Clavier, F. and F. Ghesquiere (2021), *Leveraging Digital Solutions to Fight COVID-19: Lessons from ASEAN Countries*, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/35126/Leveraging-Digital-Solutions-to-Fight-COVID-19-Lessons-from-ASEAN-Countries.pdf?sequence=1> (accessed on 14 February 2022). [13]
- CNA (2021), *Commentary: Does Singapore have to resort to 'slapstick and Singlish' to get public messages across?*, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/singapore-phua-chu-kang-advertisement-vaccination-covid-19-1969851>. [47]
- Dai, H. et al. (2021), “Behavioural nudges increase COVID-19 vaccinations”, *Nature Medicine*, Vol. 597, pp. 404-409, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-021-03843-2>. [76]
- De Mauro, A., M. Greco and M. Grimaldi (2016), “A formal definition of Big Data based on its essential features”, *Library Review*, Vol. 65/3, pp. 122-135, <https://doi.org/10.1108/LR-06-2015-0061>. [27]
- Donovan, J. (2020), *The Life Cycle of Media Manipulation - The Verification Handbook 3*, <https://datajournalism.com/read/handbook/verification-3/investigating-disinformation-and-media-manipulation/the-lifecycle-of-media-manipulation>. [64]
- Drummond, J., D. Shephard and D. Trnka (2021), *Behavioural Insight and Regulatory Governance : Opportunities and Challenges*, OECD Publishing, [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/behavioural-insight-and-regulatory-governance\\_ee46b4af-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/behavioural-insight-and-regulatory-governance_ee46b4af-en). [56]
- Dutch National Institute for Public Health and Environment (2022), *Applying behavioural science to COVID-19*, <https://www.rivm.nl/en/coronavirus-covid-19/research/behaviour>. [74]
- European Parliament (2022), *Digital Services Act: regulating platforms for a safer online space for users*, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220114IPR21017/digital-services-act-regulating-platforms-for-a-safer-online-space-for-users> (accessed on 28 February 2022). [101]
- European Union (2021), , <https://futureu.europa.eu/?locale=en> (accessed on 10 January 2022). [36]
- Fletcher, R. et al. (2020), *Information inequality in the UK coronavirus communications crisis*, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/information-inequality-uk-coronavirus-communications-crisis#sub5>. [26]
- Furnham, A. and H. Boo (2011), “A literature review of the anchoring effect”, *The Journal of Socio-Economics*, Vol. 40/1, pp. 35-42, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socec.2010.10.008>. [59]
- G20/OECD (2021), *G20 Compendium on the use of digital tools for public service continuity*, <https://assets.innovazione.gov.it/1628073696-g20detfoecdcompendiumdigitaltools.pdf>. [95]
- Garcia, L. and T. Shane (2021), *A guide to prebunking: a promising way to inoculate against misinformation*, [https://firstdraftnews.org/articles/a-guide-to-prebunking-a-promising-way-to-inoculate-against-misinformation/?mc\\_cid=244c5eba4d&mc\\_eid=be43181caa](https://firstdraftnews.org/articles/a-guide-to-prebunking-a-promising-way-to-inoculate-against-misinformation/?mc_cid=244c5eba4d&mc_eid=be43181caa). [71]

- Goot, E. (2016), *Competence Centre Text Mining and Analysis*, [33]  
[https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/sites/default/files/20161213-cc-text-mining-vandergoot\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/sites/default/files/20161213-cc-text-mining-vandergoot_en.pdf)  
 (accessed on 10 January 2022).
- GOV.UK (2020), *Guidance: Data Ethics Framework*, [89]  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/data-ethics-framework#full-publication-update-history>.
- Government of Singapore (2019), *Protection From Online Falsehoods And Manipulation Act 2019*, [102]  
<https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Acts-Supp/18-2019> (accessed on 28 February 2022).
