CHAPTER 4:
COMMUNICATION

ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses research on the capacity and effectiveness of government's communications strategy as South Africa went through the various stages of lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. It probes the working relationship between communications from all spheres of government and community, private, digital, and social media, as well as organised civil society before and during the lockdown and assesses its impact and efficacy.

Recognising the multilingual nature of South African society, the urban–rural digital divide, and the prohibitive costs of data, the chapter identifies lessons and reaffirms the relevance of the development communications approach to government–citizen communications. It motivates for the prioritisation of accessible, multilingual digital communications with a citizen feedback loop that is transparent and responsive to ensure people are informed and empowered, as envisioned in the Constitution.

Such responsiveness needs an enabling environment from government and from the public, private, and community media landscape. Collaboration and cooperation across these sectors with government communications and with the non-governmental health and communications sectors is critical in such an all-encompassing crisis. The chapter highlights the need to continue to understand South Africa's highly diverse communication space, in which digital new media platforms exist alongside loudhailers, and make accommodations in legislation, policy, and government coordination with social partners to reach all people across the digital, class, and language divides.

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This chapter was prepared by:

Name	Designation and affiliation
Martina Della Togna (convenor)	PhD Scholar, School of Journalism and Media Studies, Rhodes University
Prof. Anthea Garman	Head, School of Journalism and Media Studies, Rhodes University
Dr Theodora Dame Adjin-Tettey	Post-Doctoral Fellow, School of Journalism and Media Studies, Rhodes University
Prof. Mmantsae Diale	NRF SARChI Chair in Clean and Green Energy, University of Pretoria
Prof. Francis Hyera	Head of Department: Public Health, Faculty of Health Sciences, Walter Sisulu University
Thandeka Bukula	PhD Scholar, School of Journalism and Media Studies, Rhodes University
Pamela Halse	PhD Scholar, University of Stellenbosch
Faizel Petersen	Researcher
Thandi Bombi	PhD Scholar, School of Journalism and Media Studies, Rhodes University
Dr Leti Kleyn	Senior Researcher, University of Pretoria

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

Africa CDC	Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
CcHUB	Co-Creation Hub
DCDT	Department of Communications and Digital Technologies
ECHCAC	Eastern Cape Health Crisis Action Coalition
GCIS	Government Communication and Information System
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
ICASA	Independent Communications Authority of South Africa
MAC	Ministerial Advisory Committee
Mbps	megabits per second
MDDA	Media Development and Diversity Agency
MEC	Member of the Executive Council
NatJoints	National Joint Operational and Intelligence Structure
PanSALB	Pan South African Language Board
SABC	South African Broadcasting Corporation
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SAHPRA	South African Health Products Regulatory Authority
SANEF	South African National Editors' Forum
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization

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BACKGROUND

In November 2019 the first cases of an unknown viral disease were reported in Wuhan in the Hubei Province of China, and the South African Government was faced with the task of repatriating its citizens working and living there. On 4 March 2020 South Africa had its own first case of what was now called Covid-19. On 24 March President Cyril Ramaphosa announced that the country would go into a nationwide lockdown for 21 days (The Presidency, 2020). The announcement included stringent measures to halt the spread of Covid-19. For the first time since the start of the country's democracy, many of the everyday freedoms South Africans enjoyed would be curtailed in a bid to fight the spread of the virus. Government communication therefore played a crucial role as it sought to inform, educate, and reassure South Africans on how to effect personal and societal behavioural change and understand the steps being taken to defeat the virus during this turbulent period.

Importantly, communication became an essential tool in the country's strategy to combat Covid-19. It focused on instilling behavioural change by profiling everyday preventative measures to stop the spread of the virus. In the avalanche of information available to the public from the onset of the pandemic, government communication set out to provide clear and concise content to keep South Africans abreast of latest developments. Notably, government was among the most trusted sources of information on Covid-19, as discussed later on.

Evidence suggests that racial and ethnic minorities and socio-economically disadvantaged groups bear an undue burden of Covid-19 morbidity and death across the world (Azar et al., 2020). Early evidence in South Africa shows that people who are already socio-economically disadvantaged have been disproportionately affected by the economic and social consequences of the pandemic (Arndt et al., 2020; Mulholland & Sinha, 2020). This has been exacerbated by poor compliance with government-imposed preventative public health measures to combat the spread of the virus (Labuschaigne, 2020).

Before the pandemic, government already had a communications strategy for managing disasters, which involved various government departments and the Government Communication and Information Service (GCIS); this was used to mobilise the national response to the virus. The GCIS would spearhead the communications response to the looming pandemic. Reporting lines were to the National Joint Operational and Intelligence Structure (NatJoints) and to the National Coronavirus Command Council under the leadership of the Minister in the Presidency responsible for Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, Jackson Mthembu. A Crisis Communication Plan was developed, and the Department of Health tasked with ensuring that the messaging from government would be coherent, credible, and reliable.

The GCIS took responsibility for ensuring the coherence of the communications strategy from national to provincial level and down to the district, municipal, local, and rural levels. In addition to formulating the messages to be used by the Presidency and the Department of Health, it also had to combat myths, misconceptions, and unfounded fears about the pandemic. The GCIS had to secure resources from

government departments to cover the costs of the communications strategy and obtain external support to cover the costs of communication on social media platforms and in the commercial media. Decisions about both the content of the messages and the messengers were crucial. Given the digital divide in South Africa, the media plan involved media outlets ranging from the digital (WhatsApp, social media, websites, and broadcast platforms) to the most direct, community-based forms of messaging. For example, GCIS officials and local public representatives used loudhailers on the streets of the smallest towns and rural villages. The Covid-19 pandemic required every one of South Africa's 57 million people to be reached.

This chapter examines government communication and information strategies in relation to Covid-19 during 2020 and how these were implemented at the national, provincial, and local levels. It offers a preliminary assessment of the extent to which government achieved its goals and makes recommendations in this regard. In so doing, it considers how agencies like the GCIS, Brand South Africa, the Media Diversity and Development Agency (MDDA), and the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) understood and gave effect to their mandates.

A key factor in handling any public health crisis is effective communication (Finset et al., 2020). Among the lessons learnt from the MERS epidemic, which hit South Korea in 2015, was the importance of effective communication in a health crisis. Thus, this research considers international best practices. It also examines presidential communications and assesses how the government communication structure collaborated with community media. It provides some community feedback on government communications in the pandemic. According to Hye-Jin Paek, 'unlike scientists and experts who recognize risk based on scientific evidence, the general population tends to have more fear and perceive more risk than the actual risk itself, due to uncertainties created by insufficient and inaccurate information' (Paek, 2016:1). This is especially true during a novel epidemic. Precise and well-managed health communication can enhance how 'societies handle uncertainty and fear, promote and accomplish adherence to necessary behavioural change, and meet individuals' fear and foster hope in the face of a crisis' (Finset et al., 2020:874).

Fighting Covid-19 requires behavioural changes, such as sneezing into the elbow, keeping one's distance, and avoiding handshakes, all of which must be communicated effectively. Lunn et al. (2020) suggest that measures such as placing alcohol-based hand sanitiser in noticeable locations could increase self-efficacy (a person's belief in their ability to succeed in a particular situation), which is a strong determinant of behavioural change. Another way of promoting behavioural change is enacting restrictive legislation. This has helped reduce smoking and is said to have enhanced adherence to social distancing in some countries (Finset et al., 2020). Such measures could be reinforced by appeals for collective action and a spirit of shared responsibility, while political leaders lead by example (Lunn et al., 2020).

The chapter concludes with a series of policy and communication practice recommendations with implications for both parliament and the national executive; the aim is to enhance government

communication and empower the country's people to cross the digital divide. This chapter focuses on the first and second waves of the pandemic. Communication during the further progression of the pandemic will be discussed in the second edition of the Country Report.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

This study used both primary and secondary data. The secondary data included scientific publications, relevant government documents and guidelines on communications, Covid-19-related regulations, and risk communications guidelines proposed by relevant regional and international organisations.

Primary data were collected through interviews with representatives of relevant government departments, media agencies, and civil society. Before this, the research team developed a common understanding of the key communications entities that played an important role in the South African Covid-19 communications strategy. The team then identified civil society communications initiatives developed in response to the crisis. Organisations included the GCIS, the MDDA, CovidComms SA, the WHO, Brand South Africa, the SABC, and the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB). It was important to conduct interviews with key role players because official documents alone could not show how effective communications were, how government agencies collaborated with community and commercial media, and what challenges the agencies encountered. All interviews were conducted through video conferencing; on average, they lasted 60–90 minutes.

Before primary data collection started, the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation sought ethical clearance from the National Research Foundation on behalf of the researchers. Respondents were contacted ahead of time. The purpose of the study was explained to them, and their informed consent was sought. Permission was sought from interviewees before interviews were recorded.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The research team was unable to utilise digital research methods to collect primary communications data independently, and therefore relied on desktop research, the website of the Parliamentary Monitoring Group, and the departments and organisations interviewed. The team was unable to interview Minister Jackson Mthembu, the lead minister on the communications response to Covid-19 until his untimely death in January 2021. His experiences would have added an important dimension to understanding how he led the political voices of the pandemic and considering the communications failures and successes.

INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR COVID-19 COMMUNICATIONS

Internationally, the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Pan American Health Organisation, and the International Federation of the Red Cross provided various guidelines for risk communication in the pandemic (Box 4.1). These stress the need for clear, concise, consistent, actionable, relevant, and timely communication, while being sensitive to the speed required for unique contexts and the trustworthiness of communication (i.e., based on science).

Box 4.1: Frameworks for Covid-19 communications: WHO and UNESCO

On 3 February 2020, the **WHO** released a **Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan** for the international community, which includes the following on risk communication and community engagement:

> Countries should prepare to communicate rapidly, regularly, and transparently with the population. All countries should prepare existing public health communication networks, media, and community engagement staff to be ready for a possible case, and for the appropriate response if this happens. Countries should coordinate communications with other response organizations and include the community in response operations. Partners stand ready to coordinate with partners to support countries in their communication and community engagement response' (WHO, 2020a:12).

Recognising the role of the media in disseminating information on the disease (public education) and bringing about behavioural change, WHO experts held workshops for journalists to give them accurate information. The WHO also provided free online courses that included standard and administrative precautions for Covid-19.

Similarly, the **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation** (UNESCO) prepared a handbook on safety precautions for journalists covering epidemics. It also published, in 16 languages, a handbook on disinformation literacy and countermeasures (UNESCO, 2020). A study by the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development (co-founded by UNESCO and the International Telecommunication Union) contributed to action-oriented recommendations for combating disinformation. The recommendations require countries to ensure their measures do not disregard, among other things, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, the promotion of the highest ethics and standards of the media, the protection of media practitioners, and the promotion of media and information literacy (Broadband Commission, 2020:3).

Among other resources, UNESCO published two policy briefs. The first identified at least nine types of Covid-19-related disinformation (Posetti & Bontcheva, 2020a). The second spelled out ten categories of responses to Covid-19 disinformation at four points of the disinformation life cycle – production, transmission, reception, and reproduction (Posetti & Bontcheva, 2020b). To disrupt Covid-19-related disinformation, it recommends disrupting disinformation in the process of transmission, preventing disinformation from reaching targets, and preventing viral redistribution of disinformation. Measures include monitoring and investigative responses to identify and debunk disinformation, instituting law and policy regulations, and implementing content credibility labelling initiatives.

