

Government Communication and the Public: An Examination of Communication Strategies Related to Ghana's Return to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Program in 2022

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Abstract

Government communication has emerged as an important aspect of political communication in efforts to generate well-informed citizens and enhance their understanding of key national policies, ideas, and decisions. Communication remains a critical instrument in the art of governance for several reasons, including galvanizing support for government decisions, shaping public perception, and ensuring accountability. The goal of this research is to examine the communication strategies employed by the government of Ghana in communicating its decision to return to the IMF as part of economic policy measures to support what was seen at the time as an ailing economy in 2022. The main goals of this study were to identify the various communication strategies employed by the government and to assess the strategies unearthed while offering recommendations. The study is anchored by the framework of government communication, an emerging field in political communication studies. In-depth interviews were conducted with the media, communication experts, and scholars to address the objectives set forth. The following communicative problems were unearthed: inconsistency in government communication, lack of authentic and honest discourse, evasion of responsibility, use of wrong channels, and unsuitable communication officials. The study has both practical and academic usefulness, as it informs studies in the increasingly important field of government communication and the professional practice of communication by governments, particularly in emerging democracies such as Ghana.

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Introduction

Communication is undoubtedly a key component in successful governance. At the heart of democratic governance are certain core principles such as the need for engagement, openness, and transparency. Political science, media, and communication scholars are explicit about the centrality of communication in the realization of these democratic ideals. Communication, in all its variants, remains a fundamental element in maintaining stable, engaging, deliberative, and successful democracies.

Since financial and economic decisions taken by the government are critical to the survival and livelihood of citizens, communication regarding major governmental decisions is an important aspect of political communication in democratic administration. An integral part of government economic management is how major decisions are communicated. On July 1, 2022, the government of Ghana, through a press release, indicated that it was going to seek International Monetary Fund intervention for what was deemed a challenging national economic situation. The response from the public was swift and spontaneous, generating extensive controversy, debate, and discussion within the public sphere.

Previous research shows that communication can play an important role in the education, understanding, and implementation of economic policy. Scholars have come to deem communication as an important policymaking instrument. According to Rice and Stankova (2019), “When it comes to forging economic policies, communicating with the public is no longer an afterthought. Instead, communications are increasingly seen as a policy tool in itself...economic reforms are more likely to fail or even be reversed unless they are understood, believed, and accepted by those whom they affect” (p.1).

This clearly demonstrates that communication plays a pivotal role in not just keeping the public informed and educated but also engendering public understanding and, equally importantly, carrying the people along when it comes to key government economic decisions. This research is important because it helps us not only understand the role of communication in economic policy but also appreciate language as an important framework of inquiry into democratic governance. In recent years, the concept of policy communication has emerged as a crucial area for deepening participatory governance, and the current study will contribute to efforts aimed at establishing the value of narratives, frames, and discourse for analytical inquiry and professional practice in this burgeoning field.

How did the government communicate its decision to return to the IMF in July 2022? What assessments can be made for these strategies? These are the central questions and concerns that guided this study.

This was not the first time Ghana sought IMF intervention when it came to managing its economy. Previous Ghanaian governments sought IMF interventions 17 times since independence, making this the 18th time Ghana was going to the IMF for support. There are several reasons for the most recent decision to return to IMF. Some experts attributed this to poor economic management, weak creditworthiness in international markets, external factors (such as the COVID-19 pandemic), and worsening debt. Whatever the reason, the Minister of

Finance expressed his reticence about going to the IMF. The government also delayed seeking help from Bretton Woods institutions, partly because of its belief in Africa beyond aid. This raised the stakes and made the decision to return to the IMF a major public issue of controversy and discourse. The government had to rely on the IMF to address a very dire economic situation.

How did the government communicate this decision, and how effective were the communication choices? Despite the widespread recognition of the importance of communication to policy work, and to economic policy in particular, and to successful governance generally, few studies have systematically assessed government communication practices. The significance of this research is that it offers a contemporary, social-scientific assessment of the critical role of communication in a recent issue of public interest, policy affairs, and national discourse.

