

How politicians fail to peddle policies to the public



By [Thabani Khumalo](#)

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Governments in a democracy seldom influence their image favourably by ignoring the role played by the mainstream media in providing political, economic and social information - and in interpreting events for their citizens. Politicians, therefore have a responsibility to promote access to their offices and services, and thus enhance their image and building their reputation.



During apartheid, a culture of secrecy, disinformation and restrictions on communication and information dissemination, and desire to control the media had infused government thinking and practice. The government of the day was perceived by the black majority as a big man living somewhere in Pretoria - inaccessible, unaccountable, unapproachable, unavailable, unquestionable, aggressive, authoritative, inhuman and short tempered. Government-driven developments were his initiative and would be delivered without consulting and involving the affected communities and their leaders.

The introduction of democratic constitutional guarantees in 1994, in respect of freedom of communication and the public's right to information, promised a new open, transparent and accountable style of government. This has been strengthened by the practice of the democratic government which has, in Parliament and in the civil service, worked hard to open up the channels that promote mutual communication, collective leadership, public participation, transparency, good governance principles and the culture of accountability.

Need the media

Politicians, whether they like it or not, need the media to peddle their policies, programmes and campaigns to the public. I have been observing and analysing communication campaigns being delivered by top ranking politicians. The question I often ask is this, "Are they really communicating?" Answer - no. Most of them are simply appalling.

Politicians in government have proved hopeless when it comes to matters of corporate image, reputation and perception

management, not to mention public and media relations. These politicians like calling media conferences in order to voice their views and visions without willing to answer journalists' questions.

Some have become so arrogant that they expect respect and royal treatment from the media. When this is not forthcoming, they blame it on anything from racism, cheap journalism, jealousy, lack of understanding of the bigger picture and hidden agendas. They even accuse the media of vicious, vacuous, vitriolic and inane attacks, and of displaying a tiresome and prosecutorial tone.

To ensure that they threaten and dominate the mainstream media, they employ ex-journalists to harass their ex-colleagues and to encourage them to undermine the rules of the newsroom. This creates an impression that politicians do not respect the constitutional freedoms of the media and journalists to operate freely, and that of citizens to be informed.

Comfort the afflicted, afflict the comfortable

The fact of the matter is that the country's democracy needs journalists with the skill and courage to dig for facts and guts to disseminate them to the public. In a democracy, media is supposed to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

Despite being backed by fully resourced communication structures (national, provincial and municipality levels), politicians spend a fortune on advertisements and advertorials rather than on public and media relations when highlighting their achievements.

My impression is that if a minister is delivering, it needs publicity rather than advertisement. Some of the projects these politicians handle could generate huge publicity if they can be properly packaged and presented to the media and general public. However, earning a space in the media rather than paying for it, takes skill and expertise.

Advertisements are only effective when used to promote the strength of a service or product, and not to seek publicity about personalities behind the service or product. It is even worse when an image of a politician is included in an advertisement. The all-over-the place press, radio, TV and billboards advertisements about politicians are not only boring, ineffective and irrelevant, but reduce politicians to celebrities. Celebrities do everything to generate major headlines, and it is not surprising that their lifespan on the planet of fame and fortune is too limited.

Communication is key to delivery strategy

Generally, politicians the world over all seem to believe that communication is as a soft skill that focuses on operational issues such as crisis management, event coordination, answering media questions, harassing journalists, creating relations and editing government newsletter. Often politicians surround themselves with junior employees who do not advise them but merely execute too ordinary ideas in the name of communication genius. The heart of the matter is that communication is key to government's delivery strategy and that communication specialists should be accorded the status of advisers, counsellors and senior employees.

South African politicians still get off lightly compared to their counterparts in other countries, and this means that our media is bowing to political pressure. In the modern political industry, communication has become a core administrative function to handle perception, reputation and image matters, and to create and consolidate relationships. Those politicians, who value and recognise the role of communication, particularly the media in an administration, can shape their destinies.

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