On the continent, the African Union and the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) provide support for a multisectoral preparedness and response plan for public health emergencies at national, regional, and continental levels (Box 4.2). In the region, member countries of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), including South Africa, adopted the WHO guidelines and those of the Africa CDC. Also, the SADC Protocol on Health requires member countries to cooperate in addressing health challenges through effective regional partnership and mutual support.

Box 4.2: The Africa CDC and the pandemic

In the early stages of the pandemic, the Africa CDC convened a meeting with all ministers of health in the region to draw up a joint continental strategy on the pandemic. A technical working group was established for risk communication and community engagement. One of its tasks was to identify rumours and draft messages to address them. To this end, the Africa CDC launched a collaboration with Co-Creation Hub (CcHUB), a technology innovation centre, to counter disbelief, misinformation, and stigmatisation around Covid-19 in remote areas. It also provided guidelines for communications campaigns, which member countries are encouraged to adapt to suit their contexts.

The Head of Policy and Health Diplomacy of the African Union, Benjamin Djoudalbaye, confirmed that African countries 'collaborated very well but the challenge was getting data from countries' (Djoudalbaye, 2020):

> Countries are reluctant to share data – the [African Union] has been working on a framework for data sharing. It was a challenge that we are trying to overcome, because now they [member states] are seeing the importance of having the data, it helps us also with the response, … if you don't know your data, it is very difficult to respond to the development of the pandemic.

Djoudalbaye pointed to the dashboard on the Africa CDC website, which is updated daily when countries release data. He noted that levels of trust between member states is a major influencing factor in data sharing. To this end, the African Union and the Africa CDC are working hard to foster relationships of trust to encourage member states to share data in the interests of the continent as whole.

On the issue of language, Djoudalbaye indicated that the African Union used five official languages – English, French, Portuguese, Arabic, and Spanish. There are limitations to its translation capacity: 'In my own country [Chad] we have 300 languages, so it becomes impossible for the [African Union] to facilitate translations at that level; each member state has its own responsibilities to communicate with its citizens in the relevant languages' (Djoudalbaye, 2020). Supported by funding from the German development corporation GIZ, the Last Mile Communication project of the Africa CDC translated Covid-19 materials into major African languages, including Kiswahili, Hausa, and Lingala, which have at least 15 million speakers.

The Africa CDC also has a strong presence on social media, where it engages with the general public. However, its capacity seems constrained, as the core team comprises only three key risk communication experts for the whole region. It, therefore, may well be unable to monitor communications at country levels. The Africa CDC also has a digital communication strategy, which is handled by two separate departments of the African Union Commission. Led by its director, the Africa CDC regularly engages with the media through press conferences.

The WHO commended South Africa's proactive response to curbing the spread of the virus at the outset (WHO, 2020b). Through President Ramaphosa, as Chair of the African Union, the country took a lead in developing a continental response to the pandemic, particularly in view of its economic impact on African countries. The African Union appointed Special Envoys on Covid-19 to mobilise international economic support for the continent's fight against Covid-19. South Africa continues to engage on multilateral platforms, such as the BRICS (comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), to address the economic impact of the pandemic (Chapter 7).

A key challenge for South Africa and the African Union was telling the country and the continent's story of managing the pandemic on their own terms, in the international media. Brand South Africa, the entity tasked with managing the country's brand globally, had an even more important role in the lockdown, as South Africa continued to be promoted to international audiences as an attractive destination for trade, investment, and cultural exchange (Box 4.3).

Box 4.3: Brand South Africa: Positioning the country internationally

The Acting Chief Executive Officer of Brand South Africa, Thulisile Manzini, confirmed in an interview with the research team that the country and the whole continent 'has to work hard to be top-of-mind in a post-Covid world – an environment marked not only by the pandemic, but also by increasing uncertainty due to trade wars, isolationism, and increasing intra- and inter-regional conflicts' (Manzini, 2020). 'We will need to manage socio-economic threats to country reputation domestically, so that these do not negatively impact how the world perceives us.' Manzini emphasised that if South Africa does not tell its own story, 'others will tell it for us, and here the challenge is and remains, to have a share of voice in an increasingly competitive environment.'

As in previous years, Brand South Africa continued to support President Ramaphosa's investment drive and remains a key implementing partner for the South Africa Investment Conference. This year, it will be positioning South Africa internationally as an investment destination through a 'hybrid' format conference. Manzini described how Brand South Africa continued to support the Presidency during the country's tenure as Chair of the African Union:

> Through our media partnerships with the likes of EuroNews and Africa News, [we] were able to target key African regions to manage perceptions of the nation brand, and also promote the role South Africa is playing in curbing the spread of the virus. We have also hosted a number of virtual dialogues that sought to contribute to shaping the continent's economic response to this catastrophic disruption.

MOBILISING FOR COVID-19 COMMUNICATIONS

> Communication plays an imperative role during an outbreak; it is the means through which we disseminate information and have meaningful exchanges. Through communication we achieve our goals and intentions, reaching to people who are distant from us. When communicating during an outbreak we seek to allay public fears; assure communities of the work that health agencies are doing; mitigate rumours and disinformation; offer preventative solutions and procedures for recovery and show credibility and openness.
>
> *Maseko, 2020*

The South African Constitution, in section 195(1)(g), requires that 'transparency must be fostered by providing the public with timely, accessible and accurate information'. It also provides in section 32 that 'everyone has the right of access to (a) any information held by the state; and (b) any information that is held by another person and that is required for the exercise or protection of any rights'. These provisions underpinned government's response to the pandemic.

As soon as a national state of disaster was declared on 15 March 2020, government began to issue regulations to shape political, economic, and social life in the pandemic. In communications, according to the Deputy Minister of Communications, Ms Pinky Kekana, and the then Director-General of the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies (DCDT), Dr Robert Nkuna, the aim was to

> ensure the smooth operation of the communications industry as an essential service during the disaster period, to impose social compact obligations on licensees to broadcast public service announcements related to Covid-19 and its impact, to enable licensees and other service providers to rapidly deploy networks and facilities, remove obstacles and to establish a coordinating mechanism through which industry service providers could facilitate the provisioning of the services (Maneli, 2020).

Regulation 11(5) issued under the Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002 criminalised the publication of misinformation on Covid-19 and the sharing of 'fake news', while other regulations required the relevant licensees to broadcast public information on the national effort to combat the spread of Covid-19 in all local languages, including South African Sign Language (RSA, 2003). The directions also explicitly required electronic communications services licensees, over-the-top (streaming) media services, and Internet service providers to 'bear the responsibility of removing fake news' related to Covid-19 from their platforms. Internet sites operating with .za top-level domain names had to display a visible link to www.sacoronavirus.co.za on the landing page. Audiovisual services (especially the broadcasting services licensees) were directed to 'increase their educational programmes to support awareness of Covid-19'. Electronic communications licensees and electronic communications network service licensees with access to radio frequencies were required to zero-rate all Covid-19 sites identified by the Department of Health. Electronic communications service licensees were directed to zero-rate local educational content websites. A subsequent provision directed them, and network service licensees with access to high-demand spectrum, to make available minimum speeds of 10 Mbps, which would give 152 districts access to virtual teaching (Dell, 2020).

The DCDT regulations were followed by regulations published by the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) on 3 April 2020. These set minimum standards to facilitate the dissemination of information and enable the national response to the pandemic (ICASA, 2020). They specified how communications services were to continue under the national state of disaster and relaxed spectrum regulations to enable the temporary licensing of the unassigned high-demand spectrum for the duration of the pandemic. Thus, Liquid, MTN, Rain, Telkom, and Vodacom were assigned the temporary high-demand spectrum (Cell C did not apply), and Mthinte Communications, Levin Global, and Morai Solutions were assigned temporary spectrum licensing in the television white space channels.

In May 2020, GCIS senior management worked with the DCDT, Real411, Media Monitoring Africa, and international tech companies, including Facebook (WhatsApp) and Twitter, to set up a command centre to monitor false information (SANEF, 2020). The DCDT also worked with community broadcasters to implement educational and health programming and public service announcements. With the Department of Basic Education, the SABC and the DCDT developed a pilot learning platform. A ministerial task team (representing the departments of Communications and Digital Technologies, Higher Education, and Science and Technology) and a technical team from the universities made provision for higher education learning websites to be zero-rated.

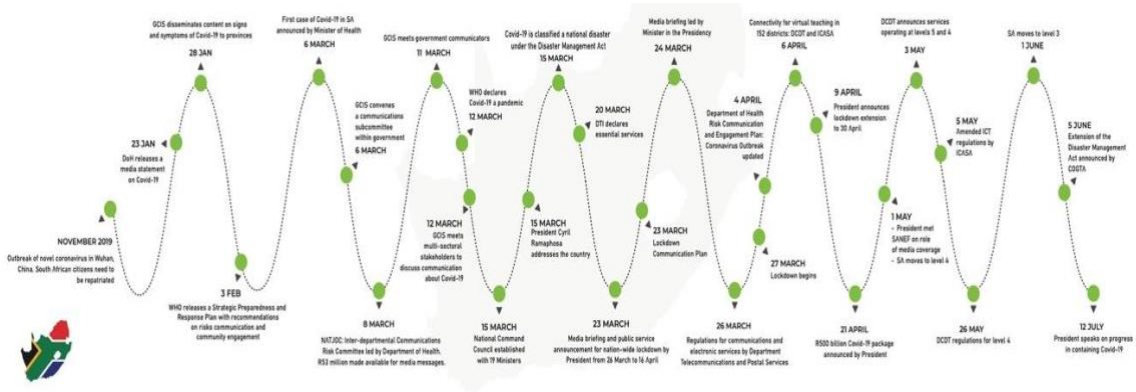
On 3 May 2020 regulations were issued under the Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002 to define which sectors of the communications industry and services were deemed essential under alert levels 5 and 4. These were amended on 12 June to include provisions for alert level 3 (DPME, 2021). The net effect of these regulations was an unprecedented increase in sensitisation in the South African digital public sphere.

GOVERNMENT'S COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY FOR COVID-19

On 23 January 2020, well before any Covid-19 cases had been recorded in South Africa and two months before the first lockdown, the Department of Health put out a media statement informing the South African public about the new virus (Figure 4.1). On 6 March 2020, just after the first local cases had been recorded, the GCIS convened a Communications Subcommittee with representatives from a range of government departments. The aim was to develop a communications toolkit, make decisions about media engagement and social media posts, develop messages, monitor the media, plan rapid responses, manage issues, and monitor 'fake' news. On 8 March an interdepartmental Communications Risk Committee, led by the Department of Health, made R53 million available for media messaging. The GCIS was appointed the lead agency and took responsibility for working closely with the Minister of Health's media liaison, Dr Lwazi Manzi (Box 4.5), to formulate an effective strategy from the national level, across departments, through provincial structures, and down to the district and municipal levels. On 11 March 2020 the GCIS met communicators from various government departments. The next day it held a meeting with 75 officials from the public and private sectors, taxi associations, non-governmental and non-profit organisations, business, labour, and gender-equality

groups. The GCIS and the National Institute for Communicable Diseases held provincial roadshow sessions during March and April and made presentations to provincial executives and communicators.

