



# Government communications in 2023 and beyond

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## Introduction

The six and a half years since the EU referendum have been busy ones for the Government Communication Service, press officers, campaign teams and everyone in government dealing with the media and communicating with the public. Throughout Brexit, the coronavirus pandemic and the cost of living crisis, government communications has been one of the tools essential to delivering the government's policy agenda.

Successes include the campaign for people to 'Stay Home. Protect the NHS. Save Lives', which was highly effective. A poll conducted within a week of the prime minister's 23 March 2020 announcement of a national lockdown found that 90% of people believed that government communications on what to do in response to coronavirus had been very or fairly clear, and that 79% of people were avoiding leaving the house, up from 50% in the three days prior to the announcement of lockdown and launch of the campaign.<sup>1</sup> More recently, the Government Communication Service (GCS) has worked with the Ministry of Defence and others to rapidly declassify and clearly communicate intelligence on Russia's likely activities in Ukraine, helping to discredit practices such as false flag attacks, and rebut false claims made by Russian propaganda.<sup>2</sup>

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At the other end of the spectrum, the summer 2020 campaign calling for people to 'Stay Alert. Control the virus. Save lives' was less clear. By late June 2020, little over half of respondents to one Ipsos survey felt clear on who they could socialise with (59%), how to work safely (56%) or where they could travel (54%).<sup>3</sup> And autumn 2019's 'Get Ready for Brexit' campaign missed the mark, with National Audit Office research showing that the proportion of UK citizens who had looked for information about Brexit was "broadly unchanged" despite a £46 million outlay. That failure cannot be directed just at the communications, of course, as the government was trying to communicate that the UK would definitely be leaving the EU in a political context in which it was unlikely, to a public that had heard previous warnings of a no-deal exit which had not materialised.<sup>4</sup>

Government communications is not only about running campaigns targeted at the public or businesses. It is also about informing citizens about the activities of government in a way consistent with civil service values. Examples of factual inaccuracy or overly political framing in the way government communicates have raised questions about whether the right ethical safeguards are in place. For example, the No.10 press office repeatedly denied that parties took place in Downing Street during the coronavirus pandemic – only for the prime minister's official spokesperson to apologise on the record once fines were issued and Sue Gray's report was released. Such denials served the political purposes of the then prime minister but were incorrect. And questions have been raised over political messages on official government channels despite GCS's commitment that government communication "should be justified by the facts" and not "biased and polemical". The Northern Ireland Office's claim that "there will be no border in the Irish Sea between GB & NI", despite the UK–EU withdrawal agreement erecting one, is one such example. The Home Office's tweeted criticism of "activist lawyers" in August 2020 is another, although it was positive that this statement was subsequently retracted.<sup>5,6</sup>

### **Effective communication by the government is important**

In the current fiscal and political environment the government has a limited range of options it can use to pursue policy outcomes. The long-term pressure on the public finances and the always limited capacity to pass new legislation mean that this is likely to continue to be the case.<sup>7</sup> By helping to shape citizens' behaviour, government communications has the potential to be a relatively low-cost contribution to achieving the government's priorities.

A rapidly shifting media landscape presents both opportunities and difficulties for the way the government communicates. Media platforms offering a universal experience to all of their audience are getting less popular, while those giving a personalised experience are growing.<sup>8</sup> This will make it easier (and cheaper) for the government to reach specific segments of the population, but harder (and more expensive) to reach everybody at once. The type of media citizens consume is changing, with video becoming an ever more important medium, driven by social media apps like TikTok. Misinformation and disinformation pose new challenges and are weaponised by bad actors seeking to undermine trust in government.

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It is in this context that this paper – reflecting the themes of a private roundtable held at the Institute for Government in November 2022 and a small number of associated interviews – looks at how government communications can be most effective in 2023 and beyond, including by considering the role of the Government Communication Service (GCS), the professional body for government communicators. Comprised of more than 7,000 members of the communications function spread across ministerial departments, non-ministerial departments and public bodies, GCS is responsible for the professional development of government communicators and its central team oversees communications across central government.<sup>9</sup>

The content and conclusions of this paper should not be attributed to any individual roundtable participant or interviewee. We are grateful to Vuelio for its support for the roundtable and the production of this paper.