- Guadagno, R. et al. (2013), "Social Influence Online: The Impact of Social Validation and Likability on Compliance", *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, Vol. 2, pp. 51-60, [62]  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0030592>.
- Hagelstein, J., S. Einwiller and A. Zerfass (2021), "The ethical dimension of public relations in Europe: Digital channels, moral challenges, resources, and training", *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 47/4, [4]  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2021.1>.
- Hallsworth, M. and M. Egan (2018), *The Illusion of Similarity*, [72]  
<https://www.bi.team/blogs/the-illusion-of-similarity/> (accessed on February 2022).
- Hallsworth, M. et al. (2018), *Behavioural Government - Using behavioural science to improve how governments make decisions*, [73]  
<https://www.bi.team/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/BIT-Behavioural-Government-Report-2018.pdf>.
- Hao, K. (2021), *The Facebook whistleblower says its algorithms are dangerous. Here's why.*, [63]  
<https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/10/05/1036519/facebook-whistleblower-frances-haugen-algorithms/> (accessed on 28 February 2022).
- He, W. and I. Li (2020), *The 'Crisis' in Coronavirus Crisis Communications: Southeast Asia and the Contest of Narratives*, [93]  
<https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/crisis-coronavirus-crisis-communications-southeast-asia-and-contest-narratives> (accessed on 10 February 2022).
- HM Government (2021), *Government report shows improving vaccine confidence among ethnic minority groups*, [52]  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-report-shows-improving-vaccine-confidence-among-ethnic-minority-groups> (accessed on 24 January 2022).
- Holtzhausen, D. (2016), "Datafication: threat or opportunity for communication in the public sphere?", *Journal of Communication Management*, Vol. 20/1, pp. 21-36, [39]  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-12-2014-0082>.
- Horrigan, B. (2016), *Information Overload*, [21]  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2016/12/07/information-overload/> (accessed on 28 October 2021).
- Impact Canada (2022), *COSMO Canada*, [75]  
<https://impact.canada.ca/en/cosmo-canada>.
- Ingram, D. (2020), *Twitter launches 'pre-bunks' to get ahead of voting misinformation*, [69]  
<https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/twitter-launches-pre-bunks-get-ahead-voting-misinformation-n1244777> (accessed on 28 February 2022).

- Jensen, K. and R. Helles (2016), "Speaking into the system: Social media and many-to-one communication", *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 32/1, pp. 16-25, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323116682805>. [41]
- Johnston, K. and A. Lane (2021), "Communication with intent: A typology of communicative interaction in engagement", *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 47/1, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2020.101925>. [19]
- Joint Research Centre (2016), *JRC Publications Repository - Behavioural Insights Applied to Policy - Country Overviews 2016*, <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC100547>. [78]
- Kambli, N. et al. (2021), *Rapid review of international evidence on Covid-19 communication and public engagement*, <https://www.rsecovidcommission.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/InternationalReview-DemSocReport-Final.pdf>. [12]
- Lewandowsky, S. and et al. (2020), *The Debunking Handbook 2020*, <https://sks.to/db2020>. [66]
