

Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning  
and the Environment

**COURSEBOOK**

**GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC INFORMATION**

The Hague

March 1997

Central Information and Public Relations Department

Press and Public Information Division

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## INTRODUCTION

This coursebook deals with government communication and public information in a governmental setting, and is intended to be used in introducing, explaining and implementing political decisions and policy measures. The coursebook can be used in the political decision-making process as an instrument for ensuring that policy measures are implemented as smoothly as possible and are as effective as possible.

Generally speaking, the reason why one person wishes to communicate with another is in order to exchange information or to achieve a certain objective, such as understanding a concept or selling a service. From a professional viewpoint, communication centres on the concept of 'purpose'. Purposeful communication involves a sender transmitting a message, either directly or through the agency of a medium, with the aim of achieving a specific objective in relation to one or more target groups, either inside or outside the public sector.

The use of the word 'government' in 'government communication' is somewhat misleading because it is too restrictive. Because of the variety of functions performed by the public sector, individual messages must be designed to suit each specific target group. These target groups should be identified as narrowly as possible, and may comprise households, firms, industrial sectors, government bodies, the mass media, etc.

# 1 WHAT IS GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC INFORMATION?

Public information differs radically from press information. The chief aim of press information is to pass on information to the independent press through a range of special channels, such as press releases, press briefings, press conferences, press visits, formal and informal contacts, and so forth.

In the Netherlands, the way in which the government informs the general public is based to a large extent on the provisions of the Government Information (Public Access) Act, which defines the type of information that should be provided by the government in a range of different situations. The Act applies to the central government, provincial authorities, and local and other authorities such as water boards. The Government Information Act distinguishes between:

- 1 a passive obligation to inform, i.e. providing information at the receiver's request;
- 2 an active obligation to inform, i.e. providing information on the sender's initiative.

In other words, public information is provided in theory in two different forms, i.e. reactively and actively. In the case of the **reactive** form, it is the receiver who takes the initiative and it is the government's duty to ensure that requests for information made by telephone, in person, in writing or (as is becoming increasingly commonplace) through the Internet, are answered both swiftly and accurately. Such requests may refer either to policy measures that are under preparation or to policy measures that have already been implemented, such as laws, regulations, subsidies and facilities. Many government bodies have set up special public information desks or information centres or have opened special telephone lines to deal with such requests. This reactive type of public information is also referred to as '**personal information**'.

The **active** form of public information consists of messages initiated by the sender. In the case of the public sector, the active form generally consists of:

- 1 information **on** policy and policy plans;
- 2 communication **as** a policy instrument;
- 3 communication **in** the policy-making process (i.e. process communication).

## 1.1 Public information on policy

Informing the public about policy and policy plans has traditionally been one of the government's main duties. The basic aim is to inform relevant groups within the general public as soon as this is required in order to ensure that the decision-making process is both effective and democratic. However, there is also a secondary aim of actively informing groups within the general public once the policy in question has been adopted, so that they know what is expected of them and what they should or should not do (in terms of observing rules and regulations, applying for subsidies, making use of

facilities, etc.).

This type of information is also referred to as '**informative information**'. The two basic characteristics of this type of information are the element of disclosure and its public service nature. It is preferable to approach the relevant target groups **directly**, where this is feasible. In many instances, however, the target groups are so large, so diffuse, or so difficult to reach that use must be made of the mass media.

## **1.2 Communication as a policy instrument**

Among the chief aims of the government are the stimulation of social, economic and cultural development and the resolution of social problems. Governments try to achieve these aims by developing policy and taking action. They have various policy instruments at their disposal for this purpose, such as:

- direct legislation;
- financial instruments such as subsidies and taxes;
- voluntary agreements;
- facilities and infrastructure;
- social instruments such as participation, communication and information.

It is clear from practical experience that policy instruments will have the greatest effect if they are used in the right way and in the right combination. Policy instruments are also used in such a way that some perform a subordinate, coordinate or superordinate role relative to others. A superordinate instrument, for example, is one that is predominant in the enforcement of a particular policy measure. A subordinate instrument is used to support and/or strengthen the effect of other instruments. In many cases, communication performs a supportive and/or strengthening role.