Figure 4.1: Timeline of government's communications strategy, alert levels 5 to 2



Government's communications response to Covid-19 had been effectively formulated in preparation for the 15 March statement by the president, the formation of the National Coronavirus Command Council, and the use of the Disaster Management Act to manage the pandemic. Thus, by the time the president briefed South Africans via live television on 23 March 2020 that the country would enter a three-week lockdown (from midnight on 26 March to 16 April, subsequently extended to 30 April), a lockdown communication plan had already been established. It provided clear direction on messages to convey, key messengers to speak on behalf of government, and a multipronged strategy to reach people across all communication platforms. Its aims were to manage the announcement of the lockdown efficiently and within a proper context, protect the reputation of the country nationally and internationally, consistently provide the public with credible information, and project the authority of the state through sustained and consistent communication. The plan included arrangements on:

- Content development, messaging production, and information dissemination
- Monitoring, analysis, research, and rapid response
- Intergovernmental coordination
- Media engagement, including social media and digital platforms
- Public and stakeholder engagement
- The establishment of a contact centre.

Authorised messengers for the communication plan (Table 4.1) included the president as the primary spokesperson (communicator-in-chief), supported by the Minister in the Presidency, Jackson Mthembu, and the Minister of Health, Dr Zweli Mkhize. Cabinet ministers would communicate on their respective portfolios, supported by media liaison officers who would amplify and/or provide more details on the president's messages. Cognisant of the WHO guidelines for the communications strategy to 'build trust, announce early, be transparent, design messages that bridge the gap between expert knowledge and public knowledge, and couple risk communications with risk analysis and risk management' (WHO, 2017), the GCIS strategy published in early April 2020 (GCIS, 2020a) built on the Department of Health's Risk Communication and Engagement Plan (DoH, 2020).

Table 4.1: Authorised messengers of the CGIS communications strategy

Role	Designated person or institution	Topics
Messengers	President	Country readiness and announcements
	Minister of Health	Daily updates and weekly media briefings
	Minister of Police	Enforcement of regulations
	Minister of Defence	Role of the South African National Defence Force in controlling the spread of Covid-19
	Minister of Home Affairs	Management of ports of entry
Experts	National Institute of Communicable Diseases	
	Public health scientists	
	Representatives of the WHO, health Members of the Executive Council (MECs), and designated health and communications experts	

The main messages the plan aimed to convey were to:

- Inform people about steps they should take to reduce transmission of the virus and its impact on health, social life, and the economy.
- Ensure health workers could engage with patients and caregivers, report effectively to the relevant health authorities, and protect themselves.
- Position health officials as the trusted source of information.
- Ensure consistency in information and language from all partners.
- Avoid misinformation and rumours.
- Inform people about the public health response.
- Ensure the participation of and engagement with relevant communities to address barriers to the implementation and uptake of public health measures.

The success of the communications plan would be measured through (a) changes in observable behaviour (e.g., the extent to which social distancing, cleaning of hands, and disinfection of working places were adopted); (b) increased awareness of Covid-19 signs and symptoms, and where to seek medical care; and (c) reducing the stigmatisation of people who tested positive.

The GCIS was very conscious of the spread of dis- and misinformation, including conspiracy theories that linked the virus to the rollout of 5G telephony. Claims that the virus had been engineered in a laboratory and deliberately released for nefarious purposes were also common on social media platforms. To combat such claims, the DCDT set up a command centre to monitor these messages, working with companies like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, along with Real411, Media Monitoring Africa, and the GCIS. The sacoronavirus.co.za website was established to disseminate useful and scientific information, and a section was dedicated to warning people about disinformation. The government website also alerted people to the dangers of fake news and the ways to report it.

To reach across departments and through the spheres of government, GCIS structures (with their dedicated officers at national, provincial, and municipal levels) were deemed the optimal means of

ensuring a coherent message. The GCIS's 55 district information centres and communication development workers would be drawn into the strategy. The GCIS would also work closely with the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, the South African Local Government Association, the offices of the provincial premiers and their media liaisons, and the provincial departments of health.

The communications command team, led by Minister Mthembu, met three times a week and reported to the NatJoints, which in turn reported to the National Coronavirus Command Council. There were also daily 'rapid response' meetings and reflection and strategising workshops.

In consultation with the Department of Health, a 'segmented audience approach' was chosen, which reflected the highly fragmented nature of media use in South Africa. Sophisticated, English-speaking, urban users obtain information primarily online and from social media, whereas speakers of African languages in rural areas rely on the public broadcaster (particularly radio) and word of mouth. To reach across this spectrum of use and languages, the GCIS used different forms of messaging (Table 4.2).

Table 4.2: Forms of messaging in the pandemic communications plan

Physical spaces	Billboards
	Shopping mall bathrooms
	Screens at taxi ranks and in taxis (80)
	Posters at fuel stations
	Leaflets handed out (1 994 400)
	Loudhailing on the streets
	Door-to-door visits
	Posters in hotspots (32 500)
	Community marketing events (12 at taxis, 11 at intersections, 11 at malls and schools)
	Train activations
	Community dialogues (7)
Television and radio	Adverts
	News clocks
	Live broadcasts
	Paid-for spots on primetime shows (Skeem Saam, Muvhango, Generations, 7de Laan, Uzalo, Rhythm City, Scandal, Imbewu) and during news bulletins Simulcasts to 65 community radio stations (27 content packages prepared)
	Regular content on 35 radio stations (18 public broadcast stations in 12 languages and 17 English-language commercial stations, reaching about 49 million listeners)
Phone	Hotlines
	Text messages (twice daily)
	WhatsApp
Online	Facebook posts (government page reached 38 million and has 140 000 new followers)
	Instagram

	Twitter (2000 messages posted; as of 16 April, @GovernmentZA had 248 500 followers; tweets were also sent from @PresidencyZA, @HealthZA, @CyrilRamaphosa, @DrZweliMkhize and @JacksonMthembu)
	YouTube
Industries	Information and education toolkits were shared for use in various sectors of the economy. Bread producers put Covid-19 messaging on the packaging of their products.

Source: GCIS

The GCIS estimates that from March to July 2020, there were 34 352 outputs carrying Covid-19 and behavioural change messaging (e.g., Figure 4.2). The SABC also set up outside-broadcast vans at the GCIS offices in Pretoria to help keep the public informed and alert. To assist the community media sector (which is crucial for messaging at provincial and local level), R40 million was provided to the MDDA to distribute to small media facing financial difficulties in the pandemic. GCIS sentiment analysis of the 'tone' of media coverage shows that there were 2200 positive stories, 9224 neutral stories, and 2462 negative stories during the hard lockdown (alert level 5). The latter largely involved police brutality in the enforcement of lockdown regulations, corruption around the handling of food parcels, and the increase in gender-based violence.

Figure 4.2: Covid-19 messaging

In a presentation on 13 July 2020, the GCIS (2020b) concluded that:

- About 93% of South Africans had heard or read about Covid-19.
- The two most-recalled messages were staying at home and wearing a mask.
- The president was trusted to lead the nation during the pandemic.
- Health experts, followed by government, were the most trusted sources of information.
- People were aware of the need to play their part in stopping the spread of the virus; however, compliance was a 'mixed picture'.
- Although 70% of people thought alcohol bans contributed to illegal trading, 64% believed such bans were necessary.
- Fear of hunger exceeded the fear of infection.
- There was great uncertainty about allowing children to go to school.

At the same time, in assessing the move between the various alert levels, the GCIS recognised that effective behavioural change could be impeded by people externalising risk ('it won't happen to me',

weak social norms ('nobody else is doing it') or competing priorities (something more urgent requires attention). Enhanced coordination across government departments was seen to need multi-faceted, reassuring messaging that continued to insist on each person's responsibility for safe behaviour. Feedback loops on experiences and behaviours from all provinces were important for government communications efforts, as was a stronger focus on community messaging, especially in townships.

Box 4.4 reflects on the GCIS's role in the pandemic, based on interviews with senior staff. Of particular concern among the issues raised is the positioning of the GCIS. In a democracy it is never acceptable for government communications to report to a security structure such as NatJoints. The attitude of the public towards the security forces is influenced both by the pervasive memory of state brutality under apartheid and by more recent experiences such as Marikana and the quelling of the #FeesMustFall movement. Over the past decade, people have demonstrated against a spectrum of grievances, including poor service delivery, government corruption, crime, unemployment, and police brutality. '2020 was no different; and with the full economic impact of Covid-19 still to be felt, the stage is set for a wave of public unrest in the coming months' (Institute for Futures Research, 2020:32).

The Covid-19 national strategy relied on positioning the might of the state in the early phases of lockdown to enforce compliance. Given the levels of civic protest as well as the unfortunate, and in some cases tragic, conflicts with armed forces in the lockdown (Chapter 3.2), this role was not well received. Had security structures positioned themselves more as a humanitarian force deployed to assist the public during a crisis, their role might well have been better accepted. However, this would require genuine internal and external organisational culture change within the security sector. In response to queries about the role of NatJoints, GCIS managers felt, however, that in the communications workstream (involving about 60 people), civilian viewpoints and ideas had dominated.

Box 4.4: The GCIS's role in communications during the pandemic

Several senior officials at the GCIS were interviewed for this research. Their names and designations have been anonymised, as per the ethics clearance prescripts recommended by the Human Sciences Research Council.

On the positive side, the officials spoke highly of the leadership provided by the President, the late Minister in the Presidency, and the Minister of Health, and of the laws and policies framing this work. They noted that the pandemic had contributed to political coherence. Being made the spearhead of the communications strategy for Covid-19 had allowed the GCIS to show the 'full extent' of its capabilities; it also highlighted the need to keep the GCIS district offices running.

On the negative side, GCIS officials pointed to the instability in the Ministry of Communications: six ministers had occupied the post in the previous five years, and the latest minister had flouted lockdown regulations and had been suspended. Under the Zuma-led government, there had been a 'deviation' from the commitment to development communications, and multiple scandals took up the entity's time.

Structurally, the GCIS depended on national departments to call on it for assistance in devising communication strategies; this meant it had to rely on departmental budgets for such work. Covid-19 had shown how effective the GCIS could be with adequate resourcing and good cooperation across departments. Said one manager: 'We do not have the funding for mass campaigns; we are consistently saying if mass penetration doesn't happen, it's because we don't have financial muscle.'

An important 'deficit' in GCIS capability is translation – the language translation unit is small. Also, although sign language is an important consideration for 'every single briefing', it could not always be supported.

Phumla Williams, Director-General of the GCIS, provided written replies to research questions. She described the task of the GCIS as 'to convey a message that is anchored in hope and confidence' (Williams, 2020). 'Our message of hope will focus on keeping South Africans abreast of progress in the recovery of our economy from the impact of Covid-19 and creating jobs, particularly for young people', she said. Williams confirmed that her department would 'concentrate our products, services and engagements on dissemination of information that yields tangible results for South Africans on jobs, opportunities and access to government programmes in a post-Covid-19 environment'.

COMMUNICATING THE SCIENCE OF COVID-19: THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

The Department of Health led government's Covid-19 and health-related communication, with the minister also being the authorised source of information on new cases and fatalities. On 4 April 2020 the department put out its Risk Communication and Community Engagement Plan for the pandemic (DoH, 2020). The plan set out basic information the public should know about the spread and symptoms of the virus and the precautions to take. It also specified that media briefings, workshops, and interviews should be include the department, and that adverts were to be placed in radio, on television, and in print media. It outlined a plan to identify audiences, partners, stakeholders, influencers, gatekeepers, and decision-makers who needed to be engaged. The ministry distributed 50 million pamphlets, leading Dr Lwazi Manzi (Box 4.5) to say that no one in the country did not have basic information on the pandemic.