## **The government should establish a more coherent approach to communications**

### **Government communicators should have more input at the outset of policy discussions**

Too often, pressure from the media and public plays a role in forcing the government to U-turn on contentious policies. While in some cases U-turns are welcome, with the government accepting it had been pursuing the wrong policy, in others it is the result of an unprecedented media or public reaction to something the government continues to want to pursue, but cannot in the face of public opposition.

Part of the reason this latter type of U-turn occurs is because too often communications professionals are involved too late in the policy development process. Without the involvement of communicators during the formative phases of policy making, it is much harder for the government to craft a compelling narrative, giving policies the best chance of surviving contact with the media and public. Communicators can bring valuable insight by providing greater detail on the underlying public concerns or sentiments that the policy needs to address. And ministers and policy makers may not get a sense of what the likely reaction to a policy is – a piece of information that should be crucial to whether they proceed. There is, of course, nothing wrong with proceeding with a contentious policy, but it is much riskier if ministers do not anticipate the external reaction and feel compelled to U-turn as a result.

Having communicators in the room when policy is made is also crucial to ensuring the difficulty of communicating frequent changes in policy are recognised. As one attendee at our roundtable put it: "I've launched four different but related schemes in one year. Each of those schemes need communicating to people – explaining why it's different to the last one, what they're going to get from it, telling the people who aren't going to get it that they're not going to get it and they need to do something

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else.” This can make it difficult for the public to understand what the government is doing to help them and saps communications resource that could have been used to communicate other priorities.

Roundtable attendees were in agreement that there should be greater recognition among policy makers of the value of getting communications input at a very early stage of the policy process, to ensure that any policy design considers the concerns of those who will be required to communicate it when it is finalised and so that ministers can be made aware ahead of time what the likely external reaction to a policy will be.

### **GCS works best with a strong, smart central function**

Attendees at our roundtable agreed that a common success factor in the communication campaigns that worked most effectively was that it was the responsibility of the central GCS team, based in the Cabinet Office, to allocate money and determine the overarching messages and goals of the campaign. This meant the government “spoke with one voice”, was able to coherently sequence and prioritise different messages, and able to prevent any segment of the population becoming overloaded with them.<sup>10</sup> It also allowed the government to better take advantage of economies of scale when procuring services and advertising space.

There was also a sense that at present, important campaigns that do not fit neatly into any department’s core business can ‘fall through the cracks’ and fail to get funding. Having a central GCS team able to take a cross-government view of expenditure would ensure such campaigns, where they represent value for money for the UK government as a whole, are commissioned.

There are some smaller campaigns targeted at specific groups that are best run entirely at departmental or public body level – for example, those relating to animal health are best run by Defra. But on the whole attendees thought that the government’s communications are too fragmented. GCS has been described as “underpowered” and different departments and public bodies land similar messages less effectively than they would do if speaking with one voice.<sup>11</sup> Enhancing GCS’s central function to allocate money and co-ordinate delivery would help to join up these fragmented voices, making government communications more effective at driving positive real-world outcomes while improving the efficiency with which taxpayer money is spent.

Some have taken this a step further and argued that GCS should have a ‘single employer model’, with all communications professionals employed directly by GCS rather than their host department or public body.<sup>12</sup>

This could have beneficial effects, such as increasing the co-ordination of government communications between departments by incentivising acting as “a single government team” across media platforms and individual channels, and making it easier to direct ‘surge’ capacity into priority issues.<sup>13</sup> The latter in particular is often a big problem; for example, Lee Cain argued in his paper for the Institute for Government that “when trying to move high-performing members of staff from

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one department to another where demand and need was significantly greater... [departmental] fiefdoms held on to talent, viewing their own department's needs as more important than the government's".<sup>14</sup>

But it also has drawbacks – not least that by employing communicators centrally, they are less integrated into departments and so less likely to have the networks, expertise and trusted relationships required to constructively and capably provide crucial input into policy discussions. As one roundtable attendee pointed out, there is already co-ordination between departments – in particular, the directors of communication in each department can form an effective cross-Whitehall network.<sup>15</sup> And there is no reason that GCS needs to be a single employer to set robust functional standards and offer high-quality learning and development opportunities to communicators across government.