Government Communication

In the vast and continuously expanding field of political communication, scholars have identified government communication as a “policy tool or instrument...a means to give effect to policy goals” (Howlett, 2009, p.23). According to Howlett (2009), government communication has now become “a large growth industry in many countries and the subject of increasing attention from both practitioners and scholars” (p.24). Government communication is seen as a dominant and pervasive aspect of democratic governance (Liu et al., 2010, p. 189). Canel and Sanders (2013) define government communication as: “The role, practice, aims and achievements of communication as it takes place in and on behalf of public institution(s) whose primary end is executive in the service of a political rationale, and that are constituted on the basis of the people’s indirect or direct consent and charged to enact their will” (p.4).

The authors further posit that, “The quality of government communication matters for human well-being. Governing necessarily involves constant exchanges of information and communication about policies, ideas, and decisions between governors and the governed’ (p.3). This perspective points to the role of communication with democratic governance as a link between the state and governed-on matters of policy, public decisions, and issues related to running the affairs of the nation. Information is seen as a useful resource for running the state, distributing important policy decisions, shaping thoughts, and realizing collective goals.

Howlett (2009) specifically defines government communication as “techniques or mechanisms which rely on the use of information to directly or indirectly affect the behavior of those involved in the production, consumption and distribution of different kinds of goods and services in society” (p.25).

This demonstrates that government communication lies at the heart of democratic governance because it helps keep the public informed and fulfills the goals of transparency, openness, and accountability, bridging the gap between the executive and citizens while carrying citizens as participants or important stakeholders in the developmental process. According to Horsley, Liu, and Levenshus (2010), “government communication exists to serve the information needs

of a democracy, to help citizens make informed decisions, and to provide a mechanism for accountability of public agencies' (p.269). The government communication information system (GCIS) of South Africa defines government communication as "media handling and direct communication with the public; hence, the role and scope of government communication is defined as citizen-focused continuous dialogue (p.9). GCIS explains the concept of government communication involving the development of information and makes it available to the public. Therefore, government communication is an essential aspect of participatory democracy and the promotion of an informed citizenry.

Government communication is a pivotal contribution to good governance because it provides the public with essential information on the agenda, plans, decisions, and various state activities. According to the Governance and Social Development Resource Center (GSDRC), "to be legitimate players in public spheres, governments need to develop and maintain effective communication capacity" (p.1). This is because it facilitates a deliberative environment while fostering informed policy debate. Scholars have broadly identified the functions of government communication as information provision, education, and advocating for particular policies and citizen engagement. Communication is fundamental to governance, because it contributes to creating awareness, explaining government policies and decisions to citizens, fostering the exchange of information, and promoting understanding. In the long run, this also contributes to carrying citizens along with the business of governance as important stakeholders while promoting compliance.

This study seeks to interrogate the government communication mechanism in relation to Ghana's latest decision to return to the IMF, examine the rationale behind the communication approach, and assess these strategies to provide lessons for the future.

Methodology

In-depth interviews were used to investigate issues for critical analysis and deeper interpretation (Showkatr & Parveen, 2017). This method is a useful social scientific methodology because it allows researchers to collect data from subjects directly related to the topic under study. This method was deemed appropriate for this study because it enables the study to speak to personalities involved with the topic of government communication regarding going back to the IMF, as well as speaking to experts who can offer critical insights and assessments of the government's strategy. Showkatr and Parveen (2017) defined in-depth interviews as "significant in unfolding opinions, experiences, values, and other aspects. Interviews are always goal oriented" (p.1). In light of technology, interviews can sometimes be conducted via phone, mail, or video (Miller, 1995). Whatever form it takes, in-depth interviews seek to unearth detailed knowledge for deeper understanding.