The Ministry of Health set up several advisory committees to work with government on the science of the pandemic (Chapter 2). The chair of the Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) on Covid-19 was Professor Salim Abdool Karim, while the Pathologists and Laboratories Committee was chaired by Professor Koleka Mlisana, the Clinicians Committee by Professor Marc Mandelsohn, the Research Committee by Professor Glenda Gray, the Public Health Committee by Professor Shabir Madhi, and the Vaccine Committee by Professor Barry Schoub. The MAC on Social and Behavioural Change, chaired by Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana, also involved reporting to the Minister of Social Development (Chapter 8). These committees were to make recommendations on:

- Case management
- Public health interventions
- Communications strategies
- Research priorities
- Economic impacts on the medical field.

Box 4.5: Dr Lwazi Manzi and the Covid-19 communications strategy

GCIS officials expressed their appreciation for the leadership on Covid-19 communications provided by Dr Lwazi Manzi, media liaison for the Minister of Health. Her scientific and medical knowledge, coupled with her experience as a filmmaker, combined to ensure that messaging was given clear direction (see Dorasamy, 2021). Dr Manzi (2020) noted two unique things about the communications strategy: it replicated the National Coronavirus Command Council structure in being both vertical and horizontal, and it produced 'one message and one voice', so that government's messaging would be both coherent and trusted. A big challenge for communication was the speed at which things progressed from November 2019 to March 2020 and the 'rapidly

evolving' situation. Dr Manzi conceptualised the situation as being composed of two fluid spaces, one technical and one media – she saw her role as translating the technical knowledge into useful media information.

Dr Manzi had seen many countries devolving into 'messy' communications in the pandemic. To avoid that, South Africa had to be 'led politically'. But because of her years in the music, film, and television industry, she knew the most effective communication had to be influenced by effective storytelling. A powerful motivator in her thinking was communicating with an African society and being conscious that South Africa was very different from Europe or the United States. This resulted in the decision to have a single figurehead (the president) holding a 'family meeting' whenever government needed to convey an important message. Repetition of a clear message was important, but it was critical to understand diverse audiences and find the right media through which to speak to them.

A February 2021 SABC Market Intelligence report (SABC, 2021) shared with the research team describes how the president's addresses to the nation – quickly dubbed family meetings – recreated the television medium's traditional power of the singular, shared moment. Like real family meetings, they were approached with both hope and dread. The host channel, SABC 2, posted record ratings for the presidential address of 21 April 2020. It attracted 5 million viewers, almost four times the norm for that time slot.

Dr Manzi also said that separating the messages to the public from the debates over 'the science' was critical. Debates and arguments could be confined to 'expert spaces', but ordinary South Africans also needed to 'engage with the science'. The MACs were filled with top scientists, many of them with media profiles. The mainstream media were often not satisfied with the government voice and wanted a diversity of opinions and contradictions. There were pressures on the MAC members and, while advising government, they also had to consider their own situations within their fields and as professionals.

An interesting development that challenged Dr Manzi was not just putting her medical knowledge into media practice, but also balancing health-related imperatives with concerns about their economic effects. She saw the epidemic as an opportunity to work towards universal healthcare for South Africans and to focus attention on the health sector. 'We must take advantage of every single opportunity,' she said.

BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE: THE DCDT

Digital technology is central to the success of an information society that functions for all people; the Covid-19 pandemic underlined the importance of progress towards a society in which all can access such technology. The digital divide between rural and urban communities, and between richer and poorer communities, affects access to education, health, employment opportunities, and other essential information. In a pandemic, such access can mean the difference between life and death. A significant challenge, particularly for rural communities, is unreliable cell phone network coverage. South Africa's apartheid-legacy geography, high levels of poverty, and low population densities between major centres are challenges for cell phone companies, who provide the infrastructure (Chapter 6.6). In 2019 only 10,4% of households had Internet access at home; in rural areas, the figure was only 1,7% (Stats SA, 2019). People in rural areas have to resort to using cell phones, despite high data costs and limited coverage.

Although data usage had increased over the previous five years, in 2018, 47% of South Africans still did not use the Internet because devices and data were unaffordable (Mothobi et al., 2018). Thus, 'any online solution using smartphones (interactive websites, mobile apps or video-streaming) was inaccessible to half of the population' (Harrison, 2020:52).

The Department of Communications and Digital Technologies (DCDT) was established in June 2019 via the merger of the Department of Communications (DOC) and the Department of Telecommunications

and Postal Services (DTPS). It is responsible for creating the enabling environment for the provision of inclusive communication services to all South Africans. As the Covid-19 pandemic took hold in South Africa, it was the DCDT that was responsible for the legislation and the oversight of these services. Section 2 of the Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002 provides for 'the dissemination of information required for dealing with the disaster … for the purposes of assisting and protecting the public and providing relief to the public' (RSA, 2003).

The ICT National State of Disaster Regulations by ICASA (2020) provided for minimum standards to:

- Facilitate the dissemination of information to deal with the national disaster.
- Facilitate the national response to the disaster and the post-disaster recovery and rehabilitation.
- Enable the implementation of measures to prevent an escalation of the disaster or to alleviate, contain, and minimise its effects.
- Ensure the continued provision of services.

To address the growing demand for both mobile and data usage during the lockdown, ICASA rolled out a temporary radio frequency spectrum nationwide until November 2020; this has been extended to 31 August 2021 (Reuters, 2021). Despite this roll-out, some communities remained unable to receive adequate information or to use the toll-free Covid-19 support services for various reasons:

- They did not have a strong-enough signal for cell phone calls (including phoning for an ambulance) or even to send and receive text messages.
- In the Northern Cape, some communities could not listen to the radio because a broadcasting tower was shut down for a mega science project.
- People in areas that depend on solar power or have no power at all could not watch television.

DCDT officials' view on these issues is reflected in Box 4.6. The DCDT is taking significant steps to address these constraints; its rapid deployment policy aims to enable operators to roll out networks at a faster pace. As part of her performance agreement with the President, the Communications and Digital Technologies Minister, Stella Ndabeni-Abrahams, has undertaken to ensure that 80% of the population has access to the Internet by 2024. The Minister must also see to the implementation of phase 2 of SA Connect to provide 42 000 government sites with a connection of at least 10 Mbps. In addition, she must review the model for SA Connect to increase private sector participation, with government as a buyer of services. Other commitments are that policy direction on 5G must be issued by December 2021; the cost of data must be reduced; ICASA must be monitored and adequately resourced to license 4G spectrum; the State Information Technology Agency is to be repositioned to drive the use of local technologies; and the Broadcast Digital Migration project and the rearranging of spectrum radio frequencies must be completed in 2021 (BusinessTech, 2020).

Box 4.6: Telecommunications in the pandemic

In an interview with the Acting Director-General of the DCDT, Ms Nonkqubela Jordan-Diyani and her senior management team, they acknowledged that the private telecommunications industry supported the Covid-19 government efforts through 'voluntary compliance … with some companies approaching the Department to see how to assist, while over 1000 websites were zero-rated during the lockdown period' (Jordan-Diyani, 2020). The Chief Director for Telecommunications and IT policy, Alf Wiltz, noted that by the end of the hard lockdown, the operators started pushing back, saying 'it's going too far' and 'they were unlikely to continue'. Jordan-Diyani also indicated that the roll-out of infrastructure for schools was hampered by delays in technology shipments during the lockdown.

The DCDT officials noted the range of policy and regulatory measures put in place in the telecommunications space. Whereas some have worked, others have not. It is, therefore, a challenge for government to connect the unconnected. Government has provided good policies, but there is a shortfall in funding. Provincial and local governments have developed different initiatives to complement those of national government, but they too face funding challenges. A key cost driver for the roll-out of digital technology infrastructure, besides the capital expenditure, is the operating expenses linked to ongoing maintenance of the infrastructure.

The officials also noted that private sector companies are not building infrastructure, because rolling out signal distribution infrastructure in rural and low-income communities does not yield significant returns.

Cabinet approved the draft White Paper on Audio and Visual Content Services Policy Framework in September 2020 (DCDT, 2020). It sketches various policy positions on how infrastructure connectivity can be improved, sets out the aim of reducing the cost of communication, and suggests various interventions to achieve that end. Some of the policy directives include:

- Improving competition
- Enabling open access by promoting the sharing of infrastructure by dominant operators
- Improving the current spectrum framework
- Opening up networks as a platform for many other service providers.

The draft White Paper is now in the public consultation phase and is expected to be submitted to parliament for consideration and approval in 2021.

PUBLIC INFORMATION AND EDUCATION: THE PUBLIC BROADCASTER

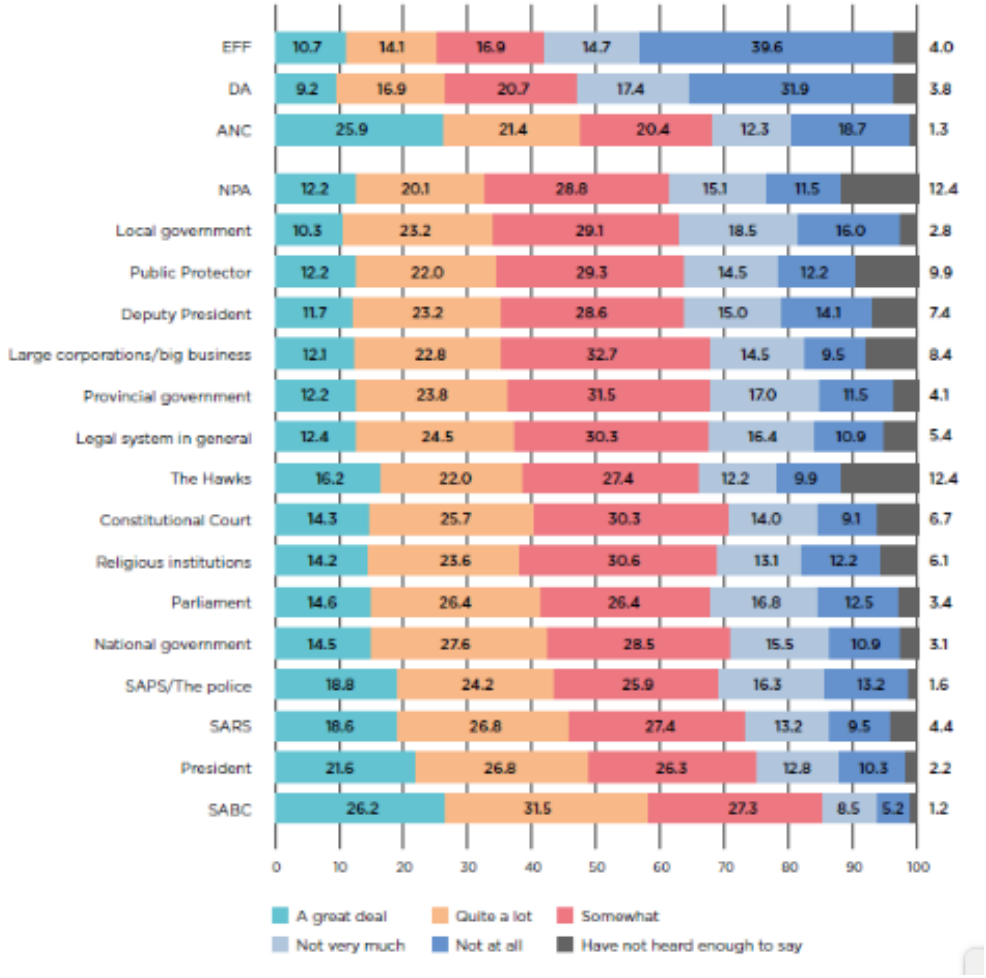
The SABC has a clear public information and education mandate. According to its Chief Executive Officer, Madoda Maxekwa, SABC platforms reach about 52 million people every month (Maxekwa, 2020). This, he said, 'gives us so much credibility, but at the same time, so much responsibility to ensure that the content is in line with the public model.' Despite the myriad platforms mushrooming in the digital environment, SABC Radio remains the market leader in audience share, with more than 72% of local audiences tuning into the medium. As the country's public broadcaster, the SABC is expected to communicate a plurality of local ideas and opinions and to provide a range of edutainment-type programming (NAB, 2020). This mandate dates back to 1999 when the SABC, with 19 radio stations and 5 television channels, was by far the biggest broadcaster. This made the SABC the go-to media platform for advertisers and sponsors.