### **GCS's remit should be expanded to include GOV.UK**

According to its functional standards, the communications function has responsibility for:

**Announcements, media management, [and] coordinated communication activities (including social media, branded campaigns, external affairs and stakeholder management) aimed to support the organisation's policy and priority objectives. This includes external and internal audiences.**<sup>16</sup>

Notably absent from this list is responsibility for the GOV.UK website. But as the government's 'shop window' it is one of its primary tools for communicating with the public and informing people about the activities of government.<sup>17</sup> The government is wrong not to consider it part of 'communications'.<sup>18</sup>

Before the advent of GOV.UK, responsibility for individual departments' websites was usually considered to belong to departmental comms teams.<sup>19</sup> But since the shift to GOV.UK it has been entirely owned by the Government Digital Service (GDS).

The way content on GOV.UK is displayed and prioritised is essential to informing the general public of government's activities. Meanwhile, the audience insights generated are crucial to government understanding what citizens want to know and whether they are able to find it. While it makes sense for the parts of GOV.UK that are geared towards service delivery to continue to be owned by GDS – for example, the GOV.UK One Login feature, which will provide a single portal citizens can use to access government services – overall responsibility for the content, design and analytics of the website should be transferred to GCS and, where applicable, incorporated by departments into their communication function as they see fit.

GOV.UK is also an important tool for ensuring that people outside government can hold it to account for its policy making. Digital teams understandably prioritise its mass service provision functions. However, this has led to a neglect of GOV.UK as a platform for providing the supporting evidence and data for policies. GCS (working with GDS where appropriate) should be set an explicit objective to develop GOV.UK as a coherent means of presenting government policy and its underpinning evidence.

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## Parliamentary statements are communications opportunities

Ministers' primary role at the despatch box is to inform the House of Commons of government policy, to allow elected MPs to scrutinise it. But, especially in a crisis, statements, questions and answers in parliament are communications opportunities. They appear on news bulletins and can be shared on social media. Their importance is reflected in the newly commonplace practice for parliamentarians of all ranks and parties to clip their speeches and post them on platforms like Twitter, Facebook and (more recently) TikTok to communicate with constituents and the wider public, as well as catch the attention of journalists.

What ministers say in parliament cannot be solely catered to external communications – whatever is said will always need to inform MPs of relevant policy detail and include messages to keep the government's own MPs on side. But a theme of our roundtable was that there should be greater input from communications professionals as to how parliamentary speeches can be used to communicate key messages to the public. While in some core departments this is the case as a matter of course, others could make more of the opportunity.

If parliamentary statements are fully integrated into a communications plan, it also means that they will be seen less as risks to be managed or distractions to be ignored. While there would undoubtedly continue to be tensions over whether statements are made to the House of Commons or announced to the public first, treating parliamentary statements seriously would help to reduce procedural conflict between departments and the Speaker of the House of Commons.

## GCS should recruit, retain and properly use the right people

The chief executive of GCS, Simon Baugh, was right to identify recruiting, retaining and properly using "great people" as one of three priorities for GCS's future in a recent speech.<sup>20</sup> Participants at the roundtable all agreed that GCS includes many excellent people, but most felt that it continues to lack some key skills, employs too many low performers and is not sufficiently attractive to the best outside talent.