The main reason for this is as follows. Many policy measures are designed to influence or change the behaviour of citizens and firms in such a way that they either start doing something new or stop doing something that they have previously done. Communication by itself is not a sufficiently strong instrument to bring about this change in behaviour. When used together with another policy instrument, however, such as a facility or a subsidy scheme, it can have the desired effect. As an example, the separation of waste glass has been a tremendous success in the Netherlands. Local authorities have placed bottle banks in easily accessible locations (i.e. they have provided facilities or infrastructure) and have coupled this with clear information on why and how the public should dispose of their waste glass. As a result, almost 90% of all waste glass in the Netherlands is now collected through the bottle bank system!

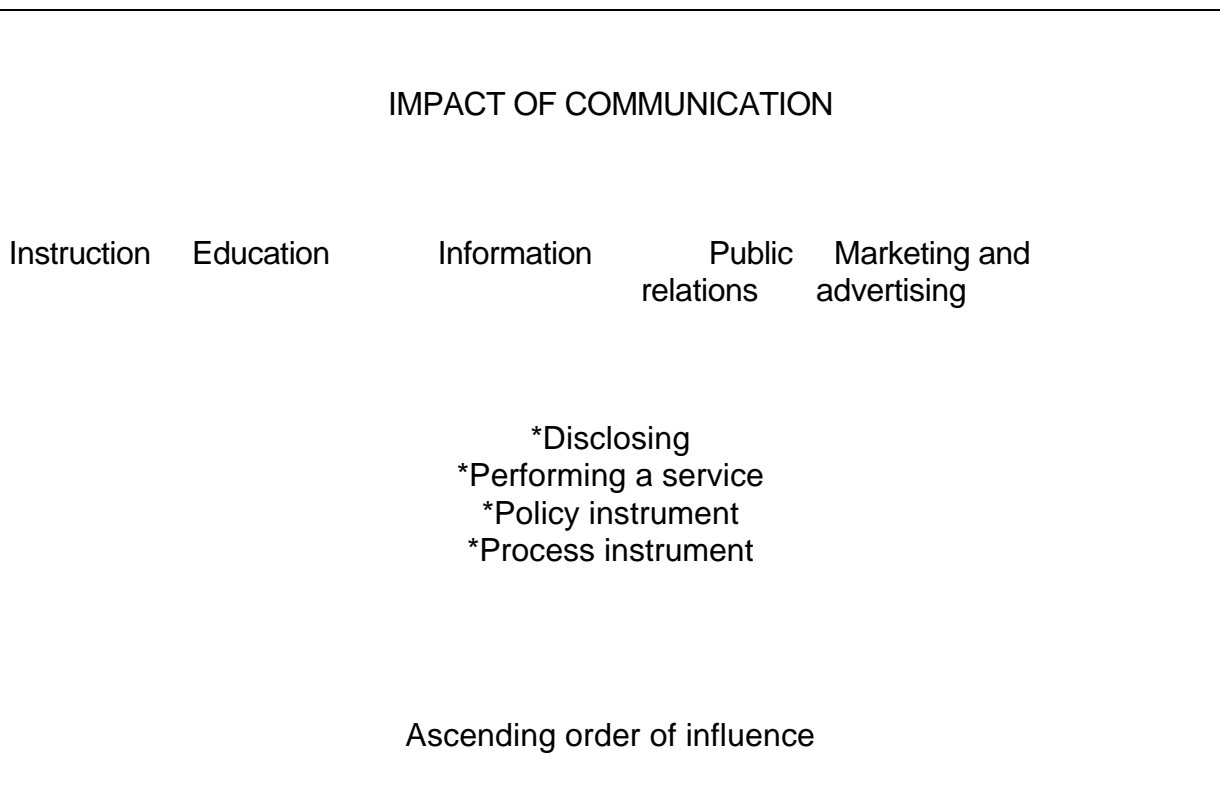
In addition to supporting and strengthening other policy instruments, communication may also be used to:

- generate public debate on a particular topic;

- raise awareness of backgrounds and causes;
- increase involvement;
- ensure that policy plans have a greater chance of being accepted;
- influence attitudes;
- influence behaviour.

