

The vanishing art of SA government communications

 By [Chris Vick](#)

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Chief of government communications Jimmy Manyi's new "centralisation" policy is ill-conceived in every respect - from the professional incompetence of staff through lack of essential understanding of what communication is all about right down to the very *raison d'être* of its conception.



On the same day Jimmy Manyi proudly announced Cabinet's backing of his new "centralisation is everything" government communications strategy, with a [billion budget for the media outlets that tell the truth about service delivery](#), there were signs that at least one government minister wasn't going to leave his fate in the hands of the information tsar.

Business Day's exclusive announcement on Thursday morning, 9 June 2011, of a radical shake-up of parastatals was remarkable not only because of the impact of the news, but because it was based on a leak from Cabinet -- several hours in advance of Manyi's carefully-scripted Cabinet media briefing.

On the face of it, it may not seem so remarkable. You could write it off as a predictable consequence of the rather strange decision to hold media briefings the day after Cabinet, rather than issuing a statement on the same day (as was the case under the previous GCIS regime). So you end up with today's news tomorrow.

Discontent has been brewing for some months

But discontent has been brewing for some months against the centralisation of media management by people with a limited knowledge of how the media works.

It started several months ago, when details were leaked of GCIS' attempts to corral government communicators into herd behaviour and trample on their relationships with their principals.

The unhappiness has continued to bubble. The first draft of GCIS' strategy, presented to Cabinet sub-committees some months ago, was questioned for being founded on the assumption that a stick gives you better media results than a carrot.

So the consequences of Thursday's leak could be quite profound, not only for the people affected -- Eskom chairman Mpho Makwana, for example, told Bloomberg he was only aware of his dismissal when he read his morning paper - but for whoever spilt the beans, as he or she risks Cabinet censure and has violated the GCIS protocol on news from Cabinet.

Significant stretch of the imagination

It would take a significant stretch of the imagination to think GCIS was prepared to violate its own protocol (not to mention work the media so effectively). And its apparatchiks wouldn't want to run the risk of being seen to promote the interests of one Cabinet minister at the expense of the collective.

Which means the fingerprints on the front page of Thursday's *Business Day* could be those of public enterprises minister Malusi Gigaba, who was conveniently protected and promoted by *Business Day*: Protected by the delightfully crafted disclaimer in the article that "neither minister Gigaba, nor his spokesman, Makhosini Nkosi, were commenting on the changes yesterday"; and promoted by the description of the shake-up as "a dramatic show of force by minister Gigaba".

Government probably wouldn't agree, but *Business Day*'s exclusive was actually an example of government communications at its best:

1. You leak the information to the daily that is most influential in your space (Daily Maverick excluded, of course), ensuring that those most captivated by the issue get the story the way you want them to.
2. In doing so, you elevate the issue from being a blob at the end of a statement - which is how government appointments are conventionally reported in Manyi's missives -- to a matter of some consequence.
3. You brief the editor directly to ensure the matter gets the correct treatment and doesn't get downplayed or misunderstood by a reporter or subeditor.
4. You then seemingly make yourself unavailable to either confirm or deny the facts.
5. Congratulations on a job well done.

One dimensional, rather naïve approach

But the current government communications approach - and the new strategy -- puts it in conflict with many of the people directly responsible for managing perceptions of government and ministers. It provides a one-dimensional and rather naïve approach to dealing with news and in dealing with the media.

If you doubt this, consider how GCIS' own news agency, Bua News, reported the adoption of the strategy: It reported that Manyi had "pleaded with the mainstream media not only to criticise, but to report on important information which South Africans deserve to know".

Deserve to know? Now there's a new news value to add to your editorial charter.

GCIS' new strategy, with its information on centralising pretty much everything, confirms that it is under pressure to deliver not just basic services, but government information too.

Should be read against

It should be read against the new proposed protection of information legislation (buried in process, but far from dead), the constant push for the media tribunal and other attempts to manage information flows.

It should also be read in the context of the day-to-day posture adopted by GCIS in dealing with the media. When they fire

off bad-tempered SMSes and emails to journalists in the morning, the nice people at GCIS would probably argue that they were simply doing their jobs. [Alastair Campbell](#), Tony Blair's former spin-doctor, used to say the same thing -- and repeated it when he came to South Africa earlier this year to advise government communicators on "best practice".

But many political reporters know it doesn't work best that way. They would be quick to remind you of the impact of informed and skilled former government communicators such as [Joel Netshitenzhe](#), who clearly understood the importance of managing messaging and working media relations.

The same political reporters (and, I have to admit, myself as well) also hanker for the dexterity and skill of former ANC communicators such as department of information and publicity head [Pallo Jordan](#) and [Gill Marcus](#) -- or if you want to go back even further, to the king of DIP in exile, Thabo Mbeki. Some political reporters, having endured one too many of ANC spokesman [Jackson Mthembu](#)'s liquid-soaked soundbites, occasionally wish [Jessie Duarte](#) was back in Luthuli House. There is even one (just one) who bemoans the absence of [Carl Niehaus](#), who apparently had an ability to see and convincingly tell a story -- even though his own personal story rivalled [Khanyi Mbau](#)'s.

In dire need

Government, and the ANC, are constantly in dire need of skilled, sophisticated spin-doctors who know their subject matter, who know how the media works and who recognise the power of strong and honest relations with journalists.

That doesn't mean you need people who genuflect to the media. It doesn't mean you should not be assertive and robust in dealing with journalists. It just means it's counter-productive to treat them badly.

It's rare to find government communicators who know that PR is short for "Public Relations", not "Press Releases", and who are able to manage their principals' expectations while building their understanding of how to get consistently good coverage - not just on the 7pm SABC bulletin, but in all media.

The situation is compounded by the fact that government's attempts at using [social networking](#) are feeble: postings by President Zuma and his ministers are generally cut-and-pastes from media advisories. They do little to mobilise or inform the public. There is no call to action - just 140-character news diary excerpts.

Seem to devalue impact

Even some of the more sophisticated communicators in government seem to devalue the impact of their own social networking platforms - so instead of using the medium to pump the message, they use it to let their 5000 Facebook followers know they're in town and looking for a party.

What's lacking is a desire to understand how the media works, or how to work the media -- whether it's mainstream or new technology. Instead, the attitude often seems to be that if you don't understand it, you don't waste time working out how to deal with it - you just hit it on the head.

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ABOUT CHRIS VICK

Chris Vick has spent seven years in the government communications environment. He has never attended a Cabinet meeting, nor has he attended a gathering addressed by Jimmy Manyi. He currently runs Black, a communications consultancy, and is looking forward to writing a regular column on the media and politics for iMaverick, the Daily Maverick's revolutionary new i-newspaper. Follow him on Twitter at @chrisvick3.

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