

Covid-19 Country Report

Chapter 4: Government mobilization and communication

Convener: Martina Della Togna

Authors:

Prof Anthea Garman

Prof Mmantsae Diale

Ms. Pamela Halse

Ms. Thandeka Bukula

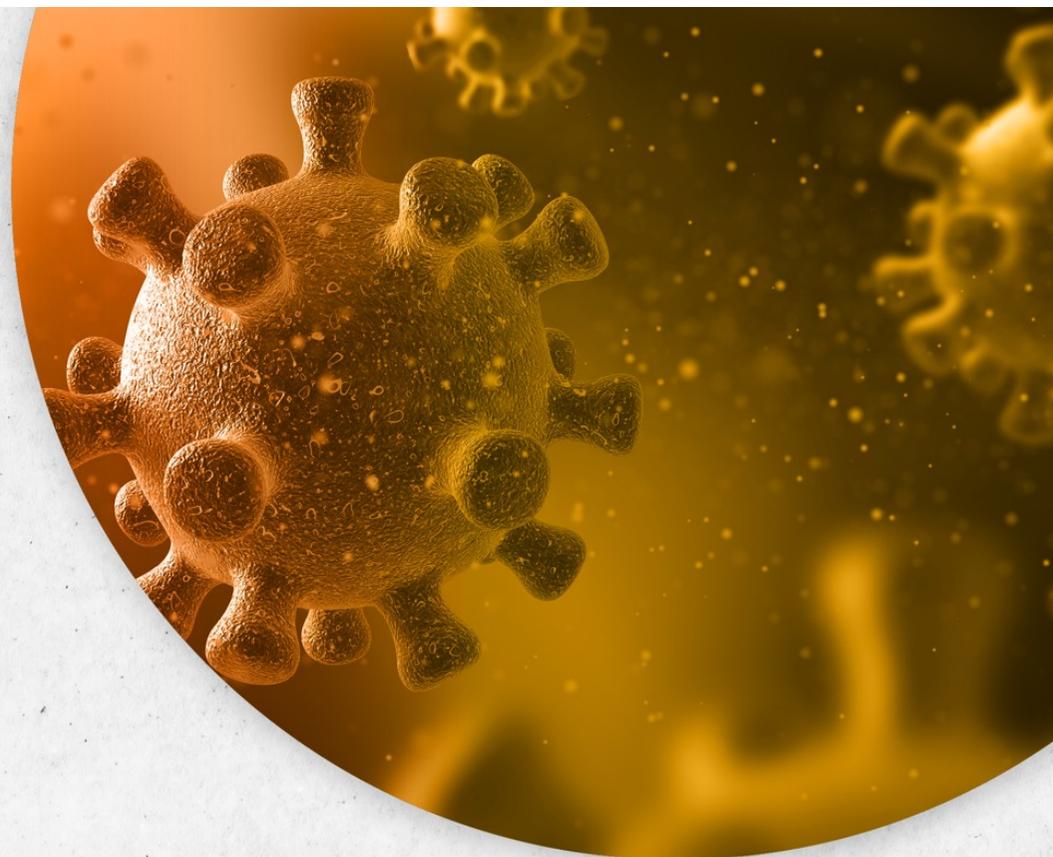
Dr Theodora Adjin-Tetty

Mr. Faizel Petersen

Prof Francis Hyera

Ms. Thandi Bombi

Dr Leti Kleyn



LET'S GROW SOUTH AFRICA TOGETHER

Purpose and relevance of study

This chapter investigates the capacity and effectiveness of government's communications strategy as the country went through the various stages of lockdown under the Covid-19 pandemic. The study probes **the working relationship between government communications** (at national, provincial, district and local levels) and other government structures involved in the containment of the pandemic; as well as the **relationship between government communications and public media, community media, private media, digital and social media, and organised civil society during the Covid-19 lockdown**, in order to determine the impact and efficacy of the communications and community mobilisation response to the pandemic. Recognising the **multilingual nature** of South African society, the urban/rural **digital divide** and the **prohibitive costs of data**, this report highlights preliminary lessons learnt.