The last report of Radio Audience Measurement – collected just before the first lockdown – revealed that the SABC was ideally positioned to fulfil its accelerated mandate to inform, educate and entertain.

Available data suggests that radio and audio consumption rose considerably in 2020 (SABC, 2021). The SABC enjoys high levels of trust and confidence among South Africans, estimated at 85% (Figure 4.3). According to the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (2019:39):

> In 2019, as in 2017 [and 2015], the SABC features as the institution that South Africans have the most confidence in. The integrity of the public broadcaster thus continues to be an indispensable part of political life in South Africa, also given that television and radio are the most trusted sources of political information and news.

Figure 4.3: Reported confidence in institutions, 2019



Source: SA Reconciliation Barometer, Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, 2019

Reflecting on the impact and immediacy of radio in informing the nation, Maxekwa (2020) said:

> All our programming on radio was focused on important developments around the pandemic. This created awareness and drove traffic to various platforms where live briefings by the President, government and Ministers were scheduled to take place. Further to this we participated in various campaigns through other radio stations in the country, and the idea there was to drive specific messages.

One example was the collaboration with the Department of Education and other stakeholders to create a multimedia program to ensure students could continue to receive support. Maxekwa

described the general programming used to focus on Covid-19 information: 'It could be in cartoon or in other formats that were more crisp and more understandable for various audiences, and we also ensured that this was translated into various languages.'

The SABC helped to alleviate lockdown pressures by providing entertainment when people were subjected to curfews under lockdown. Its broadcast of the movie *Contagion* on SABC 3 in April 2020 became a national event, attracting ratings equivalent to 1,3 million people watching the entire movie at the same time (over five times the normal audience in that slot). SABC 3 also broadcast content for the 2020 class of matric learners. However, despite the importance of young people having access to such content, this did not translate into actual viewing. The channel lost over half its normal ratings from audiences aged 15–19 in all the slots where Woza Matric was scheduled, prompting a rethink of this crucial public service during the pandemic. The public broadcaster was at its most effective in the provision of news and current affairs, with the tagline 'Independent and impartial'.

As with the SABC News channel, the SABC's online audience – driven by www.sabcnews.co.za – also grew. After increasing to over 2 million browsers at the height of the lockdown in April and May 2020, the online platform's audiences settled at levels higher than before the lockdown. SABC Radio's social media followers on Facebook and Twitter grew from 1 million to 11 million from April to December 2020. Over the same period, YouTube views of SABC Radio's video content grew from 36 million to 41 million, while streaming sessions grew from 841 000 in April to 1,2 million in December 2020.

Maxekwa said the SABC sometimes had to develop its own Covid-19-related content for educational and sensitisation purposes. It could not always rely on government departments because messaging from the various departments was sometimes confusing. The SABC decided to consolidate generic materials and translate them into various languages, while ensuring that they were aligned with the national guidelines.

This reference to the translation of the messaging into African languages touches on a major source of concern: the lack of resources in the GCIS to translate material expeditiously. This is critical because behavioural change is impossible to achieve if audiences do not understand what is expected of them. Still, audiences were huge, Maxekwa said, especially on television, 'because people were thirsty for information'. SABC News – on DStv and digital terrestrial television – more than doubled its audiences month-on-month from February to April 2020 at the height of uncertainty about the virus and the lockdown provisions. By June 2020 audiences had settled into levels almost double those of a year before. The SABC News channel's audience remained consistently above prior-year levels, especially if the effects of load-shedding in September 2020 are discounted. (This trend is also evident in data from global news organisations, all of which report increased listening, viewing, and reading in 2020.)

None of this is to imply that the SABC did not face any challenges. Adequate funding for the public broadcaster was highlighted as a key concern because it affects its ability to invest in new content and in innovation. The funding model of the SABC is seen as crippling, given some of the components of its mandate. Covid-19-related programming tended to displace programming that would normally

generate substantial revenue, especially the presidential addresses. This deepened the broadcaster's financial problems. The SABC was also not involved in the frequent virtual meetings that the GCIS hosted with communicators from all national departments, even though its inclusion may have improved the coherence of the messaging.

COMMUNITY MEDIA AND SUSTAINABILITY DURING THE PANDEMIC

Recognising the critical role of community media in the dissemination of information, the MDDA Board provided a Covid-19 emergency response fund to assist ongoing print and broadcast projects during the lockdown (Phakathi, 2020). Launched at the end of March 2020, the first tranche of R10 million supported content creation, fuel, distribution costs for print, telecommunications, and hygiene essentials. The MDDA approved another R10 million to be allocated should the lockdown be extended and to monitor further developments during 2020/21. Funds from the first tranche were disbursed in March and April 2020 to 228 print and broadcast projects.

According to the Chief Executive of the MDDA, Zukiswa Potye, the MDDA also facilitated interviews around Covid-19 with the Minister in the Presidency on community radio stations and distributed government messages and radio advertising to MDDA beneficiaries. It further linked community radio stations to civil society organisations in the Eastern Cape and other provinces, to support public health messaging on community media platforms.

PANSALB AND THE QUESTION OF LANGUAGE

Before the democratic dispensation, only English and Afrikaans were classified as official languages in South Africa, and African languages were not supported. Since then, the 1996 Constitution has been clear about the need to use and promote the 11 official languages, along with other languages such as the Khoi, Nama, and San languages, as well as South African Sign Language. This is not the case, however – this constitutional stipulation and the Use of the Official Languages Act 12 of 2012 are largely disregarded. English is seen as the language of communication and business and is (wrongly) perceived to be accessible to all.

The Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) was established through the Pan South African Language Board Act 59 of 1995, with the exclusive mandate to promote and create conditions for the development and use of all official languages of the Republic of South Africa, including the Khoi, Nama, and San languages, as well as South African Sign language. PanSALB monitors government's use of the official languages. Every national department and public entity or enterprise must submit to PanSALB an annual report on the activities of its language unit, the implementation of its language policy, and how it handled any language-related complaints. PanSALB also holds public hearings on how departments implement multilingualism.

When the national disaster was declared in March 2020, PanSALB called for information to be provided in all official languages and in South African Sign Language (PanSALB, 2020). It also offered translation services to government departments, though this was not strictly in its mandate. In this

regard, PanSALB wrote a letter to the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Covid-19 on 20 March 2020, stating that they should adhere to the 2012 Official Language Act. The PanSALB Board subsequently wrote to the Presidency, noting that it had received numerous complaints from the deaf community about their limited access to critical information. The letter pointed out that South African Sign Language was the home language of many people and reiterated the need to provide information in all official languages and in sign language. The Board advised that:

1. Provisions be made for South African Sign Language interpreting during media briefings on Covid-19 updates in all spheres of government
2. Regulations issued in terms of section 27(2) of the Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002 be made available in South African Sign Language.

PanSALB wrote a third letter on 28 April 2020 to the Department of Basic Education on the exclusion of deaf learners from televised lessons. The letter recommended:

1. Establishing a working relationship between the Department of Basic Education and the SABC to ensure the inclusion of deaf learners through the provision of sign language interpreters and subtitles across all televised learning programmes
2. Assistance with regard to the database of interpreters for South African Sign Language.

PanSALB argues firmly that to participate effectively in any agenda of the country, the public should have access to information in their own language. However, government has not yet achieved much in terms of the multilingual agenda. PanSALB had to offer translation assistance in a time of crisis when government should already have established language units to offer these services in all official languages. South Africa still operates largely in English, which has been ineffective in ensuring access to information. Covid-19 has shown that the inability to reach the public in their own languages may be a matter of life and death. PanSALB holds that the country needs to commit to multilingualism and adhere to its language policies by involving and communicating with the public in their own languages.

COMBATING COVID MYTHS

The pandemic has reinforced inequalities worldwide, and vulnerable groups have been the hardest hit (Mulholland & Sinha, 2020). Similarly in South Africa, those who are already disadvantaged have been disproportionately affected by the economic and social consequences of the pandemic (Arndt et al. 2020; Mulholland & Sinha, 2020; see also Chapter 5.3). In communities across all provinces, alarming misconceptions and misinformation about Covid-19 could have contributed to infections, and even deaths. Government therefore criminalised the spreading of fake or misleading information, as noted. In terms of Regulation 11(5) under the Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002 (Truter, 2020):

> any person who publishes any statement, through any medium, including social media, with the intention to deceive any other person about Covid-19; the infection status of any person; or any measure taken by the Government to address Covid-19, commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a fine or imprisonment.

Media Monitoring Africa and CovidComms SA played an important role in combating misinformation and fake news (Annex 4.3). They use Real411, a platform that tests the validity of news and information, distributes accurate information, and helps combat digital disinformation. The DCDT, as the lead government department tasked with tackling fake news, worked with both Media Monitoring Africa and CovidComms SA in combating the 'disinfodemic', in an example of a public–social partner compact in the interests of the public (Mzekandaba, 2020). Media Monitoring Africa helped the department monitor fake news in real time; the department itself set up WhatsApp and other digital platforms to enable the reporting of fake news.

CovidComms is a network of communications volunteers producing and disseminating credible, easily understood, and helpful information on the pandemic. Information is produced in English and most official South African languages, using social network platforms. The network regards disinformation as being as much of a threat to public health as no information. It prioritised partnering with entities combating false information on issues such as the source of the pandemic, how it is transmitted, the efficacy of immune boosters and medicines, and whether vaccines would kill Africans. It produced several 'myth buster' information products that clarify what Covid-19 is, how the virus is spread, why it is important to practise safe health, and the like. Chris Vick, the founder of CovidComms SA, was seconded onto a Ministerial Task Team established by Communications Minister Stella Ndabeni-Abrahams to help distribute government messaging through the CovidComms networks. This included the development of a communications strategy and media plan to raise public awareness of the steps to follow in verifying information and/or reporting disinformation.

Other civil society organisations also played a vital role in spreading messages about the pandemic. Case studies of such initiatives are provided in Annex 4.3. The role of civil society in partnering with government on public health communications is significant, given the country's recent emergence from a protracted period of conflict between civil society and government in the communications sector. It perhaps points to a resetting of relationships between civil society and the newly formed department, whose officials appear determined to breach the digital divide.