- Lewandowsky, S. et al. (2020), *JRC Science for Policy Report: Technology and Democracy - Understanding the influence of online technologies on political behaviour and decision-making*. [25]
- Lewsey, F. (2021), *Cambridge game 'pre-bunks' Coronavirus conspiracies*, <https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/goviral>. [70]
- Macmillan, C. (2021), *Analysing Contributions to the Conference on the Future of Europe - Presentation*, [https://cor.europa.eu/europcom/2021/Documents/Workshop\\_Digitalisation\\_09.11.2021\\_%20Macmillan%20Charles.pdf](https://cor.europa.eu/europcom/2021/Documents/Workshop_Digitalisation_09.11.2021_%20Macmillan%20Charles.pdf) (accessed on 10 January 2022). [37]
- Macnamara, J. (2017), *Creating a 'democracy for everyone': Strategies for increasing listening and engagement by government*, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/assets/documents/research/2017/MacnamaraReport2017.pdf>. [18]
- Macnamara, J. (2015), *Creating an 'architecture of listening' in organizations: The basis of engagement, trust, healthy democracy, social equity, and business sustainability*, University of Technology Sydney, <https://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/fass-organizational-listening-report.pdf?no-cache>. [38]
- Macnamara, J. et al. (2021), *Asia-Pacific Communication Monitor 2020/21. Strategic issues, competency development, ethical challenges and gender equality in the communication profession*, APACD, EUPRERA, <http://www.communicationmonitor.asia/media/APCM-2020-21-Report.pdf>. [83]
- Malaysia Productivity Corporation (2021), *MPC calls for adopting behavioural insights in government policies (Press Release)*, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/announcement/562420> (accessed on 28 February 2022). [105]
- Ministry of Communication and Information (2021), *MCI's response to PQ on impact of change in WhatsApp's privacy policy on Government communications*, <https://www.mci.gov.sg/pressroom/news-and-stories/pressroom/2021/2/mci-response-to-pq-on-impact-of-change-in-whatsapp-privacy-policy-on-govt-comms> (accessed on 28 February 2022). [97]

- Ministry of Finance (2020), *Summary of the 2020 dialogues*, [35]  
<https://avoinhallinto.fi/assets/files/2021/01/Lockdown-Dialogues-summary-of-2020.pdf>  
 (accessed on 10 January 2022).
- Natalegawa, A. (2021), *Fake News Crackdowns Do Damage Across Southeast Asia During Pandemic*, [103]  
<https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/fake-news-crackdowns-do-damage-across-southeast-asia-during-pandemic> (accessed on 28 February 2022).
- NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (2021), *Fact-checking and debunking: a best practice guide to dealing with disinformation*, NATO, [67]  
[https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/nato\\_stratcom\\_coe\\_fact-checking\\_and\\_debunking\\_02-02-2021-1.pdf](https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/nato_stratcom_coe_fact-checking_and_debunking_02-02-2021-1.pdf).
- Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (2022), *Behavioural Insights Units*, <https://oecd-opsi.org/bi-units/> (accessed on 2022). [79]
- OECD (2022), *Open and Connected Government Review of Thailand*, OECD Public Governance Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/e1593a0c-en>. [96]
- OECD (2022), *Principles of Good Practice for Public Communication Responses to Mis- and Disinformation*, OECD Publishing. [60]
- OECD (2021), *Good Practice Principles for Data Ethics in the Public Sector*, OECD Publishing, [88]  
<https://www.oecd.org/digital/digital-government/good-practice-principles-for-data-ethics-in-the-public-sector.htm>.
- OECD (2021), *Government at a Glance 2021*, OECD Publishing, Paris, [42]  
<https://doi.org/10.1787/1c258f55-en>.