As a methodology, in-depth interviews go beyond what is seen to account for experiences, feelings, underlying reasons, assessments, and convictions behind certain actions and occurrences. This enables researchers to account for contexts and generate deeper meanings. It involves the use of the qualitative process and analytic language to attain responses, values,

and motivations to attain firsthand understanding of the issue at hand. In-depth interviews have been used as a credible and accepted way of interrogating phenomena to ascertain subjects' self-understanding and awareness in the process of communication strategies and processes. In general, in-depth interviews provide hard and authentic data from the sources to obtain the core essence of a situation under study and in the process, providing useful insights. Direct and firsthand knowledge and assessment of a given situation are epistemologically fundamental aspects of in-depth interviews. This is an important part of social scientific research as it enables us to consider subjects' worldviews and their experiences and evaluations of a phenomenon to come through in a systematic manner.

In offering insights, detailed knowledge, and analysis of a situation, it is essential to obtain detailed information, explore the underlying reasons behind certain decisions, and provide context as well as evaluation of outcomes. This is what the in-depth interview methodology provides. In this research, the methodology is adopted to obtain further detailed information to address the objectives set forth, that is, to ascertain the communication strategies employed in relation to the government's decision to return to the IMF, reasons behind the strategy, and an assessment of the strategies used.

In-depth interview procedures and data analysis

The procedure began by identifying appropriate subjects or participants for the interview based on the research objectives set forth. This research was concerned with how the government communicated its decision to return to the IMF and assessed the communication strategies used. To address the focus of this study, relevant subjects or interviewees with the requisite knowledge and expertise in relation to the topic were identified, contacted, and consent sought, and interviews were conducted in a semi-structured form. This included seasoned journalists, communication lecturers and academics, and experts.

Specifically, the following subjects were identified and interviewed: (a) A top-notch veteran award-winning journalist with expertise in economics or the financial beat. Two communication scholars and academics offered rich insights and assessments of government communication related to the topic being studied. A veteran journalist is an experienced communicator, making him a good subject that traverses the economic, media, and communication fields. Communication lecturers were chosen from reputable universities.

Preliminary calls were made to enlist the participants. The participants were first contacted, and their participation was sought and confirmed. The interviews were conducted on the phone and face-to-face at a time convenient for respondents. Both approaches are seen as credible, allowing meaningful and thoughtful conversations, engaging in discourse, and helping generate rich responses. The interview guide was designed to guide the interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow a guided approach with follow-up questions. Interviews provided a complete and comprehensive picture of an issue.

The analysis stage involved textual analysis of the data in relation to the research objectives. Over the years, textual analysis has emerged as a credible approach to analyzing communication content. An important reason for this is that such an approach allows for the comprehensive, contextual, and critical analysis of interviews and communication content to gain meaning beyond the manifest content. Textual analysis has been defined as ‘how other human beings make sense of the world’ (McKee 2003, p.2). Therefore, this data analytic method allowed for the analysis and interpretation of how various subjects, including officials and experts, made sense of the communication surrounding the government’s decision to return to the IMF. Scholars, such as Sikanku (2023) and Fairclough (2003), explicate textual analysis to comprehend the central themes, frames, patterns, symbols, and meanings contained in social actions and texts that address specific issues in society.

The analytical process began with the transcription of the interviews. The data were then analyzed textually with reference to the research objectives and questions. The textual analysis process began with the first reading of the material to be broken down for understanding. Initial observations were noted together with cogent responses that addressed the issue of communication strategies, assessments, and recommendations. A second reading was done to firm up observations, break the data down into any emerging themes, and establish a process of constant comparison. A third reading was conducted to further confirm and conclude, while engaging in deeper interpretations, analysis, and discussions. Throughout the process, constant references were made to the research objectives and conceptual framework to unearth data that specifically spoke to the objectives and research purpose. Participant 1 is the top-notch veteran award-winning journalist with expertise in economics or the financial sector. Participant Two was the first academic and communication scholar, and Participant Three was the last communication expert/scholar.