It is important to remember, when using the term 'communication', that it covers a wide variety of different forms of communication, ranging from instruction, education and information to public relations and advertising. Government communication frequently involves a mix of these forms that is designed to meet the specific needs of different target groups.

Figure 1 shows what the term 'communication' means to a communication expert:



### **1.2.1 The policy-making process**

Studies conducted into public affairs in various countries have shown that policy-making is a cyclical process that consists basically of the following four stages:

- 1 identifying the problem;

- 2 formulating policy;
- 3 implementing the solutions;
- 4 management and control.

Communication has a different role to play in each of these four stages. Figure 2 shows the role played by the government in the various stages of the policy-making cycle. The government's role gradually increases in importance during the identification stage and reaches its peak at the end of the stage in which policy is formulated. From then on, there is a slow decline in the government's influence.

Figure 2: The role played by government during the various stages of the policy-making cycle

Identification stage	Policy formulation	Policy implementation	Management and control

**Identification**

The following communication methods are used during this stage:

- frequent surveys of opinions and attitudes;
- analysis of the contents of the mass media;
- constant, systematic networking with NGOs, interest groups and scientific institutions (public relations);
- regular briefings, interviews and meetings with interest groups and the press.

### **Policy formulation**

Activities performed during this stage may have the effect of making the general public aware of specific problems, giving the public greater insight into the policy proposals and generating broad support for relevant issues. Whilst the legislators are aware of the issues which are being addressed, no solutions have yet been suggested. The target groups at this stage consist of opinion leaders, decision-makers and the public at large.

The following communication methods are used:

- surveys of knowledge, attitudes and practical behaviour;
- integration of communication in a mix of policy instruments;
- design of a communication strategy;
- communication and consultation with those involved in the process (public relations).

### **Policy implementation**

The aim at this stage is to communicate information on the way in which the problem in question is to be solved. The objective is to communicate the substance of the policy and the nature of the relevant policy measures. Communication at this stage is geared primarily towards certain specific target groups.

Communication methods:

- information campaigns;
- specific information materials;
- marketing and advertising;
- instruction;
- education;
- consultation with target groups (public relations).

### **Management and control**

Communication during this stage takes the form of a service that is provided in order to support recent changes in attitudes and behaviour. The aim is to provide information on the policy that is being enforced and to obtain feedback. Communication may take the form of an active service that is rendered to explain complex legislation and regulations. It may also be used to announce impending changes to policy instruments, such as legislation.

Communication methods:

- monitoring and communicating results;
- frequent surveys of opinions and attitudes;
- information on changes in the substance of policy and its enforcement;
- education.



Figure 3 shows the communication methods as these are used during the various stages of the policy-making cycle.

Stage of the policy-making cycle	
Identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• frequent surveys of opinions and attitudes</li> <li>• analysis of the contents of the mass media</li> <li>• analysis of the communication materials disseminated by NGOs and consumer groups</li> <li>• constant, systematic networking with NGOs, interest groups and scientific institutions</li> <li>• regular briefings, interviews and meetings with interest groups</li> </ul>
Policy formulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• surveys of knowledge, attitudes and practical behaviour</li> <li>• integration of communication in a mix of policy instruments</li> <li>• design of a communication strategy</li> <li>• informative information and communication to familiarise those concerned with the problems and policy choices</li> </ul>

Policy implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• communication as an autonomous instrument</li> <li>• communication as a supplement to other instruments</li> <li>• informing groups about the use of other instruments (news, laws, subsidies, etc.)</li> <li>• preliminary evaluation by means of qualitative research</li> </ul>
Management and control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• public information</li> <li>• information on changes in the substance of policy and its enforcement</li> <li>• frequent surveys of opinions and attitudes (given that age-related target groups will be replaced by younger generations)</li> </ul>