### GCS is right to launch a mandatory accreditation scheme – as long as it does not disadvantage external recruits

In his speech, Baugh set out a proposal to introduce a "mandatory accreditation and assessment model to make sure all GCS communicators are operating at the expected standard".<sup>21</sup> This could be a positive step, ensuring the quality of communicators in government and potentially forcing ministers and policy professionals to take communicators more seriously. But it will only work if the skills codified within the accreditation are the right ones.

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Participants at our roundtable particularly emphasised the need for communications professionals to understand the policy area in which they are working in to be able to convey accurate information persuasively. This is also crucial to giving communicators the credibility necessary to be involved in policy discussions from the outset. While there will be some communication skills that are necessary across all government roles, any accreditation scheme should also have an element that assesses whether the communicator in question has sufficient knowledge of the subject area about which they will be communicating.

There was also widespread agreement that while some progress has been made, GCS is still lacking in digital, broadcast and data visualisation skills. GCS's 2022–25 strategy acknowledges that "there are pockets of exceptional broadcast and digital capability within GCS but these skills overall are in short supply" and calls for a "revolution in our digital, data, and content creation skills", while noting that "we must do more to increase broadcast and digital expertise to reach new audiences" with "data analysis and presentation... a core competency for government communicators".<sup>22</sup> Any accreditation scheme must also tackle this issue and ensure that communicators are literate in broadcast and digital communications and have at least basic data visualisation skills, even if they are not expert.

There was a sense that some essential communications skills had atrophied in recent years, such as the ability to build relationships with journalists, even simply by briefing them on the phone – although in part this was attributed to press officers feeling worried about a lack of backing from ministers and special advisers to exercise their judgment on what does and does not need to be communicated externally. And there was also a recognition that strong influencing skills are needed for communicators to be able to shape policy discussions – something that can be difficult to do, especially if policy teams (and in core departments, ministers) are not intelligent customers attuned to the importance of being able to communicate policies well. While both are difficult things for an accreditation scheme to directly measure, GCS should build this into its expectations about what makes a successful communicator.

For the accreditation scheme to be a success, it will also be important for GCS to assess candidates through interviews and simulated exercises where there is no single 'right answer', something from which it can learn from the successful Government Commercial Function accreditation.<sup>23</sup> This is one important way to prevent the accreditation favouring internal candidates who have learnt the 'right thing to say'. Another way of ensuring the accreditation does not favour internal candidates is to avoid linking it to the completion of certain learning and development courses. Doing so would render it a tick-box exercise that emphasises process over outcomes; there will be external communicators who already have the skills the accreditation tests for who would have to take these learning and development courses for no reason other than satisfying the accreditation's criteria.

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## **The government is right to enhance the training that professional communicators receive**

While GCS should not link the completion of learning and development courses to its accreditation, it is right to want to enhance its training offer. Pamela Dow, the former head of the Government Skills and Curriculum Unit, argued at a recent Institute for Government event that the government risked losing the battle for civil service skills.<sup>24</sup> Improving the development opportunities for communicators, as part of a whole-civil service effort, is important.

In this context, it is encouraging to see a focus on inductions for new senior recruits in the recent GCS strategy, which states that “we will develop a bespoke GCS leadership induction approach (programme, mentors, buddy) to ensure that our leaders are equipped to flourish in their new role”.<sup>25</sup> More comprehensive inductions is something the Institute has said should be implemented across government; our research has found that one of the biggest problems preventing external recruits from being successful in the civil service is that poor inductions start them off on the wrong foot.<sup>26</sup>

## **Reforms to pay and the way the GCS presents itself as an employer are essential to bringing in the right recruits**

Recent Institute for Government research argued that the government does not bring in and retain high-quality external recruits, and particularly specialists, as well as it should.<sup>27</sup> Attendees at our roundtable suggested the communications function is no different.