Results and Discussion

Inconsistent messaging

The government’s communication problems, as identified by the first subject, began before the announcement to return to the IMF (pre-announcement phase). According to this interviewee or participant, messages from the government were inconsistent with the eventual decision. Some government officials assured the public that they were not going to the IMF yet they did.

The public had been told that, to put it simply, the IMF is bad for you and that we are too good to go to IMF; we are proud people and we are better managing our own economy, so we will not go. President looks at all the data and I am sure his advisers argue about it, because later on, when I interviewed the information minister, he said there were various views but the president decided... so he is saying that the finance minister probably still did not want to go ... (Participant 1, 2022, interview/field data)

Participant 1 also referred to this inconsistency as a “self-imposed communication nightmare.” There was a communication gap after the government’s press release announced its decision

to return to the IMF. Many people wondered what led to the government's apparent "U-turn." In terms of assessing policy communication, this pitfall was identified. According to the interviewee who works as media personnel in one of the country's prominent media houses, few officials from the government spoke to the issue a day or two after the release. This did not really help, as it created further uncertainty in the minds of the public:

"...it was difficult to get people to speak. Indeed, the announcement was supposed to be on Friday July 1. Saturdays frequently featured most government officials. This time, there was no serious government representation, especially in the immediate period after the announcement, because it was a difficult decision so they did not get a lot of aggressive defense until the information minister started going out himself and as we speak, I have not heard the finance minister even speak about the decision. (Participant 1, interview/field data, 2022)

The government communication theory posits that it (governmental/policy communication) is a necessary instrument to fulfill the informational needs of citizens and help create well-informed citizens. Others see it as an "essential lifeblood" for nation-building. The lack of explanatory information in the immediate aftermath of the IMF decision was problematic because it created public confusion and limited public understanding of such a major financial policy decision.

Communication frames: Government communication sent right signals

However, in the same breath, the same participant (Participant 1), also known as interviewee one or interview subject 1, gave one positive evaluation of the government's communication processes. He maintains that, from a purely financial perspective, the government's press release targeted the international community as the major audience and sent the right signals to the international market and financial institutions.

" My argument is that the IMF's decision was to send a signal to the market that Ghana's economy would get better, allowing us to borrow more money. That was the purpose of the IMF decision so that the announcement was to the market and to announce such a thing to the market a live broadcast or television address would be an effective way to speak to Ghanaians, carry them along, and help them understand. The press release was simple and indicated that it was from the highest level, the president he had spoken to the MD of the IMF in Washington, so the decision that has been made is not going to be reversed. T because the finance ministers' position has even sent shock waves down the market, financial minister does not want to go to IMF" (Participant 1).

Participant one also assessed the press release as simple, direct, and straight to the point, although it was impersonal compared to the television address. In terms of communication, a television address or video content would have aided in the persuasive process and helped the government connect more with the Ghanaians. Clarity is essential for an effective and efficient communication. The assessment is that this was not a problem, although it lacked details.

“The press release was not confusing. It was unambiguous, but it did not have sufficient background to give people a certain level of assurance. It is not as if the press release left the people in doubt what the decision was, but it did not offer enough explanation for the U-turn” (Participant 1).

Despite the clarity of the press release, it was observed that other communicative forms could have been used to fill the explanatory/detail gap.

“...he probably could have done a press release and then he could have written an op-ed [too]... ...maybe the finance minister could have done an op-ed and said apart from the press release published the op-ed in a major newspaper with nation-wide reach, for instance, the Daily Graphic. This could have been executed by government officials. If I were Kojo Oppong Nkrumah, I would probably have done so. Also, I will probably do a little post or release a video giving immediate reasons for the government’s decision. I will speak to the camera, so when the press release goes out, the media houses will also have me out there on video offering instant explanations...” (Participant 1)

Media as a partner and tool for development

In terms of recommendations, Participant 1 urged government communication machinery not to withhold information but rather saw the media as a governance partner. Participant one recommended that since the media is an important agent in reaching out to people, the government must feed the media with adequate information. This participant mentioned that editorials and explainers and interviews conducted by himself and other leading journalists went a long way to fill the communication lacuna in the face of limited follow-up information after the press release was issued. The interview with this subject also revealed that the government could set up its own internal explainers and media outreach networks to communicate directly with the people. In the absence of that, government officials must make themselves available with ample time to fill any communication gaps and clear any misunderstandings. In this regard, he stated that the communication buzz that ensued a few days after the initial announcement was a step in the right direction, even though it came late.