- OECD (2021), *Inclusive Growth*, <https://www.oecd.org/inclusive-growth/#introduction> (accessed on 3 November 2021). [16]
- OECD (2021), *OECD Report on Public Communication: The Global Context and the Way Forward*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/22f8031c-en>. [3]
- OECD (2021), *Recommendation of the Council for Agile Regulatory Governance to Harness Innovation*, <https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-0464>. [82]
- OECD (2021), *Recommendation of the Council on Enhancing Access to and Sharing of Data [OECD/LEGAL/0463]*, <https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-0463>. [9]
- OECD (2021), *The E-Leaders Handbook on the Governance of Digital Government*, OECD Digital Government Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/ac7f2531-en>. [15]
- OECD (2021), “The OECD Framework for digital talent and skills in the public sector”, *OECD Working Papers on Public Governance*, No. 45, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/4e7c3f58-en>. [6]
- OECD (2020), *Building resilience to the Covid-19 pandemic: the role of centres of government*, OECD Publishing, <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/building-resilience-to-the-covid-19-pandemic-the-role-of-centres-of-government-883d2961/#blocknotes-d7e2104>. [1]
- OECD (2020), “Digital Government Index: 2019 results”, *OECD Public Governance Policy Papers*, No. 03, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/4de9f5bb-en>. [24]

- OECD (2020), *Governance responses to disinformation: How open government principles can inform policy options*, OECD Publishing, <https://www.oecd.org/gov/governance-responses-to-disinformation-d6237c85-en.htm>. [99]
- OECD (2020), *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/339306da-en>. [34]
- OECD (2020), *OECD Reviews of Public Health: Korea: A Healthier Tomorrow*, OECD Reviews of Public Health, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/be2b7063-en>. [94]
- OECD (2020), "Open, Useful and Re-usable data (OURdata) Index: 2019", *OECD Public Governance Policy Papers* No. 1, <https://doi.org/10.1787/45f6de2d-en>. [23]
- OECD (2020), *Regulatory policy and COVID-19: Behavioural insights for fast-paced decision making*, OECD Publications, <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/regulatory-policy-and-covid-19-behavioural-insights-for-fast-paced-decision-making-7a521805/#section-d1e637>. [80]
- OECD (2020), "The OECD Digital Government Policy Framework: Six dimensions of a Digital Government", *OECD Public Governance Policy Papers*, No. 02, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/f64fed2a-en>. [10]
- OECD (2020), *Transparency, communication and trust : The role of public communication in responding to the wave of disinformation about the new Coronavirus*, OECD Publishing, <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/transparency-communication-and-trust-bef7ad6e/>. [2]
- OECD (2019), *Artificial Intelligence in Society*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/eedfee77-en>. [86]
- OECD (2019), *OECD Artificial Intelligence Principles*, <https://oecd.ai/en/ai-principles>. [92]
- OECD (2019), *Tools and Ethics for Applied Behavioural Insights: The BASIC Toolkit*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9ea76a8f-en>. [53]
- OECD (2017), *Behavioural Insights and Public Policy: Lessons from Around the World*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264270480-en>. [84]
- OECD (2017), *Recommendation of the Council on Open Government [OECD/LEGAL/0438]*, <https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-0438>. [7]
- OECD (2017), *Trust and Public Policy: How Better Governance Can Help Rebuild Public Trust*, OECD Public Governance Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264268920-en>. [20]
- OECD (2014), *Recommendation of the Council on Digital Government Strategies [OECD/LEGAL/0406]*, <https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-0406>. [8]
- OECD (2013), *Recommendation of the Council concerning Guidelines Governing the Protection of Privacy and Transborder Flows of Personal Data*, <https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-0188>. [91]
- OECD (Forthcoming), *OECD Principles and Best Practices for the Ethical Application of Behavioural Insights in Public Policy*, OECD Publishing. [90]

- OECD and The GovLab (2021), *Open Data in action Initiatives during the initial stage of the COVID19 pandemic*, OECD Publishing, <https://www.oecd.org/gov/digital-government/opendata-in-action-initiatives-during-the-initial-stage-of-the-covid-19-pandemic.pdf>. [31]
- OECD/ADB (2019), *Government at a Glance Southeast Asia 2019*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264305915-en>. [14]
- Osaki, T. (2020), *Let's discuss Hikakin and Yuriko Koike* |, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2020/04/21/language/lets-discuss-hikakin-yuriko-koike/> (accessed on 17 January 2022). [46]