This was recognised in the GCS strategy itself, which said that: “Whilst we will always need people with generalist communications skills, we increasingly need people to complement their breadth of knowledge with deep and specialist expertise in one or more areas... We need new ways of attracting the best communications talent.”<sup>28</sup> Echoing the language in the *Declaration on Government Reform*, the strategy pledged to “develop new entry routes from industry, academia, and the third sector with flexibility to suit those who want to build a career in government and those who want a shorter tour of duty... [and] promote secondments to and from private and third sector organisations”.<sup>29</sup>

Most of the reasons GCS has struggled to attract external talent are replicated across the civil service – for example, job adverts are too often unintelligible, onboarding and security checks take too long and potential applicants are put off by the uncertainty over what post-employment restrictions will be placed on them.<sup>30</sup>

Two further problems have a particularly acute impact on GCS. The first is a pay gap with the private sector that, in the words of one roundtable attendee, “has grown massively in the past 10 to 15 years, making attracting... and retaining staff harder”. Uncompetitive remuneration is a problem across the whole of the civil service, but appears to be a particular problem in GCS, where civil service salaries do not allow the government to reliably attract the best people from outside or retain its most skilled communicators.



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There will always be some talented people willing to work in government at a salary well below their market value but “there is only so far you can stretch the elastic”.<sup>31</sup> Remuneration constraints mean the government substantially reduces the talent pool available to it. As another roundtable attendee put it: “We have challenges with hiring people who are used to private sector salaries. We tend to find that our people have made their money... elsewhere... and join us because they care about our mission and purpose. Meanwhile, people who want to build their career from the bottom up tend to hit a salary ceiling and go into the private sector for considerably more money.” To address this problem, GCS should have more flexibility to offer targeted higher salaries to people with the in-demand skills it needs.

The second problem is that government communications has an external reputation as a place which “moves slowly” and where people are “stifled” by civil service bureaucracy.<sup>32</sup> Once again, this problem is not one specific to GCS – it links to a wider problem with the civil service’s ‘employer brand’. But it has particularly negative consequences for the government’s ability to attract communication professionals, who are discouraged by the sense that the civil service is overly bureaucratic and does not prize innovation.

This perception is very often wrong – as one roundtable attendee put it, “once you get into central government communication you realise the speed at which it operates... if you’ve worked in a high-speed environment you’ll likely be a fit in a government role”. GCS should do more to present this alternative, positive vision of communication roles in government.

It was encouraging that the GCS strategy correctly identified that the communications function “must get better at highlighting the exceptional and unique roles and opportunities for Government communicators” and stated that “we need to build a more inspiring and motivating GCS brand to increase our profile and dispel the misconceptions around the profession”, committing to “create a brand strategy to attract more people who have built skills in the private and third sector to government communications”.<sup>33</sup> As part of any brand strategy, GCS should make a virtue of the speed at which government communicators work, which roundtable attendees pointed to as a unique selling point of a job in government.

### **Professional communicators should have a path to the top of the civil service**

Communications professionals do not feel they have a clear path to the highest echelons of the civil service as a communicator, impacting on the civil service’s ability to attract and retain the best talent. The most senior communications job in government is at director general level, and it is the only communications role at a level more senior than director.

This is another problem hardly unique to the communications function; previous Institute for Government research has found that experts across a range of functional domains are not afforded parity of esteem with policy officials.<sup>34</sup> This reduces the attractiveness of professional communicators joining or remaining in government

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because they do not feel it is plausible enough that they will be able to occupy a genuinely senior role in government, with commensurate prestige and pay, at the point in their career where they might be able to attract such pay and prestige elsewhere. It is the best communicators who will be able to find prestigious and lucrative jobs elsewhere and so will be able to leave the civil service, meaning that the lack of career paths for expert communicators deprives government of its top talent in particular.

To tackle this problem, there should be clearer career paths into the senior civil service for government communicators. And the role of chief executive of GCS should be appointed at a second permanent secretary grade, in line with previous Institute for Government recommendations.<sup>35</sup>

### **The communications function is too large**

The GCS strategy acknowledges that the size of the communications function has grown over Brexit and Covid and that there is room for headcount reductions. Roundtable attendees agreed, arguing that like much of the civil service there is a natural tendency towards constant expansion, and departments fail to effectively manage out poor performers or make them redundant where necessary. Some pointed to large departmental press offices and the proliferation of strategic communications units as examples of the overstaffing of communications teams – and to recent examples of successful reductions in those areas, such as the Home Office press office, as evidence that staff numbers could be cut and that smaller teams could mean less duplication.