“Why will he come on air for one hour to try and answer questions about what an IMF program means. The government itself created a communication problem by the propaganda prior to IMF...they also had to spend a lot of time answering whether FREE SHS will be cancelled or not’ (Participant 1).

The data are consistent with the theoretical or conceptual explanation that substantial political communication should be prioritized if governments are to maintain a free and open society with a well-informed citizenry. This helps ensure rich, quality, and intelligent discussion, which can contribute to public debate and enhance the ideal of political deliberation.

The second participant (Participant 2) also recognized the need for effective communication in policymaking:

“Communication will connect key players in any economy; it will also inform key stakeholders and all players of the economy about government policies, government

vision and the way government wants to bring about development and progress to any national economy. Communication is at the center of government policy, and it makes sure that everybody who will be impacted by the policies are well informed ...nation building is not only a one-sided affair' (Participant 2).

Democracy refers to being responsive and proactive in keeping the public informed. In whatever form it may take, the government must take steps to fully explain the major decisions that are taken to citizens. Researchers (Fordjour, 2015) have argued that people are better able to participate in democratic politics when they are better informed and adequately understand governance processes.

Authentic Communication

Regarding the mode of communication, the second subject (Participant 2), an academic and communication scholar, was of the view that authentic communication was missing from the government's communication strategy. Scholars have pointed out the need for authenticity in communication to garner trust and credibility. Regarding the need to go to the IMF, it was realized that the government was not honest in its discourse:

"Even after taking the decision they were not forthcoming. I think the methodology and tone they employed in telling the citizens that now we have gone to IMF was not the best; it was not open, clear, or honest. They could have made some admissions and were very frontal with Ghanaians saying something like we are sorry, probably we are not very frontal with the truth with you guys so we are sorry, that could have been my approach if I were the president, accept the blame, be honest with the situation and then call for support but they did not do that' (Participant 2).

Unlike dictatorships and autocratic regimes, in which governance and communication are opaque processes, scholars agree that governance in a democracy must be transparent. Moreover, the literature on leadership points out that authentic communication includes admitting mistakes when one gets something wrong and being quite honest with one's feelings (Sikanku, Fordjour, Mensah & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2022).

Jones (2015) asserted that authentic discourse "represents a virtue, not a distraction, for representative democracy. Authenticity takes on heightened importance when the public seeks information on how representatives will act in contexts where the public is absent and unable to influence decisions" (p.1). Such a scenario played out in the government's decision to return to the IMF because the public did not have access to the corridors of power or spaces where the decision was debated (such as a cabinet) or made. Jones (2015) therefore concludes succinctly that "from the perspective of democratic theory and psychology, the public has compelling reasons to value authenticity in political discourse" since political posturing, lack of persuasive explanations, concealment of information, and lack of adequate information/transparency can affect the credibility of the government.

Explanatory, participatory communication and channels

In terms of communication style, Participant 2 recommended that the president or ministers (s) should have used a more conversational and explanatory approach. The best medium was

television. Television affords the president the opportunity to deliver a national address and gives him further opportunities to persuade and engage Ghanaians in the need to make such a decision.

“If he had adopted the fellow Ghanaians approach, come on television or holding town hall meetings trying to engage the people, trying to appeal to their conscience and their emotions, that would have been better. I have come to you as a father; there is a problem; we need the big brother to come in and support us, and bear with me. How many people will even have the opportunity to access press releases in a country like Ghana? Government communicators also did not do well, I monitored them, and they were not even speaking to the press statement that the government really put it out. They were mostly engaged in comparisons with the previous administration” (Participant 2).