THE NEWS MEDIA'S EXPERIENCES DURING THE LOCKDOWN

The research team interviewed the South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF) and the Spotlight editorial team to review the role and experiences of the news media during the pandemic.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL EDITORS' FORUM

SANEF's Executive Director, Kate Skinner, highlighted some of the key challenges facing the news media during the lockdown (Skinner, 2020). SANEF represents editors, senior journalists, academics, and media trainers organised across different platforms – broadcast, online, and print – and across the public (SABC), commercial, and community media. Its mandate, according to Skinner, is to

> conduct research, policy work, capacity building and, most importantly, to fight for the constitutional principles of media freedom, freedom of expression, access to information, and to

ensure that the environment is conducive to journalists doing their work, which we believe is absolutely essential for democracy.

SANEF interacted mainly with the GCIS during the pandemic; the GCIS was open to supporting the media, journalists, and freelancers in the hard lockdown. SANEF helped ensure journalists and editors understood the Covid-19 regulations relevant to the activities of journalists as essential workers on the frontline. SANEF also had several engagements with stakeholders in the security cluster about ongoing harassment of journalists by security officials (Box 4.7). SANEF was, however, unable to engage directly with the Ministry of Health. This was frustrating for journalists, as they had to rely on the GCIS facilitating their requests for information and data from the ministry.

Box 4.7: Journalism and the role of the security forces in the pandemic

SANEF Executive Director Kate Skinner, in her assessment of the performance of government communicators during the lockdown, said that 'given the circumstances and things shifting all the time, the intentions in terms of putting out the information that was needed, were definitely there'. 'In order for the government to be held to account, and for the security authorities to be held to account, journalists had to be out there,' said Skinner, 'and there were a number of incidents where journalists and freelancers were harassed'.

The Independent Panel Inquiry into Media Ethics and Credibility led by retired Judge Kathleen Satchwell, and commissioned by SANEF, noted

> the bravery of reporters risking their own health to report on the news during the pandemic – from health facilities, overcrowded protest actions and other perilous locations – and the exposure by the media of abuses such as the brutal killing of Collins Khosa and the physical abuse of many others by authorities over-zealously imposing a curfew in the early weeks of the pandemic' (Satchwell et al., 2021).

Skinner acknowledges that there is always a tension in the role of security forces in a national emergency: 'in the case of a national health emergency like Covid-19 there was a sense, from the "outside looking in" of the strong arm of the state, the might of the state coming to bear down on citizens to ensure that lockdown is enforced, as opposed to a more humanitarian role where security forces are coming to help the people'.

On the issue of language and the overwhelming use of English as a medium of communication by government and the media, Skinner said the dominance of English has received attention for some time. 'We have established a Diversity and Ethics Committee to look into the issue of language, and we feel that the community media sector has a significant role to play in language diversity.'

SANEF's position is that beyond the Covid-19 pandemic, public interest journalism websites should be zero-rated alongside educational and public health websites to ensure that people can access vital information. 'Something interesting that we picked up during the lockdown was that middle-class people flocked to the online platforms but working-class people who didn't have access to the Internet at home, and who generally consume local community publications, were unable to receive these publications and the result was a real drop in readership; it is a worrying trend,' Skinner said.

A significant focus of SANEF's work is the sustainability of the media sector (see Rumney, 2020; OSF-SA & Rhodes JMS, 2021), which is already struggling with the rapid loss of advertising revenue to technology multinationals such as Facebook, Google, and YouTube and the rise in digital media consumption. During the lockdown the hardest-hit sector was print media, with many publications closing and hundreds of jobs lost. SANEF launched a fund to assist journalists in the hard lockdown,

but more needs to be done. A task team had been established in the Presidency under the late Minister Jackson Mthembu to consider policy interventions for dealing with Facebook and Google, the zero-rating of news websites, and the establishment of a media sustainability fund. SANEF believes that the establishment of this committee in the Presidency affirms the strategic importance of the media and public interest journalism in a thriving democracy.

SPOTLIGHT AND PUBLIC HEALTH INFORMATION

Spotlight, published by SECTION27 (a public interest law centre) and the Treatment Action Campaign (an HIV advocacy organisation), is a digital, public interest health publication established to address the poor coverage of important health issues in the mainstream media. The research team spoke with Spotlight Editor Marcus Low and Deputy Editor Alicestine October about their experience of government communications and the challenges of reporting in the lockdown (Low & October, 2020).

Box 4.8: Access to public health information in the pandemic

For the Spotlight team (Low & October, 2020), the Covid-19 pandemic was an opportunity to intensify its journalistic efforts. Editor Marcus Low noted that there had been problems with government communications on healthcare even before Covid-19:

> In our experience if you contact provincial health departments, there is a reticence to share relevant information and data. In a crisis like Covid-19, the challenges became much clearer – there was suddenly a more pressing need for accurate information, and we were just not getting that information – it is a critical weakness. There seems to be an attitude in many provincial health departments that there is no obligation to share information with the public. At the national level the picture is mixed – there has been transparency, for example when Professor Abdool Karim did the webinar live on television explaining the science behind the decisions being made by the government.'

Low pointed out that other information, such as advisories, took time to be released into the public domain. 'At the provincial level the impression is created that information is shared when it is politically convenient to do so, and if it is not politically convenient, you can ignore the media.'

Another challenge is the lack of communications capacity in critical health organisations, such as the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority, the National Institute for Communicable Diseases, and the Department of Health. 'There are some good communications people there, but they are completely overworked. The government is very good at using the media as conduits for information but when we start to ask the hard questions, there is this paranoia that information is on a need-to-know basis,' Low contended.

Reflecting on the challenges faced by journalists covering the pandemic, Low and October said: 'We want our writers to get into communities to see the realities of what they are reporting on. As our journalists were at risk, we would say to journalists that they should not go out unnecessarily, and that's been quite unusual because it is the opposite of what we would want, but we have responsibility to our journalists as well.'

Another key concern is the lack of female voices quoted in the media during the pandemic. October referred to the findings of a Media Monitoring Africa study,[1] which drew data from the Real411 website. The study showed that although the media responded rapidly in reporting on Covid-19, 'the people interviewed for views on the matter were mainly government officials, possibly as a result of government's efforts to constantly and consistently communicate with the public and possibly curb and avoid dis/misinformation during this time of uncertainty and anxiety' (MMA, 2020c). Coverage

[1] Analysis of Covid-19 Media Coverage Briefs (MMA, 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2020d; 2020e; 2020f; 2020g).

was also heavily dominated by male voices, most of whom were in prominent government positions, including the president and the ministers of Health, Finance, and Police. The report commented: 'Interestingly, very little was heard from experts and ordinary citizens on the ground who are most affected by the pandemic and lockdown in this period.' One of its main recommendations is that 'it would be prudent for the media to seek to include more voices from both ordinary members of the public, especially women and young people, but also more medical experts on the issue of Covid-19 and its consequences' (MMA, 2020c:12).

LESSONS LEARNT

In March 2020 the government communications sector launched an unprecedented and historic public health communications campaign to help protect the people of the country. The scale of the campaign and efforts made by government communications entities led by the late Minister Jackson Mthembu sets a new benchmark for public health emergency communications in South Africa. It is interesting to note that common themes of language use, the digital divide, outdated policies, private sector investment challenges, and a lack of government resources (both human and financial) emerged as challenges to both government and civil society. The lessons learnt and recommendations below are based on the research and many interviews done for this chapter.

In summary, this chapter:

- Reaffirms the constitutional mandate that places an obligation on government to communicate; this underpins the ongoing legitimacy of government, especially in times of national emergency or disaster.
- Highlights the relevance of the development communications approach to communication between government and the public.
- Urges government to fast-track the approval and implementation of policy initiatives to address the digital divide.
- Motivates for the urgent prioritisation of digitally accessible, multilingual communications with a feedback loop from the public that is both transparent and responsive.
- Identifies the cost of data and cell phone network coverage as ongoing obstacles to people's access to the Internet as a public good.
- Affirms the move to enable people's access to zero-rated websites for education and health – although this has been a valuable initiative towards combating data costs, it is neither extensive nor permanent.
- Recognises the precedent set by news media to provide all Covid-19 journalism and reportage free of charge as playing a significant role in treating certain kinds of information as a public good.
- Underscores the need to understand South Africa as a highly diverse communications space in which new media digital platforms exist alongside more traditional communication methods (e.g., loud-hailing, posters, and messages on product packaging).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Planning communications during futures waves of the pandemic or other disasters should factor in the following issues:

1. Communications approach

1.1 The communications approach should have humanitarian overtones first, rather than a security-driven approach that projects the might of the state towards enforcing behavioural change. The approach should emphasise public health communications principles and use African storytelling techniques to customise generic public health messaging for a diverse population.

1.2 It should also use integrated communications practice – recognising the diversity of language and digital access – rather than the more conventional market segmentation approach of private sector marketing. The recognition of South African Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook users as interlocutors with the potential to breach the rural–urban divide would increase the circulation of public health information. The 'black Twitter' community should be recognised as a relevant interlocutor between different forms of media and different communities. People with access to social media and the Internet should be encouraged to share public health messaging within their communities. For example, the online vaccine registration drive will only reach across the rural–urban divide if the digital citizens help others (particularly elderly or vulnerable people and those with underlying health challenges) who have no access to data and/or the Internet, to register.

1.3 Stakeholder relationships between private, public (SABC), community, and government media should be cultivated for public emergencies in the context of a public information and education campaign. The SABC should be included in GCIS planning meetings of communicators across government. These are critical to a shared strategy for any future public health emergency.

1.4 There is a wealth of knowledge in universities and non-governmental and civil society organisations that the public sector can leverage. Academic, civil society, and social partner networks are very important during crises.

1.5 A presidential committee should look into the sustainability of the public, private, and community media to ensure that the media sector survives the challenges of economic stagnation, multinational tech monopolies on advertising, and the changing patterns of media consumption to digital platforms.

2. Digital access

2.1 The DCDT must actively pursue policies to roll out infrastructure to service all communities and seek solutions that can lower data costs and ensure the permanent zero-rating of public interest websites (e.g., education, health, and news information).

2.2 Various departments (and regulators) responsible for telecommunications, spectrum, universal access, and regulation have long produced reviews, reports, policy documents, and White Papers without significant progress towards empowering all South Africans with affordable access to the

Internet. Without political will at the highest levels and the Presidency and cabinet driving this programme, the intentions set out in the 2015 National Integrated ICT Policy Review Report (DTPS, 2015) and the 2020 White Paper on Audio and Audiovisual Content Services (DCDT, 2020) might well meet a similar fate. Integration of departments, regulations, and services is critical to treating the entire communications landscape (which is now fundamentally digital) as one entity requiring cohesive and comprehensive plans and strategies.

3. Capacitating government communications

3.1 A growing cadre of new government communicators is needed, who embed communications work in broad civil society activism and form stronger partnerships with civil society.

3.2 The Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation should engage with the National Treasury and other departments to improve their understanding of the role of the GCIS as the department planning and buying media on behalf of government. The GCIS should be empowered to manage (adequately resourced) communications campaigns on national emergencies, which require the obligatory use of the GCIS for media buying.