The government has an ambition to reduce the number of civil service roles as part of a broad programme of public sector efficiencies. There is scope for some of these cuts to fall on communications teams. There are potential benefits on its own terms – more streamlined communications teams could prove better at their work and more able to focus on core priorities rather than producing what one attendee described as the current “deluge” of ephemeral communication. And reducing the size of the communications function could free up some savings that could be redistributed by increasing the remuneration of highly skilled communications roles, as argued above.

As part of the government’s programme of headcount reductions, departments should seriously consider the optimum size of their communications teams. And GCS could have a role in reviewing the capability of core departments and ALBs to inform decisions about communications teams’ size and structure.

### **The government should establish new ethical safeguards for communicators**

The role of GCS is to communicate the activities of the government to citizens, not to engage in partisan communication. Communicators should “make as positive a case as the facts warrant” but go no further.<sup>36</sup> As GCS’s 2022–25 strategy puts it: “Any statement that comes from official government channels should be justified by the facts. It should be objective and explanatory, and not biased or polemical.”<sup>37</sup>

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While it is inevitable that “the most positive case the facts warrant” will be a subjective judgment, most roundtable attendees agreed that GCS as an institution has sometimes struggled to live up to these standards in recent years. As one attendee put it, there are “repeated examples of departments doing comms work... that is overly driven by political priorities and ministerial demands, rather than serving the public”. The No.10 press office’s repeated denials that parties took place in Downing Street during the coronavirus pandemic is perhaps the most egregious example. But there are plenty of others, including the Treasury Twitter account’s assertion that the measures in Liz Truss’s mini-budget could realise potential savings worth £12,700 for a first-time buyer of a house in London earning £30,000 a year – which was subsequently retracted after the consumer rights expert Martin Lewis described the assumptions underlying the calculation as “nonsense”; and the Northern Ireland Office’s assertion that “there will be no border in the Irish Sea between GB & NI” despite the UK–EU withdrawal agreement erecting one.<sup>38,39</sup>

This sort of communication is not only a potentially inappropriate use of taxpayer money, but risks calling into question the impartiality of government communicators more generally. As an attendee put it: “The more you see [overtly political communication], the less cross-party buy in you will have for government communications as a necessary part of government functioning, as distinct from advocacy for the government of the day.”

The consensus at the roundtable was that government communicators need to be more aware of their professional ethical responsibilities as set out in the GCS propriety guidance – something that the GCS strategy recognised in committing to introducing mandatory training on the guidance – and it must be enforced more rigorously. Attendees also emphasised that ministers need to be more aware of what is and is not appropriate for government communicators to do and have a clearer sense of the circumstances in which they must rely on party political communication, while permanent secretaries should have a clearer sense of when overly political communication constitutes a misuse of departmental resources.

It would also be beneficial for communicators to more readily admit when the government has got something wrong, to avoid tying themselves in knots trying to defend the indefensible – although this is admittedly difficult if ministers are not prepared to sanction this approach, and in an era where you get “crucified” by the media for any missteps.<sup>40</sup> Attendees also debated whether bigger reforms were necessary to provide a more forceful way to improve standards. Ideas included creating a communications watchdog, importing some of the standards on accuracy applied to national statistics, or creating an additional duty for government communicators to communicate in the public interest as well as to support the government of the day, all of which are worthy of further exploration.

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## The government can improve the way it communicates

Structural changes to the way GCS operates and a strengthening of the ethical safeguards communicators operate under will help to ensure the government communicates more effectively and honestly. But there are further changes that can be made.