Experts, analysts, and the public have frowned upon the politics of comparison and equalization. It gives the government and party officials the opportunity to evade responsibility, does not account for context, and overall, does not amount to productive or effective communication. In the contemporary realm of politics, it is extremely important to view communication as a more interactive tool, ensconce with relevant knowledge and content to empower citizens, enhance compliance or support, and ultimately democratize power.

Functions of policy communication

In the information-deterministic age, how one communicates information is extremely important. Policy decisions must be communicated in a clear and compelling manner to be accepted or remain workable. Communication about sensitive, complex, and ambiguous situations needs to be carefully crafted using broad, multilayered, interactive media, simultaneous, flexible, and easy to assimilate formats with well-defined functions and objectives. This information must be presented in a simple and trustworthy manner.

The political discourse of authenticity requires politicians or governments to personally connect with people and engage with them in a way that citizens accept the veracity of their claims. To do this, it is important to show human, humane, or character elements in a particular situation, which may sometimes include accepting reality, remaining honest with people, and accepting difficulties.

The data from participant 2 showed that the government should have engaged in a more open or sincere rhetoric and not switched to defense mode but rather appeal to Ghanaians.

“I will first of all do a national broadcast. The Minister of Information, in collaboration with the Minister of Finance, could hold some town hall meetings with some key stakeholders of the economy explaining to them, appeal to them, rather than trying to justify that their decision to go to IMF is better than Mahama’s decision to go to IMF, which was totally unnecessary and totally uncalled. Whatever communication form or choice

was taken, the point was that people should be carried along rather than preached to. There were concerns about the tone and posturing of government communication machinery' (Participant 2).

Participant two also added that:

"I think the posturing was wrong, the channel was wrong, the communication tool was wrong and everything around their diamino didn't show that we are in difficulty. They were merely trying to defend that they had done their best. If they did the best, we would not have been here in the first place, so they did not admit that we are in difficulty, so I think the posture and everything of the government to me should have been done better."

Effective communication is indispensable in democracy to deepen public awareness and education. How would the public come to accept and understand key government policies if they were not well communicated or explained? Government communication is not simply about throwing out information, but doing so in an open, respectful, honest, and truthful manner. In this case, the government could have supported its position by being a lot more forthcoming, offering context, and situated meaning to the policy decision. In other words, governments must begin to view democracy as governance through conversation (Mayhew, 1974).

According to Middelaar (2020), "nothing is as powerful as the spoken word to rally support or harness forces for change... it is thus upon the embodied word that the politician's public claim to leadership and authority lies. (p.269). When such spoken words are inconsistent, contradictory, or paradoxical, they undermine effective communication.

Not everyone would obviously be convinced, but few argue that it would have, at least, reduced confusion and public outcry when the decision was taken. Although this was a step in the right direction, by the time the government went all out to headline the major media programs trying to explain their decision, people had turned out to make such a move rather belated.

Communication Management

The third respondent or participant three emphasized the importance of managing communication in the political system saying that, "one of the key orientations that scholars are talking about has to do with the political management orientation which believes in engaging voters or engaging citizenry to inform government policy in decision making." He stated that the government used communication tools and channels effectively, mentioning that:

"I believe they are not using their communication very well, they are not using communication tools very well and they are not using the communication channels equally well because they could have used it to set the agenda, dialogue and interact with the people. Sometimes you see in communication what matters has to do with the time of the communication and personally I believe they delayed' (Participant 3).

This is consistent with statements from previous subjects, who touched on timing as a key issue in government communication.

The third respondent, participant, subject or interviewee also corroborated or supported the position of the first subject regarding the fact that the media could have been used more effectively:

“Media gets results so if government had come up with the kind of dominant media strategy bringing together all the tools, bringing together good programs...you know to advance their decision to go to IMF probably it could have convinced people or people probably could have been convinced. You may find some even adding their voice in support of the government and could have said something to the effect that if this is what the nation is facing, then we will even prefer the government going to IMF rather than sitting down’ (Participant 3).