Figure 3: The various stages of the policy-making cycle and the related communication methods

### 1.3 Communication in the policy-making process (process communication)

The normal practice to date has been for policy and policy measures to be cooked up in the ivory towers in which civil servants spend their waking hours. In some cases, policy-making is followed by consultation with and the participation of those groups of people who are to be affected by the policy in question. However, when governments devise policies and measures in order to bring about certain changes which they deem desirable, they often have trouble getting these policies and measures accepted by the public. In other words, the public does not want to do what the government wants it to do. Moreover, governments are becoming increasingly aware not only that it is not possible for them to bear the responsibility for certain changes, but also that they should not aspire to do so either. For this reason, there is a tendency among governments to abandon their ivory towers, and to seek to make policy in **conjunction** with relevant target groups. This is not simply because such groups can play a role in implementing the policy in question, but also because, with their experience and knowledge of what is feasible in practice, they can make a very valuable contribution to moulding the substance of the policy. Bringing together politicians, policy-makers and the general public (that is to say, providing an answer to the question of how to involve the public in policy formulation) is a task for which a communication expert is eminently suited. Moreover, communication is the oil in the wheels of this type of co-productive process.

The underlying goal of communication as a factor in the policy-making process is to act as a catalyst in improving relations between the government and the public. We are currently witnessing a shift in the role played by the government, which is becoming less of a regulator and hence no longer at the forefront of things, but nevertheless wishes to retain a certain measure of responsibility for collective services. Where the government does regulate, it does so in conjunction with and after careful interaction with the public target groups.

## 2 THE ROLE OF NGOS AND INTERMEDIARIES IN GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION

Governments are increasingly inclined to join forces with NGOs and other intermediary organisations for communication purposes. The legal status of these organisations is such that they are formally independent of the government, despite the fact that there may be a financial relationship between them, for example in the form of subsidies. Intermediary organisations frequently perform a dual role: not only are they the receivers of the message, but they also act as senders in informing their own target groups and end-users.

Intermediary organisations can perform four different functions in the communication between governments and their intended target groups. One single intermediary is also capable of performing a number of different functions at the same time. The four functions are:

- 1 the **support function**: the government uses intermediaries to raise support among the target groups associated with the intermediaries;
- 2 the **expert or advisory function** (also known as the radar function): the government can use intermediaries to pick up signals about target groups which may be relevant to the way in which policy is formulated and to communication on policy;
- 3 the **distribution function**: the intermediary passes on all or parts of the message to the target groups that are associated with it. The message is either left intact or is specially adapted for specific target groups;
- 4 the **gap-bridging function**: this may relate either to a **geographical** gap (in the case, for example, of leaflets published by the tax authorities which are distributed through post offices) or to a **psychological** gap, i.e. the psychological distance between the government as the sender and the target group as the receiver.

In addition, certain NGOs and intermediaries play an important role in fostering **public debate** on social issues. Environmental and conservation organisations such as Greenpeace and the Worldwide Fund for Nature are good examples. It is thanks to their efforts that issues relating to the environment and nature conservation have been placed at the top of the social and political agendas, and remain in the limelight.

### 2.1 Types of alliance

In practical terms, there are three ways in which intermediary organisations can be involved in communication:

- 1 **written information**: the primary aim is to inform the intermediary organisations themselves. There is also a secondary aim of using the agency of the intermediaries to disseminate the information material among the target groups;

- 2 **oral consultation:** the primary aim is to obtain information on the problem for which the government wishes to formulate a policy and about which communication will need to take place. The secondary aim is to harmonise information activities, obtain advice on the communication vehicles that are to be used and to establish whether the intermediaries require certain facilities or support;
- 3 **alliances:** as the name implies, this involves striking up a genuine alliance in relation to communication, for example by designing a joint public information campaign. A recent example in the Netherlands is the climate and energy campaign, which was a co-production involving the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment, the Worldwide Fund for Nature and the electricity distribution companies.