- Pham, M. (2007), "Emotion and Rationality: A Critical Review and Interpretation of Empirical Evidence", *Review of General Psychology*, Vol. 11/2, pp. 155–178, <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.11.2.155>. [55]
- Rahman, G. (2021), *The government spent £63,000 on influencer marketing for Test and Trace*, <https://fullfact.org/online/influencer-test-and-trace/> (accessed on 17 January 2022). [48]
- Reuters Institute (2021), *Digital News Report 2021*, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021>. [40]
- Revlon-Chion, E., E. Bolat and Y. Liang (2020), *Instant Buying of Fast Fashion: Are Influencers to Blame? Working Paper*, Bournemouth University. [44]
- Roozenbeek, J. and S. van der Linden (2021), *Don't Just Debunk, Prebunk: Inoculate Yourself Against Digital Misinformation*, <https://www.spsp.org/news-center/blog/roozenbeek-van-der-linden-resisting-digital-misinformation>. [68]
- Sanders, K. and M. Canel (eds.) (2013), "Government communication in 15 countries: Themes and challenges", *Government Communication - Cases and Challenges*, No. 16, Bloomsbury Publishing, <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/government-communication-9781849666121/>. [17]
- Shahbaznezhad, H., R. Dolan and M. Rashidirad (2021), "The Role of Social Media Content Format and Platform in Users' Engagement Behavior", *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, Vol. 53/1, pp. 47–65, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2020.05.001>. [54]
- Sharot, T. (2011), "The optimism bias", *Current Biology*, Vol. 21/23, pp. R941-R945, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2011.10.030>. [58]
- Sombatpoonsiri, J. and S. Mahapatra (2021), *COVID-19 Intensifies Digital Repression in South and Southeast Asia*, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/10/19/covid-19-intensifies-digital-repression-in-south-and-southeast-asia-pub-85507> (accessed on 28 February 2022). [104]
- Sweller, J. (1988), "Cognitive Load During Problem Solving: Effects on Learning", *Cognitive Science*, Vol. 12, pp. 257–85. [57]
- Tworek, H., I. Beacock and E. Ojo (2020), *Democratic Health Communications during Covid-19: A RAPID Response*, UBC Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions, [https://democracy2017.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2020/09/Democratic-Health-Communication-during-Covid\\_FINAL.pdf](https://democracy2017.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2020/09/Democratic-Health-Communication-during-Covid_FINAL.pdf). [30]

- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2021), *Confronting Health Misinformation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on Building a Healthy Information Environment*, <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-misinformation-advisory.pdf>. [50]
- White, C. and B. Boatwright (2020), "Social media ethics in the data economy: Issues of social responsibility for using Facebook for public relations", *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 46/5, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2020.101980>. [87]
- Wiencierz, C. and U. Röttger (2019), "Big Data in Public Relations: A Conceptual Framework", *Public Relations Journal*, Vol. 12/3, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333220279\\_Big\\_Data\\_in\\_Public\\_Relations\\_A\\_Conceptual\\_Framework](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333220279_Big_Data_in_Public_Relations_A_Conceptual_Framework). [29]
- Wiesenberg, M., A. Zerfass and A. Moreno (2017), "Big Data and Automation in Strategic Communication", *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, Vol. 11/2, pp. 95-114, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2017.1285770>. [5]
- WPP Government & Public Sector Practice (2016), *The Leaders' Report: The future of government communication*, WPP Government & Public Sector Practice, <https://govtpracticewpp.com/report/the-leaders-report-the-future-of-government-communication-2/> (accessed on 23 February 2021). [81]
- Zerfass, A., J. Hagelstein and R. Tench (2020), "Artificial intelligence in communication management: a cross-national study on adoption and knowledge, impact, challenges and risks", *Journal of Communication Management*, Vol. 24/4, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-10-2019-0137>. [22]
- Zerfass, A. et al. (2020), *European Communication Monitor 2020. Ethical challenges, gender issues, cyber security, and competence gaps in strategic communication. Results of a survey in 44 countries..* [85]
- Zerfass, A. et al. (2016), *European Communication Monitor 2016 - Exploring trends in big data, stakeholder engagement and strategic communication*, <https://www.communicationmonitor.eu/2016/06/13/ecm-european-communication-monitor-2016-big-data-algorithms-social-media-influencer-strategic-communication-automated-pr/>. [28]