### The government should communicate more strategically, with better use of data

Attendees suggested the sheer number of communications campaigns the government runs – in the 2020/21 financial year there were 162 – indicates that they are not robustly assessed for their necessity and efficacy.<sup>41</sup> Roundtable attendees argued that too many of these campaigns are “baubles” that do not need to exist. Often, they duplicate existing work – as Lee Cain argued in his paper for the Institute for Government, too often there are “dozens of campaigns on different aspects of a policy when there should be just one”.<sup>42</sup> In some cases, they are the legacy of previous ministerial communications initiatives that have continued long after the relevant minister had left the department in question, leaving the campaigns with a questionable level of political backing and an unclear purpose. As one roundtable attendee described it, sometimes these campaigns:

**“Communicate to I-don’t-know-who, with no metrics for success or effort to measure whether it’s working, without a call to action... it’s a huge waste of money... and a pointless exercise.”**

Running so many campaigns not only fragments the government’s message and fails to provide value for money but also reduces the bandwidth available for other government communication. As one attendee said: “For every slightly nutty ministerial campaign, you undermine your ability to pursue other things that are urgent.” Another described how some of “the big strategic things that we could and should have communicated on... we haven’t done”.

The recommendation above to strengthen GCS’s central function would improve the way the government strategically communicates, helping to dispel the incentives that lead to the proliferation of departmentally owned, low-value campaigns and more effectively fit the campaigns that do run into a coherent, overarching message. There also needs to be an emphasis, permeating everything government communicators do, on evaluating the necessity and effectiveness of campaigns – and determining when it is or is not appropriate to launch, pause or stop them. The government needs to be more ruthless – both quicker to deem campaigns unnecessary or poorly performing and faster to shut them down when they are.

To inform these decisions, government communicators need to gather proper insight, including collecting and analysing real-time data. This is something they do already, but there is scope to go further. Buying expertise and analytics from third parties has

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a place and roundtable participants also emphasised that government communicators should make more use of the capabilities of the analysis function. As a roundtable attendee described it, “as you get faster news cycles, you’re going to need to focus on the things that matter and not get distracted, and for people to do that you need to provide them with good data” on which campaigns are working and which are not.

But there is only so much GCS can do, because ultimately the profusion of campaigns is in large part because of the incentives that act on ministers. The advancement of ministers’ careers can be dependent on making eye-catching policy announcements and it is GCS’s job to communicate them.

As the Institute has previously argued, the prime minister should make promotion more dependent on the delivery of policy, rather than its announcement.<sup>43</sup> For as long as announcing new policy is an effective way to climb the ministerial ladder, ministers will keep initiating ‘pet projects’. But it is very difficult to shift the culture of ministerial promotion. In the medium term, the role of government communicators is to stress-test ministers’ proposals and, once a minister has left a department, make an honest decision in collaboration with the new minister as to whether continuing the campaigns their predecessor set up is of genuine value.

### **The government should communicate more proactively**

In departmental press offices in particular there is great emphasis on reacting to negative news stories. But government communicators tend not to place enough emphasis on putting out information that increases public understanding of the positive things the government is doing.

As one partner of a successful communications firm we interviewed said:

**“If we’re trying to grow and improve the brand of a start-up, we pump out proactive, positive news stories. But too many government press officers spend too much time writing a two-line response to negative story after negative story, which goes at the bottom of the article. Government does fantastic things – for example, spending millions of pounds on health research – and gets little to no coverage out of it.”**

It is understandable that government communicators who feel buffeted on all sides by negative stories do not feel they can dedicate much of their time to proactive content. It is undeniably harder to get pick up for positive stories, particularly through traditional media outlets. And it is not appropriate for taxpayer-funded communications teams to publish and promote propaganda. But proactively informing citizens about government activity is consistent with ethical codes of conduct and important in explaining how taxpayer money is being spent.