The third participant was consistent with the previous respondents regarding honesty and authentic discourse. He mentioned that the government should take seriously its commitment to being truthful and transparent in policy decision making:

“ When they got the opportunity to use the media, they denied it, and communication in politics was not about falsehood. It’s quite unfortunate in our part of the world that has become the norm but you know, people, politicians, they use media channels just to create falsehood...I think that the government per my assessment did not use the communication channels and tools properly you know to communicate its decision to go to IMF’ (Participant 3).

A lack of authentic discourse can lead to credibility and image problems for the government. Because of the aggressive and deliberate manner in which the current administration sold itself as better managers of the economy and the fact that the finance minister kept insisting that the government would not go to the IMF, participant three maintains that finally going to the IMF became very confusing to the citizens and created a credibility problem for the government. This is especially so when the government had framed the IMF in the past as a sign of ineffective economic management:

“... once you are going to IMF as better managers of the economy there was a need for you to have discussions with the people and probably explain and give the people the timelines so that the understanding will come that probably these are the reasons why we are going to IMF” (participant 3).

To expand the choices available, the subject recommends that the government use *national broadcasting channels*. In an attempt to manage the fallout from the government’s decision to

go to the IMF and the potential backlash from the public, it is far from certain that communication will always solve this problem. However, in the interest of deliberative democracy and the need to increase public understanding, it is essential for the government to send the right people to appeal to the public. A distinct problem identified by the third interviewee was that the right people were not sent to do the job. It was stated that people with the right competencies should be identified for communication on such important issues.

Professional Communication

Communication facilitates government policy in terms of persuading and carrying people. In this regard, professionalism needs to be introduced into the government communication machinery. Competence and expertise should guide the selection of communicators rather than simple partisanship, loyalty, or those better at engaging in insults and shouting bouts because wrong emissaries could worsen the problem. According to the respondent, propagandist partisan hacks or communicators could:

“... make people angry and this can come back to bite during an election because yes of course people don’t really understand and they couldn’t make sense out what they are supposed to know, you couldn’t persuade them and you may end up getting them more angry and that can go against your votes so for me the communication after the decision to go to IMF was announced didn’t go well.” (Participant 3).

Over the past few decades, as Ghana has continued to entrench democratic practices, political communication between government and citizens has evolved. There has been a gradual transformation in the modes, tenor, frequency, approach, and extent of communication between state authorities and citizens. As democratic consolidation continues, the nature of communication is expected to become deeper, diverse, and more participatory. Of critical

importance is the idea that for a democracy to be workable, governments must seek the views and opinions of the public, keep citizens informed when it comes to key government policies, and maintain an exchange loop with the government.

Finally, the assessment by experts indicates that the government’s communicative approach was far from efficient. The shift and changing dynamics of contemporary information order require communication to play a facilitative, persuasive, knowledge-sharing, and information-sharing role. The flow of such information, its recursive or circulatory nature, and general understandings and interpretations garnered have all become crucial in maintaining a deliberative and democratic society.

Conclusion

This study explores the importance of policy and government communication in Ghana’s democratic dispensation. The role and importance of such communication have been widely recognized as critical to maintaining an informed public, ensuring government accountability, and spurring substantive debates and discussions. This study investigated and assessed the communication strategies employed by the government to communicate their return to the IMF.

The first problem identified was the inconsistency in messaging and general lack of information. An important part of successful democratic governance is the provision of information. This information must be clear, consistent, and precise to prevent public dissonance. Information must also be honest, open, and readily available to the public. The problem here is that the government, especially through the finance minister, had consistently insisted that they were not going to the IMF, and that doing so was a blot on the nation's pride. To turn back suddenly on this decision was as surprising as it was disconcerting. Therefore, there is a need for a major communication strategy (pre-announcement) that will prepare Ghanaians for the sudden U-turn. The immediate aftermath of the press release should have been followed by proactive aggressive immediate communication. However, this did not occur until much later on.