## 2.2 Join forces or go it alone?

Governments first need to decide whether or not it makes sense to join forces with intermediary organisations. There are six points which should be taken into consideration in this connection:

- 1 The influence which intermediary organisations can exert over policy development  
You should bear in mind, when making use of an intermediary, that it may try and exact a price for its services in the form of a say in policy formulation. This is more likely to be the case if the intermediary supports the policy in question and if it has no other means of influencing policy.
- 2 The intermediary's attitude to the policy  
You should try and identify the intermediary's attitude to the policy which you are seeking to communicate. A positive or neutral attitude may constitute an important selection criterion. In some cases, it may be desirable to involve an intermediary in the communication process in spite of its critical attitude.
- 3 The target group's attitude to the policy  
If the target group opposes the policy, you should establish whether or not the intermediary commands sufficient authority among the members of the target group or is capable of amassing support. If it is not, it may not be wise to involve the intermediary in the communication process.
- 4 The intermediary's own interest  
You should identify the interests of any intermediaries (e.g. financial, in terms of network-building, influence, image-building, etc.) before making use of their services.
- 5 Power  
An intermediary can use its position to alter the substance of the message which

you wish to communicate. This is particularly relevant where the government depends on the intermediary in order to reach the target group in question.

- 6 Financial relationship between the intermediary and the client  
If the intermediary is in a position of financial dependence on the government, this may be an inhibiting factor that prevents it from exerting its authority.

### **2.3 Some rules for cooperative ventures**

- Make sure that you formulate clear communication objectives and that you define the target group or groups in clear terms
- Lay down the financial limits of the communication process before committing yourself
- Undertake systematic research into potential intermediaries beforehand
- Identify the function for which you wish to employ the intermediary
- Identify the intermediary's attitude to the policy
- Identify the intermediary's own interests
- Once you have decided on the above points, form a joint communication working party
- Draw a joint communication plan and plan of action, including a description of powers and responsibilities, go/no go moments, etc.
- Do not communicate with the intermediary's members or supporters without its knowledge
- Hold regular meetings to evaluate progress and conduct a final evaluation (you should assess both the cooperation process itself and the final results)

### **3 PLANNING COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES**

Every communication activity should be based on a communication strategy or plan. A communication strategy or plan contains at least the six following core elements:

- 1 **WHY?**  
What is the aim? What are the policy issues? What are the policy objectives?
- 2 **FOR WHOM?**  
Who are the groups at which the communication is to be targeted? It is clear from experience that target group segmentation often enhances the effect of communication.
- 3 **WHAT'S IT ABOUT?**  
What is your message? In order to optimise communication, it is a good idea to translate the policy into a number of concise sentences which the target group can easily understand. Formulating sentences in this way may even help to clarify certain policy aims for the civil servants involved.
- 4 **WHEN?**  
Depending on the stage in the policy-making cycle which has been reached, you will need to decide when the time is right for communicating the message in order to achieve the maximum effect.
- 5 **HOW?**  
Which method and which media are to be used?
- 6 **WHICH CHANNELS?**  
Which distribution channels are to be used for conveying the information to the target group?

It is important to remember that communication should always be geared to the following three key features. These should be borne in mind at all times during the development of a communication strategy:

- 1 The need to influence and change knowledge
- 2 The need to influence and change attitudes
- 3 The need to influence and change behaviour

A more sophisticated communication strategy or communication plan may be drawn up, based on the 10-stage model for the development of a communication plan.

## **4 STAGES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A COMMUNICATION PLAN**

### **Stage 1: Analysing the problems**

- 1 What sort of problems are you dealing with? Are they major or minor problems?
- 2 What are the causes of the problems? Try and distinguish between technical and human factors.
- 3 What are the policy objectives?
- 4 What potential solutions are there? Try and distinguish between technical and human factors.

### **Stage 2: Outlining the role to be played by communication**

- 1 What policy instruments can play a role in solving the problems and changing the behaviour of the target group?
- 2 What role can communication play in this mix of instruments?