3.3 More significant investment is needed in the promotion and use of all 11 official languages across all government communications platforms. A multilingual approach that includes sign language is vital for public health messaging. The language services unit at the GCIS should urgently be capacitated, so that government messaging can be distributed in all official languages on government websites and social media accounts. This approach will set an important precedent and needs to be adequately resourced.

4. Capacitating the SABC

4.1 Given the SABC's strategic importance in terms of its audience reach and multilingual platforms, it is arguably the most important media entity for reaching South Africans in a credible, consistent manner. Adequate funding for the public broadcaster is needed to support its public mandate, particularly during public health emergencies. The SABC's current funding model, which relies on advertising revenue and licence fees for the bulk of its operating expenses, makes the public broadcaster particularly vulnerable to income loss during a national emergency.

4.2 The PanSALB's working relationship with all government departments (particularly Health and Basic Education) and the SABC needs to improve to ensure the inclusion of deaf learners.

5. Capacitating community media

5.1 Funding is needed for community radio stations and small independent publishers to fulfil their mandate on media diversity and development.

5.2 Community media organisations need to draw on credible community-based leaders and individuals from within local and district municipalities to share information. The relatability of the messenger is key to localised public health messaging.

5.3 The government communications system and the public broadcaster should work more closely with the MDDA to share relevant public health content across all community media networks.

5.4 To maximise the potential of community radio and television stations and the network of independent publishers as expressions of media diversity and development, more coherent, sustainable funding grants are needed for public health content, capacity building programmes, and the development of an enabling environment for sustainable community media.

6. Creating an enabling environment for public interest journalism in the private sector

6.1 As a partner in health and risk communication, the private media are as important as the public and community media; a good partnership that fosters a relationship with news journalists and editors is key in times of crisis. At present this relationship is brokered by the SANEF with the Presidency. It could be strengthened by the Presidency recognising the importance of a healthy, functioning, and permanent forum through which to engage on a regular basis with public, community, and private news media.

6.2 Covid-19 has intensified the financial sustainability crisis facing commercial media, large and small, as digital advertising has been drawn towards the multinational social media platforms and Google. As in other countries, government needs to develop a strategy to deal with platforms that operate internationally without paying taxes and whose dominant share of advertising revenue has had such damaging effects on national media. Government must also pay attention to the call for financial support from tax income for public interest media, which disseminates key information to the wider population. Three recent reports on the financial crisis of the South African media all call for intervention at the highest levels to rescue the industry (Rumney, 2020; Satchwell et al., 2021; OSF-SA & Rhodes JMS, 2021). The existing vehicle, the MDDA, could be enlarged in scope to act across the news media industry to provide funding and ensure a healthy and diverse public interest media. However, the MDDA would need to operate with transparency, oversight, and credibility to fulfil this role.

7. Further research

Since the Covid-19 pandemic still lingers, and given the likelihood of future public health emergencies, an independent, longitudinal research study is needed into the effectiveness of government communications and engagements with civil society and other relevant agencies in combating Covid-19. The next phase of this report will seek to frame the longitudinal study, which will include a financial analysis of media spend across government, a review of the role of service providers in the roll-out of the communications campaign, and mechanisms of accountability for communications campaigns led and managed by government communicators. An intersectional (gender, race, and class) analysis of the drivers of messaging will be included, given the initial findings by various studies that men have by far been the most prominent sources of information in 2020. The next phase will examine the vaccination campaign as a focal point for the communications strategy roll-out.

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ANNEX 4.1: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The South African Government's 2018 Communication Policy stressed 'communication driven by democratic principles of openness and participation, which are guided by transparency, accountability and consultation' (GCIS, 2018:7). Key development communication scholars likewise emphasise a process based on dialogue that '[seeks] change at different levels, including listening, building trust, sharing knowledge and skills, building policies, debating and learning for sustained and meaningful change' (Dagron, 2009:6). This approach seeks to empower audiences and encourage participation in collective decisions at all levels of society. Servaes and Malikhao (2004:1) echo the need for dialogue and stress the social nature of the process:

> In essence development communication is the sharing of knowledge aimed at reaching a consensus for action that takes into account the interests, needs and capabilities of all concerned. It is thus a social process. Communication media are important tools in achieving this process, but their use is not an aim in itself – interpersonal communication too must play a fundamental role.

Development communication policy prioritises the promotion of participation and social change, using methods and instruments of interpersonal communication, community media, and modern information technologies (Fraser & Restrepo-Estrada, 1998). This has enormous potential in health emergencies.

Regarding communications in a health crisis, Miller (2017) posits that appeals induce an emotional reaction, such as an obligation or responsibility. Nagler and LoRusso (2018), on the other hand, suggest that health and risk communication must draw from both scientific and political domains. They caution against inconsistent, divergent, or contradictory messaging, which could create confusion about what to do and how to behave. Messaging must draw on credible sources like the WHO, science experts, medical practitioners, and ministries of health.

The efficacy of health risk communication is influenced largely by the type of risk, the current knowledge of that risk, and the psychological and sociocultural factors that affect how the message is communicated (Lyyttimaki & Assmuth, 2017). Because Covid-19 was a novel virus, much of the science around it was uncertain. This made it imperative to be as transparent as possible and to update messaging continuously. In communicating about health risks, the issue is not only about determining the message (i.e., what to say); rather, it is a multifaceted process of understanding the nature of the risks, the diversity of stakeholders, the complex media environment, the attitudes of people that can affect their risk perceptions, and considerations of how, to whom, at what point, and through which medium content is delivered (Paek, 2016). In public health crisis like Covid-19, health communication experts, health behavioural change professionals, patient education specialists, health experts, and relevant agencies and institutions must join forces to respond to and manage the crisis.

Dutta (2015) recommends the culture-centred approach to communicating during a crisis. Health messages must be framed with erased voices and the most vulnerable populations in mind, while using local understanding of healthy behaviours and what people value to inform health messages and local programme development. Culture-centred tactics may include collecting evidence from

communities about attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions through community engagement activities and then letting such evidence inform both the content of messages and the channels for communicating them. Another strategy is using opinion leaders and community- or faith-based organisations to convey health messages in a language and manner with which communities can identify. Using community members to reach vulnerable communities can also be effective in local contexts.

Such strategies are likely to be useful in communicating about Covid-19 risk. When science experts or scientific organisations propose guidelines for communicating and/or responding to the pandemic, attention should be given to the cultural contexts within which communication occurs. Recommended communications approaches and content must be adapted to help people understand the messages and recommendations for behavioural change (e.g., changing from shaking hands to bumping elbows).

ANNEX 4.2: ICT POLICIES AND LEGISLATION

Table 4.3: Timeline of ICT-related policies and legislation

1994	Reconstruction and Development Programme of the Government of National Unity (replaced by the National Development Plan)
1996	White Paper on Science and Technology (1996), followed by the National Research and Technology Foresight (1999), and the National Research and Development Strategy (2002)
	Sentech Act 63 of 1996
	Telecommunications Act 103 of 1996
1999	Broadcasting Act 4 of 1999
2000	Independent Communications Authority of South Africa Act 13 of 2000
2002	South African National System of Innovation
2003	Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act 53 of 2003
2006	Black Economic Empowerment Charter for the ICT Sector Council
2007	Broadband Infraco Act 33 of 2007
2008	Department of Science and Technology's Ten-Year Innovation Plan (2008–18)
2010	Karoo Core Astronomy Advantage Area (Karoo Core AAA) declared a protected area
2011	New Growth Path
	Draft Under-Serviced Area Definition Regulations and the Explanatory Memorandum
2012	Presidential Infrastructure Coordinating Commission launched Strategic Integrated Project 15: Expanding Access to Communication Technology
	National Development Plan
2013	South Africa Connect: Creating Opportunities, Ensuring Inclusion (Broadband Policy)
	ICT Research, Development and Innovation Roadmap
2014	Electronic Communications Amendment Act 1 of 2014
	ICASA Amendment Act 2 of 2014
	Infrastructure Development Act 23 of 2014
	The Square Kilometre Array and MeerKAT Telescopes categorised as Strategic Integrated Project 16 under the National Infrastructure Plan
2015	Broadcasting Amendment Bill of 2015
2016	South African Research Infrastructure Roadmap
	National Integrated ICT Policy White Paper of 2016
2017	National Research and Development Strategy of South Africa
2019	Electronic Communications Amendment Bill of 2018 [letter of withdrawal, 13 February 2019]
	White Paper on Science, Technology and Innovation of 2019
	Data Services Market Inquiry Final Report (2 December 2019) – Recommendations

2020	Strategic Infrastructure Projects, which include:
	No. 22: Digital Infrastructure
	Subproject: a. National Spatial Infrastructure Hub
	No. 30: Digitising of Government Information Programme
	No. 35: SA Connect Phase 1B Programme
	South African Science, Technology and Innovation Indicators Report
	Electronic Communications Act 36 of 2005 Invitation to provide written comments on proposed policy and policy direction on rapid deployment of electronic communications networks and facilities
In progress	Decadal Plan for White Paper on Science, Technology and Innovation (2020–30)

ANNEX 4.3: CIVIL SOCIETY COMMUNICATIONS INTERVENTIONS

To begin to outline civil society's responses to government communications in the pandemic, the research team interviewed the founder of CovidComms SA, a community leader in the Western Cape, and activists from the Eastern Cape Health Crisis Action Coalition (ECHCAC).

COVIDCOMMS SA

CovidComms SA was established in recognition of the need for authoritative, easy-to-understand information in as many South African languages as possible, which could be distributed within the constraints of the national lockdown. Chris Vick (2020) had triggered a discussion on social media, after which several communicators, journalists, and others came together. The founders' goal was to 'fill the gaps' in government communications, and participants were united by a desire to use their skills to make more public health information available to people at large. The core principle was to produce material that would lead to behavioural change to mitigate the impact of Covid-19. The emphasis, therefore, was on producing compelling, well-written, and well-designed information products that could easily be disseminated through social media and on WhatsApp; no print products were produced because of the restrictions on movement. Information was gathered from government regulations and press releases, labour organisations, scientific organisations, and trusted sources of local and international news.

From the outset, the founders saw CovidComms SA's initiatives as assisting government in addressing the massive challenges around communications and behavioural change. But, Vick stresses, the initiative was not part of any government project. Rather, it was a civil society initiative, and the network has prioritised links with social justice initiatives. Nevertheless, it kept government informed of its programmes, meeting with senior officials to brief them on the network's objectives and programme. Government expressed support but did not provide any practical assistance. Given the challenges of this environment, the CovidComms SA team focused on engaging with civil society. The team has ongoing discussions with SECTION27, Corruption Watch, the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation, and Gauteng Together about expanding its scope of work to include other social challenges, such as racism, xenophobia, corruption, gender-based violence, and economic exclusion.

CovidComms SA is formalising its existence. 'We recently applied to the Department of Social Development for registration as a non-profit organisation. We have been informed that approval of the application is in its final stages', said Vick. Discussions are ongoing about the future of the network, which is contingent on the immediate threat of Covid-19 and on the appetite within civil society for a progressive, professional communications agency providing end-to-end communications services to the social justice sector. Key elements of these discussions are the importance of growing a cadre of new communicators, embedding communications work in broad civil society activism, and building stronger partnerships with civil society organisations with a common purpose.