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## The government should consider emphasising the lobby less

Roundtable attendees argued that part of the reason that the government communicates too reactively is because it is overly focused on 'the lobby', the UK's powerful political journalists.<sup>44</sup> For example, "the prime minister's morning meeting has long been dominated by a review of the daily newspapers and how to respond to them", with one media report in January 2022 quoting an adviser saying that "all you can do with that is focus on whatever's at the top of the media agenda".<sup>45,46</sup> A report in October 2022 suggested that one of Liz Truss's concerns on the day she decided to resign as prime minister was that "she had lost every national newspaper with the exception of the *Daily Express*".<sup>47</sup>

One attendee at our roundtable argued that: "There is a disproportionate focus, particularly at No.10, on [the lobby] and ministers are absolutely terrified about doing anything other than focusing on the lobby, [despite] there being this enormous opportunity to communicate directly with the public, not having your messages filtered by the media."

By focusing so much on the lobby, ministers in particular become too concerned about controlling negative stories that have already been published and not concerned enough about preventing such stories in the future. As one roundtable attendee argued it, too often ministers "read through today's papers, that were written yesterday, and panic about that, as opposed to getting their head up and thinking about where they want to get to".

Attendees also emphasised that there is an opportunity cost to spending time worrying about what major media outlets or lobby journalists are saying as opposed to communicating the government's preferred messages directly to target audiences, in particular via social media. As the market share of traditional media outlets, especially newspapers, continues to decline this opportunity cost will only become larger.

The GCS strategy was right to note that "despite 24-hour broadcast news and the transformative effect of social media, government communications is still disproportionately focused on print media and twice daily lobby briefings".<sup>48</sup> This is something particularly driven by ministers and the quality of government communication would improve if they instead allowed communicators to focus more on proactive and strategic communication, including via digital and broadcast channels.

This does not mean abandoning print media and traditional outlets, which remain an important part of how the government communicates and retain a wide reach. But it is right that serious thought is given to how much time and resource is spent on them – and whether this should be reorientated to place greater emphasis on different forms of media.

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## **Rebutting misinformation and disinformation is increasingly important – but should not be confused with rejecting genuine criticism of government policy**

Rebutting false claims has to be done sensitively and carefully. Press freedom is a central tenet of British democracy and the government has to be extremely careful not to attack this. It also has to retain credibility and overly aggressive rebuttal can look shrill and suspicious. But in situations where claims made about the government are genuinely false, it is important that they are rebutted – with transparent reference to the evidence that proves this to be the case wherever possible.

This is something the government has recognised and, as long as it is done appropriately, there is room to go further – although rebuttal will be believed only if the government has a reputation for trustworthy communication. It is also crucial that rebutting mis- or disinformation is understood to be distinct from government communicators expressing disagreement with legitimate criticism of the government's position. The government must not baldly state that something is wrong when the evidence is contested – that in itself is misinformation – and communicators in government need to keep a sharp distinction between facts and argument or opinion.

## **Conclusion**

Government communication is an important tool for the government to achieve its policy agenda. This paper sets out, based on discussions with experts, ideas about how government communications can function more effectively.

The government should take a more coherent approach to communicating, with a strong, smart, central GCS function co-ordinating cross-government communication and taking responsibility for the content of GOV.UK. Communicators should provide more input into parliamentary statements, which are communication opportunities, and participate more from the outset of policy formulation processes.

GCS's focus on attracting "great people" is welcome, as is its emphasis on introducing an accreditation scheme and improving the learning and development opportunities on offer. But there remain substantial barriers to attracting the best external talent into the civil service – most notably pay and GCS's 'employer brand' – and unclear career paths for communicators in government makes it harder to retain staff.

Meanwhile, recent controversies around government communications have highlighted problems with the existing ethical safeguards. Government communicators need to be more aware of their ethical responsibilities as set out in the GCS propriety guidance, the guidance must be enforced more rigorously, and there may be scope for more radical reforms. The more trustworthy communications this should lead to would benefit public discourse and make it easier for the government to carefully rebut genuine mis- and disinformation – something that will continue to increase in importance.

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