The policy framework for the research

The South African Constitution prescribes the responsibility of government in communications as follows: “Transparency must be fostered by providing the public with timely, accessible and accurate information” – s195 (1) (g). The **2018 Communication Policy** stresses the promotion of “communication driven by democratic principles of openness and participation which are guided by transparency, accountability and consultation” (Govt Communication Policy 2018 p.7)

From a **health/risk communication perspective**, communication is not only determining the content of communication (that is, what to say), but it is a multifaceted process of understanding the nature of risks, the diversity of stakeholders, the complex media environment, attitudes of people which can affect their risk perceptions, as well as considerations for how, to whom, at what point and through which medium content is delivered (Paek 2016).

Literature review

1. International WHO / UNICEF / AU Guidelines

WHO collaborated with UNICEF) and IFRC to ensure that biomedical recommendations and recommendations related to communication are tested, adapted, localized and applied.

2. Covid-19 Plans and APP Reports to Parliament Portfolio Committee on Communications by entities including GCIS, DCDT, the MDDA, DOH, Brand SA and the SABC [VIA PMG Website]

3. SANEF reports

4. Acts and Regulations

5. Government Communications Policy

6. Government websites and social media accounts

** Full list available in the Chapter under references*

Who the research team interviewed

Interviews were conducted with senior officials and/or representatives from the **African Union, GCIS, DCDT, MDDA, CovidCommsSA, WHO, Brand South Africa, PANSALB, Goodwood rate-payers association, Eastern Cape health Action Committee, SANEF, Spotlight, the Scientists Collective and the SABC.**

South African Regulatory context

One of the most critical set of Electronic Communications, Postal and Broadcasting directions issued passed under regulation 10(8) of the DMA 2002 (Act No. 57 of 2002) was signed off by Minister of Communications and Digital Technologies, Stella Ndabeni-Abrahams on 26 March 2020. The scope of the directions was to ensure : Dissemination of real time public information / Access to communications infrastructure and digital services / Provision of essential postal services / Tracking and tracing of persons / Support Education. Health and Local Government.

‘The purpose of the directions was to impose social compact obligations on ... broadcast service licensees to broadcast public information .. in all local languages including sign language.’

South African Regulatory context

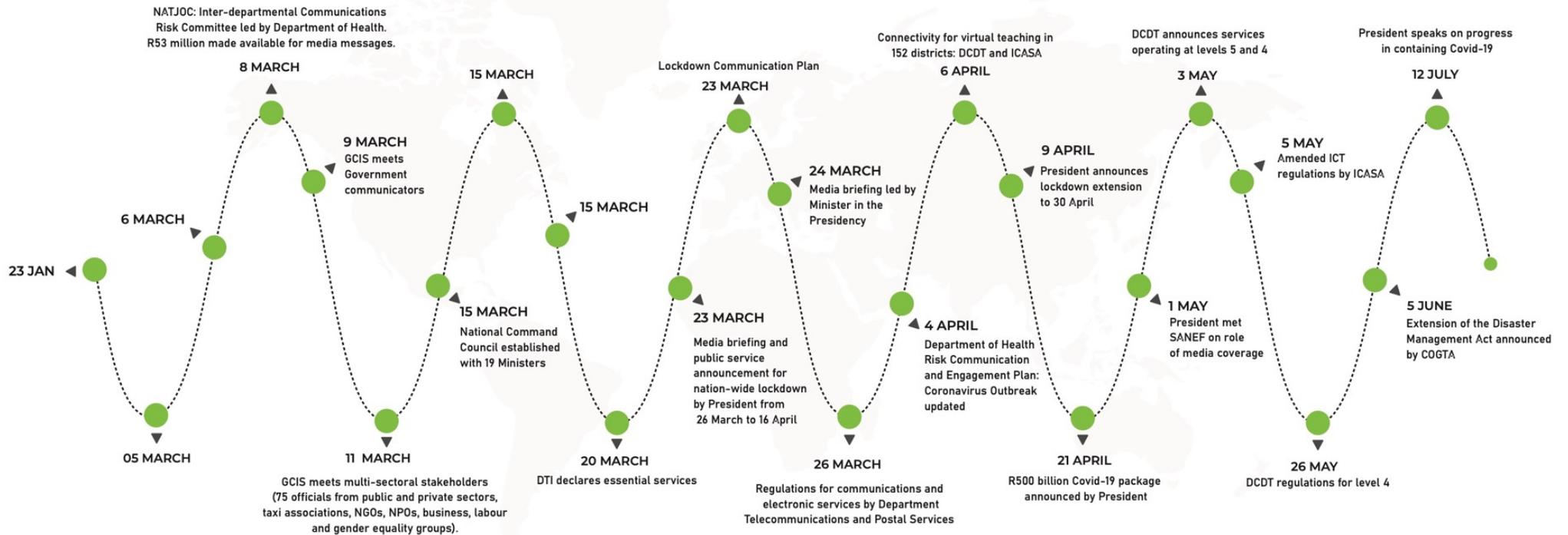
- Electronic communications services licensees, OTTs and ISPs bear the responsibility of **removing fake news** related to the Covid-19 from their platform immediately after being identified as such.
- Internet sites operating within .zaDNA top level domain name must have **a landing page** with a visible link to www.sacoronavirus.co.za.”
- ALL electronic communications service licensees were directed **to zero-rate access to local health and educational content websites** as identified by the DOH and the DBE.
- ALL broadcasting services licenses, were directed to **“increase their educational programmes** to support awareness of Covid-19.”