Conflicting communications in the Western Cape

Faizel Petersen is the Chairperson of the Goodwood Ratepayers Association, where he represents his community in interaction with all levels of government (Petersen, 2020). Goodwood is predominantly a middle- to upper-income community, and many residents have higher education and formal-sector jobs. They have their own smartphones and good Internet connectivity, and many have DStv. During alert levels 5 and 4, Petersen's role centred on the compliance of homeless people who had not been moved to shelters.

Petersen also represents the Manenberg Aftercare Centre, an afterschool centre where children can do sport, art, music, and the like. They receive a warm, cooked meal at the end of the day. Petersen mentors some of the children and helps them draft CVs, apply for ID documents, and so forth. Many residents of Manenberg are poor, with precarious, often casual, employment; they were especially badly affected by the lockdown. This community predominantly gets its news through the radio and tabloid newspapers like *The Daily Voice* and *Die Son*.

Petersen engaged extensively with government to have the Manenberg Aftercare Centre declared an essential service. He is well positioned to assess the differential access to and impact of government communications in the two areas. In his view, media campaigns in both communities were extensive, and communities knew what was required because government used a wide range of communication channels, including television, radio, newspapers, billboards on streetlamps, and even pamphlets on bathroom doors. In some areas, ward councillors drove around with loudhailers, telling people they needed to be inside, and when venturing out in public, had to wear masks, maintain social distancing, and sanitise. Nevertheless, the two communities experienced lockdown differently: there was more compliance in Goodwood, whose residents appeared to have a clearer understanding of the reasons for the lockdown and the importance of social distancing, as well as greater means to sustain such practices. The Manenberg community was less compliant: many people still walked around in groups, and children played in the streets. People could not look for casual labour during the hard lockdown and depended on assistance from area-based feeding schemes. Critically, information on where residents could access government food aid was non-existent. Many residents were therefore willing to risk breaking lockdown rules and regulations to find food.

Petersen observed significant misalignment between communication from local, provincial, and national government levels. Communication was too top-down in orientation, with an 'us versus them' approach when it came to national, provincial, and local governments. The president addressed the nation after consultation with national ministers and the National Coronavirus Command Council. However, Petersen argues there should have been engagement with the leadership of the various provinces and local governments, as each province has unique concerns. For example, the Manenberg community looked to the City of Cape Town for food parcels but were told it was a national issue. The lack of clear messaging around where to get help led to frustration and anger, undermining trust in 'government'.

Many community organisations defied the lockdown regulations to set up feeding schemes to assist struggling communities. The Manenberg Aftercare Centre wanted to continue to provide food for the children but were forced to shut down under alert level 5. Petersen reached out to the national and provincial departments of social development, but 'was given the run-around. No one was willing to take a stance and give a clear direction.' Approval was only granted six weeks after the start of the lockdown.

Petersen, who is classified as an essential worker, travelled between communities in the lockdown. But he was never stopped or questioned by any authorities who were supposed to be enforcing the restrictions. Such a lack of enforcement contributed to increasing non-compliance. While the military had been deployed, they were only stationed at strategic points. Police sometimes appeared to be unaware of their role during lockdown and what the lockdown rules were. Their main tool to enforce compliance was to arrest the person breaking the rules and release them on a R1 500 admission of guilt fine, but because few people could afford this, police seldom used this authority.

Government stated that homeless people would be placed in shelters (Cocks & Roelf, 2020). One such facility established by the City of Cape Town was a tented camp erected at the Strandfontein sports ground. Petersen argued that the City appears to have underestimated the number of people in need of shelter. Questions were also raised about why community centres were not used, rather than establishing an expensive new facility. Also, a large group of refugees were illegally camped in the Cape Town central business district – they wanted to be moved to other countries and not repatriated to their countries of origin. After legal proceedings, they were moved to Bellville (Paint City) and Goodwood (Wingfield) (Makinana, 2020). The Goodwood community were concerned because the refugees did not follow all the health regulations. Petersen raised these concerns with the authorities, but no one took responsibility for these sites.

A High Court ruling prevented evictions under the lockdown, which may have encouraged land invasion on open land. The resulting settlements were not serviced, which contributed to community protests (Evans, 2020). The invasions also created tension with people who had long been on housing waiting lists; they were pushed further down the list when the groups setting up the shacks demanded housing in exchange for agreeing to be moved.

Schools were another source of mixed messaging. For example, the national government wanted school feeding schemes to be halted, but the Western Cape chose to allow them to continue. Plans to reopen the schools also changed frequently and were poorly communicated, and a briefing by the Minister of Basic Education on 31 May 2020 was cancelled at the last minute (Mailovich, 2020). This led to confusion and frustration for learners and their parents.

Petersen also noted that there was little meaningful communication with communities to notify residents about door-to-door testing programmes or where testing would take place, and obtaining this information was not straightforward. Information on how to access government assistance (e.g., Covid grants) was hard to obtain when the roll-out was delayed. This led to a breakdown of trust,

especially when allegations of corruption emerged. Petersen's role as a community leader was to proactively bridge the gap between his community organisations and local provincial and national government. He went the extra mile to obtain information critical to his community; in some cases, he was able to access the offices of relevant ministers to obtain the information and the necessary resources to provide emergency relief. The communications weaknesses he observed affected all the people of the Western Cape, and it is unlikely that many could secure the same access to information that he did. The absence and, in some cases, the contradictory nature of information caused confusion and even contributed to hunger among communities.

The Eastern Cape Health Crisis Action Coalition

The Eastern Cape Health Crisis Action Coalition (ECHCAC) began to provide information on Covid-19 because of significant gaps in the information being shared with many rural communities (ECHCAC, 2021). The coalition noticed that in the early stages of the lockdown, information shared on radio and television focused primarily on the precautionary measures people needed to take to prevent infection. However, it did not consider the varying nature of communities (geographical, socio-economic, cultural, etc.) or variations in the existing burden of disease, levels of health literacy, and access to healthcare.

Karessa Govender, a programme manager at the Rural Health Advocacy Project, and Tlamelo Mothudi, health researcher at the Public Service Accountability Monitor, drove a Covid-19 Information Dissemination campaign on behalf of ECHCAC, contributing information that was particularly relevant in the Eastern Cape (Govender, 2020). Their objective was not to repeat government's messaging, but rather to share information on the context in which communities live and why they experience the pandemic differently. The campaign identified gaps in information via a brief survey conducted by the Rural Health Advocacy Project in the communities of Ngqeleni in the OR Tambo District; monitoring media in the province; and discussions within civil society and on social media.

According to Govender, the ECHCAC used radio because of its wide reach in the Eastern Cape: 'not a lot of people have Internet at their homes, not a lot of people have the luxuries that we have, like being able to go on a computer or to Google something. Some of them only have a radio, or they will have a phone that doesn't have WhatsApp, but they can access the radio on their phone and so they can get information that way.' They focused on the relationship between Covid-19 and variables such as diet-related non-communicable diseases, HIV/AIDS, mental health and well-being, the use of chronic medication, attending funerals, using homemade and traditional medication, food security, and the management of grief. The range of topics addressed was influenced by current events, and the team continued to assess local developments to ensure the topics were relevant.

IsiXhosa is the main language spoken in the Eastern Cape, so the ECHCAC 'primarily sought speakers who were fluent in IsiXhosa. Speakers who were from the Eastern Cape or lived in the province were particularly welcomed because of their understanding of the region and their ability to contextualise information.' Speakers ranged from academics, healthcare workers, and doctors to community health

workers, dieticians, psychologists, community and traditional leaders, and grassroots organisations. It was important that 'the people of the Eastern Cape were able to see themselves in the speakers.'

The ECHCAC collaborated with seven local radio stations, providing content for around 130 slots from May to late-2020, through interviews or audio recordings.

> We drew on the principle of community radio stations' playing a developmental role and leveraged this to share extremely important information, much of which was missing in the national and provincial discourse. We were unable to carry out a formal evaluation to determine the efficacy of the campaign meeting the needs of the communities in the Eastern Cape, but we received a positive response from many of the radio stations that we worked with.

The ECHCAC interventions are a prime example of organised civil society networks taking the initiative on public health emergency communications.

Conflict in science communication: The scientists collective

As happened many other countries, there were tensions between government's approach to managing the pandemic and the views of eminent scientists, some of whom served on the MACs set up by the Department of Health.

The first widely publicised disagreement involved Professor Glenda Gray, President of the South African Medical Research Council, who publicly criticised the phased exit out of the hard lockdown as 'nonsensical' and 'unscientific' (Karrim & Evans, 2020; see also Chapter 3.1). Health Minister Zweli Mkhize responded by saying the reports of her statements contained inaccuracies and in particular, her statements about seeing more cases of malnutrition at Baragwanath Hospital were 'factually incorrect' (Karrim, 2020). He also responded to dissatisfaction among some scientists that government was not taking their advice seriously by saying government had accepted all 50 advisories from the MACs. One result of this public fallout was the creation of the Scientists Collective, which then used the online Daily Maverick as a vehicle to disseminate information on Covid-19 directly to the public.

Gray convened members of the Scientists Collective for an interview with the research team for this chapter (Gray et al., 2020). In response to questions about their experiences of serving on the MACs, Marc Mendelson, Professor of Infectious Diseases and Head of the Division of Infectious Diseases and HIV Medicine at Groote Schuur Hospital, University of Cape Town, spoke of the frustration he and others felt when information they had given the minister was not made public. Dr Wendy Stevens, Head of Molecular Medicine and Haematology at Wits University, felt that 'the communication about testing was appalling across the board', which meant that 'most people did not understand testing'. James McIntyre, Chief Executive of Anova Health Institute, said of the scientists in the MACs: 'the depth of knowledge assembled was astounding' and 'world class', yet the knowledge did not reach the 'people who made the decisions'.

Concerns were also raised that information from the scientists was 'cherry picked'. There was no transparency about how government used the knowledge or who the gatekeepers were. Shabir

Mahdi, Professor of Vaccinology and Director of the Respiratory and Meningeal Pathogens Research Unit at Wits University, said: 'There was significant gatekeeping. … There was very selective citing of the information from the MACs, and sometimes recommendations from other advisory committees (such as those consulted by other departments) trumped the medical advice given to the Minister of Health. But those on the MACs did not know who was advising other departments; they were not public, not named.' It was difficult for the scientists to understand the processes and where the gatekeeping was happening. Dr Jeremy Nel, Head of the Department of Infectious Diseases at Helen Joseph Hospital, said that the structure of the MACs was 'ill conceived', adding that 'an independent advisory body was needed' with a 'public separation' from the Department of Health. By pulling the MACs into the Department of Health so that their communication was intended only for government, there was 'no independent voice for the scientific community', he said.

Professor Gray and several other scientists also felt that government was not communicating clearly enough with the public. They approached Mark Heywood, editor of Maverick Citizen (and former Treatment Action Campaign activist) and began to write for the public. They styled these articles as 'advisories' and tried to anticipate how South Africans could cope with the pandemic, be safe, and still live normal lives (Daily Maverick, 2021).

Initially the Collective involved professors Madhi, Gray, Mendelsohn, and Francois Venter, Director of Ezintsha at the Wits University Reproductive Health and HIV Institute; Dr Lucille Blumberg, Deputy Director of the National Institute of Communicable Diseases; and Dr Aslam Dasoo, Convener of the Progressive Health Forum. Others were drawn in for expert advice depending on the topic. A series of health advisories written by the Scientists Collective was published in the South African Medical Journal (Gray et al., 2021) and the Daily Maverick (2021).