The recommendation here is that communication plans should be fashioned for the pre-announcement phase of government policy decisions. Additionally, there should not be an informational gap immediately after the announcement. It should be followed up immediately by supporting informational products in a frontal, honest, persuasive, and detailed manner. If necessary, officials must be willing to apologize or adopt *apologia* as a discursive or image-restoration tool to connect with citizens.

Excellent communication and public relations undoubtedly have the potential to send the right signals, enhance images, and facilitate discourse. One of the major findings was that the press release sent the right signals to the international community that the government was at least taking major steps to address its precarious economic situation by reaching out to an international body. It prepared the ground and sought to frame the government as being serious-minded in terms of getting its fundamental rights and re-aligning with the international community. Press releases played a communicative role in this regard. More positively, the fundamental expectation of democratic politics is to keep the people at the center of government business, and communication plays a critical role in ensuring this.

Another outcome of this study is that media proliferation can be used as an opportunity to enhance government and policy communication. To this end, policy officials and government officials must fashion specific or tailored plans that can be used to engage media. Respondents applauded the fact that government officials were sent to various media houses to explain the recent decision, although some seemed not to be fully knowledgeable, or the decision to send those officials was rather belated. Therefore, the media can be used to guide public discussions while unraveling the complexities associated with such decisions in a well-informed manner.

In line with the broad assessment of communication strategy, one of the results showed that the government should have been clearer with its communication. The context is clear. One of the major barriers to successful communication was that the government never fully apologized or admitted anything regarding why they returned to the

IMP, although it was not an initial option. It was important for detailed explanations to be given and for the government to admit and be honest about its turn. This would enhance the credibility and authenticity of communication, as well as the overall image of the government. With the tacit recognition of flip-flopping, it painted the government as evasive, inconsistent, and disrespectful of its citizens. It was also recommended that discourse and policy communication be more persuasive than propagandist, partisan, or political to generate better understanding and for Ghanaians to be convinced. Professionalization of communication or professional communication is therefore seen as a way to enhance government, policy, and party communication machinery.

Practically, the first step is to see governance as an ongoing deliberation, discourse, or conversation between government officials and a diverse range of stakeholders with the people at the center. Informational exchange and messaging are an intrinsic part of governance and merit increased attention from all governments to deepen understanding, shape perceptions, carry people along, and maintain values. Therefore, those at the heart of policymaking need to consider empathetic and strategic discourse or communication approaches in order not to run the risk of courting disaffected, generating confusion and perhaps opposition, or sometimes a rejection of policy measures. Governance is a shared space where rhetoric can inflame passion, assuage feelings, persuade, elicit support, or create a sense of shared purpose with citizens.

A vibrant, meaningful, productive, and participatory democracy is achieved when multiple measures, both formal and informal, traditional and conventional, are used to involve people in the governance of the nation. In fact, new media and digital tools of the modern age can be harnessed for cutting through the noise and grasping the attention of the audience in several innovative ways such as policy storytelling, impactful policy briefs, visual communicative products, research, and other strategic communicative approaches. Ultimately, the central underlying point is that the incumbent party failed to view governance as a social and communicative relationship, thereby denying the state the opportunity to engage in non-hierarchical, continuous, prompt, substantial, and adequate informational flow and exchange (Bang, 2003).

Democracy can bring about progress, enrich people's lives, and make great contributions to society if citizens remain at the center of government businesses. From a communicative and rhetorical perspective, the right to information and the free flow of information are crucial if citizens remain core stakeholders and are well-informed in this path to democratic consolidation. As policy issues become complex, it is important to connect with the public and maintain genuine and professional political conversations. To ensure this, we recommend that the various communication units of the ministries and agencies of the government, as well as the presidency, become fully professionalized. This can be achieved through continuous training in professional, policy, government, and political communication.

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