### **Stage 3: Identifying the target groups**

- 1 Who is responsible for the problems in general terms? Make an inventory of the target groups which are involved. Try and rank these according to their importance.
- 2 Do these target groups know enough about the problems, or is lack of knowledge one of the causes of the problems?
- 3 Is the attitude taken by the target groups one of the causes of the problems? Are the target groups aware of the problems? Do they realise the effect which the problems are having? Are the target groups prepared to help solve the problems?
- 4 In what way is the behaviour displayed by the target groups exacerbating the problems? What should the target groups do in order to help solve the problems? Are the target groups capable of behaving in the manner in which you wish them to behave? Are there any barriers standing in the way of a solution?
- 5 What are the social and demographic characteristics of the target groups (i.e. size, sex, education and profession, type of dwelling, marital status, position within networks, membership of organisations)?
- 6 Which media do the target groups use? Do your target groups have a marked preference for auditory or visual media? Do you have access to the addresses of the members of your target groups? Are there organisations which are in regular contact with your target groups? Are these organisations prepared to act as intermediaries in communicating your message?

### **Stage 4: Identifying the communication objectives**



Remember that this stage is concerned specifically with what you wish to achieve with the aid of communication, and not with what you wish to achieve with the aid of the whole mix of policy instruments. Try and identify your communication objectives with reference to the general policy objectives. Try and express the objectives in verbs. Try and relate them to percentages and dates.

- 1 What are your communication objectives in relation to attention?
- 2 What are your communication objectives in relation to awareness, knowledge and understanding?
- 3 What are your communication objectives in relation to willingness and motivation (i.e. attitude)?
- 4 What are your communication objectives in relation to behaviour and skills?

### **Stage 5: Identifying the strategy/message**

- 1 What is the essence of the message which you wish to communicate to your target groups?
- 2 What is the most important issue and what are the sub-issues?
- 3 What arguments do you intend to use?
- 4 What sort of tone do you intend to adopt?

### **Stage 6: Identifying the communication vehicles**

- 1 What media do you have available to you?
- 2 Which of these media are used by your target groups?
- 3 Should you use new media?

### **Stage 7: Budgeting for your communication activities**

- 1 What is the size of the budget which you need in order to fund your communication activities?
- 2 How can the activities be funded?
- 3 If the budget available to you is not sufficient, could you:
  - generate additional sources of income?
  - join forces with other bodies or organisations?
  - use private-sector organisations to perform certain activities?
  - plan the activities in such a way that the costs are spread over a relatively long period of time?
- 4 If it is not possible to find additional sources of income, can you set priorities?

### **Stage 8: Organising your communication activities**

- 1 What are the various tasks which will need to be performed and how should the various responsibilities be distributed?
- 2 How can these tasks be coordinated?
- 3 Would you be able to operate more effectively and more efficiently by cooperating with one or more other organisations?
- 4 Can you use private-sector organisations to perform certain communication activities?

### **Stage 9: Planning**

- 1 Can you draw up a list of the communication activities in chronological order?
- 2 Who (whether a person or an organisation) is to do what and when?

### **Stage 10: Conducting an evaluation**

- 1 How are you going to assess the results (i.e. in terms of knowledge, attitude or behaviour)?
- 2 What methods do you intend to use?
- 3 How do you intend to communicate the results of the evaluation to the target groups?
- 4 Have you achieved your objective?
- 5 How should you adapt your activities in the light of the results of the evaluation?

Stage 1 Analysing the problems	Stage 2 Outlining the role to be played by communication	Stage 3 Identifying the target groups	Stage 4 Identifying the communication objectives	Stage 5 Identifying the strategy message

Stage 6 Identifying the communication vehicles	Stage 7 Budgeting for your communication activities	Stage 8 Organising your communication activities	Stage 9 Planning	Stage 10 Conducting an evaluation

## 5 HOW DOES COMMUNICATION WORK?

Once it is clear what particular aspect the government information officer needs to communicate to a particular target group, the next step is to identify the communication strategy. This depends on the communication objectives which the communication activities are designed to achieve, such as changing the target group's knowledge, attitude or behaviour. A government information officer can choose his or her strategy from a wide range of options, all of which can be used in conjunction with specific media.