The net effect of these regulations resulted in an unprecedented increase in the digital footprint of the South African digital public sphere.

Communications Timeline: - January to July 2020

TIMELINE OF COMMUNICATIONS EVENTS IN LOCKDOWN 5 & 4



In summary the Chapter

- **Reaffirms** the constitutional mandate which **places an obligation on Government to communicate** which underpins the ongoing legitimacy of Government especially in times of national emergency/disaster.
- **Highlights** the relevance of the **development communications** approach to Government-citizen communications.
- **Urges** the South African Government to **fast track the approval and implementation of policy** initiatives designed to address the digital divide.
- **Motivates** for the urgent prioritisation of **digitally-accessible, multilingual communications** with a citizen feedback loop that is both transparent and responsive.
- **Identifies** the cost of data and cell phone network coverage as ongoing obstacles to citizens' access to the internet as a public good.

In summary the Chapter

- Supports the move to enable citizens' access to **zero-rated websites for education and health** as a valuable initiative towards combating data costs but is not extensive nor permanent.
- Recognises the precedent set by the private news media to make **free all Covid-19 journalism and reportage** as playing a significant role in treating certain kinds of information as a public good.
- Points towards the need to continue to understand South Africa as a highly diverse communications space in which **new media digital platforms** exist alongside **more traditional communication methods** (such as loud-hailing, posters, messages on product packaging).

Recommendations – 1. Communications Approach

1.1 We recommend a resort to a communications approach with humanitarian overtones first rather than a security driven approach which projects the might of the state towards enforcement of citizen behaviour change. We encourage an approach which emphasises public health communications principles and which use African storytelling techniques to customise generic public health messaging for a diverse South African citizenship.

1.2. We further recommend an approach that uses integrated communications practice - recognising the diversity of language and digital access rather than a more conventional market segmentation approach used in private sector marketing conventions.

Recommendations – 1. Communications Approach

The recognition of South African **Twitter**, **Instagram** and **Facebook** users as interlocutors with the potential to breach the rural/urban divide will increase the circulation of public health information. The South African "black twitter" community should be recognised as a relevant interlocutor between different forms of media and between different communities.

Citizens with access to social media and the internet should be encouraged to share public health messaging within their communities - for example the 2021 on-line vaccine registration drive will only reach across the rural / urban divide if digitally empowered citizens play an important role in assisting those, particularly the elderly, the vulnerable and those with underlying health challenges who have no access to data and/or the internet, to register.

Recommendations – 1. Communications Approach

1.3 We urge the cultivation and maintenance of stakeholder relationships for public emergencies between Private, Public [SABC], Community and Government media in the context of Covid-19 public info and education campaign, and the inclusion of SABC in GCIS planning meetings of communicators is critical to a shared strategy for future public health emergencies.

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

1.5 A presidential committee to look into the sustainability of the media [Public, Private and Community] in SA needs to work with the sector towards finding solutions to ensure that public interest media in SA survives the challenges of economic stagnation, multinational tech company monopolies on advertising and the changing patterns of citizen consumption of the media to digital platforms.

Recommendations – 2. Digital Access

2.1 In the past decade various Departments responsible for telecommunications, spectrums, universal access, regulation and regulators, etc, have produced reviews, reports, policy documents and white papers without significant progress being made towards empowering every single South African with affordable access to the Internet. Without political will at the highest levels, and the Presidency and the Cabinet driving this programme of a digitally empowered South Africa- the latest intentions (set out in the 2015 National Integrated ICT Policy Review Report and the 2020 White Paper on Audio and Audio-visual Content Services Policy Framework) might also not meet their targets. Integration of departments, regulation and services is critical to treating the entire communications landscape (which is now fundamentally situated in digital terrain) as one sector requiring cohesive and comprehensive plans and strategies. Parliament must also play its role in oversight over the regulator, Icasa, as well as push for the necessary policy approvals.

