



Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration

The reference for understanding government action

GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION

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Government communication can be defined as all the activities of public sector institutions and organizations that are aimed at conveying and sharing information, primarily for the purpose of presenting and explaining government decisions and actions, promoting the legitimacy of these interventions, defending recognized values and helping to maintain social bonds.

Government communication concerns both government institutions (e.g., governments, courts, auditor general's office, etc.) and public sector organizations presenting a very broad range of forms (e.g., administrations, arm's length bodies, agencies, etc.). Viewed in terms of an organized process, government communication covers all formal activities, be they written or oral, regardless of the support used, and involving either a single individual (interpersonal communication), a specific group of people (group communication or mini communication) or an undefined body of recipients (mass communication).

A general distinction is made between active government communication and passive public communication. Active communication active is a term used to refer to all information that is provided, unbidden and generally in an organized fashion, to the public or specific target groups by the authorities and the administration. Thus, most communication activities conducted by government organizations can be said to be active, as they are planned, organized and financed by these entities. In contrast, passive communication refers to the information conveyed by the administration to those persons who request it under the provisions of access to information laws now current in most countries. By and large, administrations are only under the obligation to ensure access to a register of documents available for public consultation (such that individuals may locate and request those files of interest to them) and to handle requests for information with due dispatch.

In contrast with private organizations, whose primary goal is to persuade people to purchase goods and services, government communication often performs several highly different functions at the same time. Admittedly, it is difficult to rank these functions, owing to how they all may be important depending on the type of organization, policy area or practical situation involved. However, it is possible to distinguish core functions from ancillary functions on the basis of legal or statutory requirements:

- Core functions: informing the public, explaining and supporting decisions; defending values and promoting responsible behaviours; facilitating dialogue between institutions and citizens.

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- Ancillary functions: orienting citizens and residents; demonstrating responsiveness, in particular through opinion surveys; promoting the legitimacy of government organizations and actions; contributing to the solidity of social bonds.

It is critical to distinguish between several types of government communication. The first such type is government-wide communication. Indeed, most governments have structures enabling them to communicate about government activities. These structures generally come under the auspices of heads of government or ministers and are charged with explaining decisions, presenting actions and contributing to debate over the government's values and objectives. Depending on the country and the tasks assumed by these structures, communication activities may be either of a political or a public-oriented nature.

Then, an administration has communication duties in respect of citizens' civil rights. In this capacity, it may be called on to encourage citizens to make use of their rights, spell out these rights (on behalf of new citizens, for example) and, as part of the political debate process, provide whatever information is requested by individuals. Although this type of communication is, in theory, highly factual in nature, it can also acquire a political quality depending, for example, on when the information in question is released.

The following types are considerably more characteristic of government communication. To begin with, there are communication activities that in fact constitute policy instruments. In effect, when the objective is to reduce the use of tobacco or alcohol, control the spread of diseases or modify personal behaviour in relation to environmental protection, communication is one of the main activities used to accomplish the corresponding public policy.

Communication relating to benefits and services does not constitute a policy instrument per se, but it is heavily relied on by administrations to ensure that beneficiaries receive the information needed to avail themselves properly of these services: What services and benefits are available? At what cost? Where can they be obtained? What terms and conditions apply? The administration must provide clear and, if possible, proactive responses to these and other related questions.

The next type, involving institutional communication, consists in enhancing the visibility and influence of the organization. In addition to traditional activities centred on highlighting "in house" news and developments (e.g., changes in the organization and staff; activity reports, etc.), organizations are increasingly required to develop a communications strategy for the purpose of creating or strengthening their image and reputation. This fundamental communication work will entail clarifying the values to be conveyed, incorporating these values into all communication activities and implementing the appropriate measures.

Another particularity of the public sector is the existence of major projects that require communication tailored to their specific characteristics. Although these projects are generally funded or carried out by traditional government organizations, they must be accorded particular attention inasmuch as they embody both an organization and an infrastructure for future service delivery. In addition, and in contrast with traditional organizations, these projects have specific start and end times that entail developing a specially focused type of communication.

Aside from the types de communication intended for actors outside the administration (including stakeholders), it is also important to mention communication that is targeted at partners. Even if the value of such efforts is self-evident, there is unfortunately a tendency to forget that external partners are an organization's first communication vectors. As it so happens, they are often informed at the same time as – and indeed after – the general public or certain specific actors.

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Not surprisingly, these same collaborators are thus unable to play their role of facilitating the dissemination of messages; indeed, they might well hamper dissemination efforts if no thought is given to communicating with them beforehand.

Finally, the last type of communication that administrations must consider is crisis communication. A particular feature of such communication is that it concerns any and all spheres of administration, arising in connection with, for example, a relationship problem originating in political institutions, a crisis of confidence with respect to organizational functioning, the emergence of a serious problem in a large-scale project, a service failure, or an internal crisis. Furthermore, crises characteristically concern an organization in its entirety, as the general public is generally unable to distinguish clearly between a service provided by an organization and the latter's overall image. Finally, crisis communication generally extends beyond the administration's prescribed ambit and brings into play the authorities and political parties as well; depending on the type of crisis, it is highly likely that the communication process is very likely to receive input from these people in the form of questions and public positions.

It is also worth noting that while the general principles of communication are the same for all the types of government communication discussed above, each type nevertheless possesses its specific characteristics, requires the appropriate kind of planning, and implies using a range of different communication tools.

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