Practical experience in the Netherlands illustrates the validity of three universal truths:

- 1 Communication is one of the key critical factors determining the success of government policy. Without strategic communication management, both government and management are deaf, blind and paralysed.
- 2 Communication management can be effective only if it is a full and integral part of the set of policy instruments. Strategic communication management requires communication to be an integral part of all stages in the policy-making process. The essence of strategic communication management lies in strategically adapting communication processes and vehicles, as well as communicators themselves, to objectives, target groups and the substance of the policy that is to be communicated.
- 3 If communication is to perform a key role for the government, the communicator must also occupy a key position in the government's organisation.

What does this mean in terms of day-to-day practice? It is the word 'adapting' which lies at the crux of the matter: it embodies the concept of integration. Integrated communication means more than anything else all-embracing conceptual frameworks and activities. The aim at all times is to emphasise the positive aspects and to take the attention away from any negative aspects. Synergy, i.e. the added value created by joining forces, is an extremely powerful factor influencing the end result. When translated in terms of the policy-making process, all this means that the principal elements of processes in integrated communication are formed by the interrelated answers to the following questions:

- How can you influence policy planning?  
(government communication as a management support function)
- How can you enable certain groups and citizens to influence policy planning?  
(involvement)

- How can you respond to the needs of certain groups and citizens?  
(marketing)
- How can you persuade certain groups and citizens to change their behaviour?  
(social marketing)
- How can you maintain good relations with certain groups and citizens?  
(public relations)
- How can you inform certain groups and citizens about all sorts of issues?  
(public information)
- How can you inform and motivate your fellow government officials?  
(internal communication)
- How should administrators and government officials propagate policy?  
(policy presentation)
- How can you present yourself, either as a wing of central government or as a local authority?  
(promotion)
- How can you 'organise' the key players in your particular arena?  
(public affairs)

To put it briefly:

- How can you organise the process of integrated government communication?

## 6

## VEHICLES AND MEDIA

Vehicles and media are indispensable tools for facilitating communication with and the provision of information to the public. They are the means by which the message is transmitted from the sender to the receiver, and vice versa. No form of public information can succeed without them. A huge range of communication vehicles and media have been developed in the course of time, and new ones are emerging all the time, thanks in particular to certain technological advances.

Most situations require a combination of different vehicles and media. The precise composition of such a mix depends on factors such as the objective, the size and nature of the target group, the strategy, the message to be conveyed and the available budget. Public information campaigns are also supported by vehicles and media that are generally used for press information purposes, such as press releases and background articles written for the trade press.

The following matrix gives a general overview of the communication vehicles and media that are frequently used for public information purposes.

Vehicles/media	Government information				Suited for				
	Disclosure	Service	Policy instrument	Process instrument	Large, heterogeneous groups	Small, homogeneous group	One-way traffic	Two-way communication	Fast, up-to-the-minute
<b>AUDIOVISUAL</b>									
TV commercial	x	x	x		x		x		
Radio commercial	x	x	x		x		x		
Co-production with broadcasting company			x	x	x		x		
Film		x	x	x			x		
Video		x	x	x			x		
Tape/Slide show		x	x	x			x		
Overhead sheets		x	x	x			x		x
<b>OTHERS/ELECTRONIC</b>									
Telephone information line		x	x		x			x	x
Public information desk		x	x		x			x	x
Leaflet dispenser		x	x		x		x		x
Exhibition		x	x	x	x		x		
E-mail		x	x	x		x		x	x
Internet		x	x	x	x	x		x	x
CD-ROM		x	x		x		x		
CD-I		x	x		x		x		
Floppy disk		x	x		x		x		

	Government information				Suited for				
Vehicles/media	Disclosure	Service	Policy instrument	Process instrument	Large, heterogeneous groups	Small, homogeneous group	One-way traffic	Two-way communication	Fast, up-to-the-minute
ORAL									
Personal meeting		x	x	x		x			
							x		
							x		
							x		
							x		
							x		x
								x	x
								x	x
							x		x
							x		x
							x		
							x		