2.2 DCDT must actively pursue the **approval and implementation of the policies** aimed at ensuring that there is roll out of infrastructure to service all communities in the country as well as seek solutions to lower

Recommendations – 3. Capacitating Government Communications

3.1 It is important to ensure a growing professional cadre of new Government communicators, who embed communications work in broad civil society activism, and form stronger partnerships with civil society organisations.

3.2 There needs to be an intervention with the National Treasury and the collective of national departments through DPME aimed at improving the understanding of the role of GCIS as the media planning and buying department on behalf of the Government. GCIS should be empowered to manage communications campaigns [adequately resourced] relating to national emergencies which require obligatory use of GCIS for media buying.

3.3 There needs to be more significant investment in the promotion and use of all 11 official languages in all government communications platforms. A multi-lingual approach, including sign language, are necessary to national public health messaging. There must be an urgent capacitation of the language services unit at GCIS so that government messaging can be distributed in all official languages on Government communications websites and social media accounts. This approach will set an important precedent and needs to be adequately resourced.

Recommendations – 4. Capacitating the SABC

- 4.1 Given the SABC's strategic importance viz a viz 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 the SABC's public mandate, particularly when it comes to public health emergencies. The SABC's current funding model, which relies on advertising revenue and license 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, and particularly the DOH and DBE as well as the SABC needs to improve, to ensure the inclusion of deaf learners.

Recommendations –5. Capacitating the Community Media Sector

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 with profiles from within local and district municipalities to share information. **The relatability of the messenger is key to localised public health messaging.**

5.3 The GCIS and the SABC should work more closely with the **MDDA** to share relevant public health content across **all community media networks** in South Africa.

5.4 In order to maximise the potential of community radio and tv stations, and the network of independent publishers as expressions of media diversity and development, there needs to be a more coherent sustainable provision **of funding grants for public health content**, capacity building programmes and the development of an **enabling environment for community media sustainability.**

Recommendations – 6. Enabling Public interest journalism

6.1 As a partner in health and risk communication, **the private media are as important** as the public media and community media, so a good partnership which fosters a relationship with news journalists and editors is key in moments of crisis and disaster. At present this relationship is brokered by the SA National Editors' Forum with the Office of Presidency and could be strengthened by the Presidency recognising that a forum to engage on a regular basis with news media (public, community and private) is key as a healthy, functioning and permanent structure.

6.2 Sustainability of the news media in South Africa: Covid-19 has intensified the financial sustainability crisis that commercial media, large and small, have been facing as digital advertising has been drawn towards the multinational social media platforms and Google. As has happened in other countries this crisis will demand the attention of the Government to grapple with a strategy to take on platforms that operate internationally without paying taxes and whose extremely large share of advertising revenue has had such damaging effects on national media companies.

Recommendations – 6. Enabling Public interest journalism

Government must also pay attention to the call for financial support from tax income for “public-interest media” -- media which disseminates information key to a citizenry. Three recent reports, taking stock of the financial crisis of the South African media, all call for an intervention at the highest levels to rescue this industry. The existing vehicle of the **Media Development and Diversity Agency** could be enlarged in scope to act across the news media industry to dispense 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.

See the reports commissioned by SANEF, [Covid-19 Impact on Journalism](#) and [The Inquiry into Media Credibility and Ethics](#), as well as the Open Society Foundation-funded report [Thinking Globally, Acting Locally: Reviving and Sustaining Journalism in a post-Covid World](#) for details on extensive financial crisis news media are facing.

Phase 2 Research

Since the Covid-19 pandemic is still with us, and given that we are likely to face future public health emergencies, we encourage a **longitudinal independent research study** into the effectiveness Government communications and engagements with civil society and other relevant agencies in combating the Covid-19 health crisis with solutions found to challenges identified.

Phase 2 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 communications campaign roll-out**, and **mechanisms of accountability for communications campaigns** led and managed by government communicators.

An **intersectional [gender, race, 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.

Thank You

LET'S GROW SOUTH AFRICA TOGETHER



planning, monitoring
& evaluation
Department:
Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

