



## GOVCOMMS PODCAST

EPISODE #131

THE OECD REPORT ON PUBLIC SECTOR  
COMMUNICATIONS

TRANSCRIPT

# TRANSCRIPT

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Karine Badr:

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Carlotta Alfonsi:

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Introduction:

Welcome to the GovComms Podcast, bringing you the latest insights and innovations from experts and thought leaders around the globe in government communication. Now, here is your host David Pembroke.

David Pembroke:

Well, hello everyone. And welcome once again to another episode of GovComms, the podcast that he examines, the practise of communication in government and the public sector. My name's David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. Today we bring you a two part series where we dive into the recently launched OECD report into public communication. The report was officially launched in December, but then out to the world in January of this year, for those of you unfamiliar with the OECD, it stands for the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, and it's an international organisation that works to build better policies for better lives.

David Pembroke:

With over 60 years, experience the OECD serves to shape policies that foster prosperity, equality, opportunity and wellbeing for all. In this episode, we'll be discussing the mission of the OECD in tackling the policy area of public communication, and take a deep dive into the findings of this report and what it provides in terms of actions, not only for the OECD but member countries. I'm joined today by two of the OECDs policy analysts who worked on the report and they worked tirelessly to bring this together, Karine Badr and Carlotta Alfonsi.

David Pembroke:

Karine is leading the OECD's work on public communication reform and its contribution to openness and democracy. She's been working with reformers both inside and outside government for more than 10 years to strengthen transparency, integrity, accountability, and participation in public life. She's formally advised governments in the Middle East and North Africa during the Arab spring on anti-corruption reforms. Karine, welcome to GovComms.

Karine Badr:

Thank you very much, David. It's a pleasure.

David Pembroke:

Carlotta Alfonsi works with Karine in the OECD's open government unit on the very same issues. And she looks at analysis of responses to both mis and disinformation. Before transitioning to the policy side, she used to work to advise governments and not for profits as a communications practitioner in London. Carlotta, welcome to GovComms.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

Thank you, David. Pleasure to be here.

David Pembroke:

Karine, I might start with you if I may just to get some background into the report, which is the first of its kind as I understand it, that's been undertaken by the OECD.

Karine Badr:

Yes, of course. And I can tell you a little bit about kind of the methodology that we used for it. And I must say it was quite a daunting task, more challenging than what we had initially imagined, but also very much more rewarding, and I'll explain why. So our report, the OECD's public communication report, is largely based on a survey containing 10 dimensions and over 50 questions. And we have around 63 institutions from 46 countries, plus the European commission who have responded to it. And so we launched our survey in January 2022, and I'm sure you can imagine what that entailed in terms of timing. But it was challenging not only for the timing, but also the relevance.

Karine Badr:

So we had chosen to focus on two entities, the first being the structures located at the centre of government. So basically those serving the highest level of the executive, prime minister's office, president's office, but we also wanted a service providing ministry. So we wanted to analyse the contribution of communications to concrete services. And we wanted to focus on the ministry whose services and policies were affecting citizens directly. So we first thought of ministries of education, then we thought maybe ministries of health could be a good idea. And in the end we ended up choosing health, and I'm sure you can guess how that played out.

Karine Badr:

So really, at the beginning of this podcast, I just wanted to mention how extremely grateful we are for really all of these heroic public officials who are going out of their way in terms of communication to save lives and who are also providing evidence for question 34.b Of the OECD survey. So this is just a quick overview of how the survey unfolded and the role it took in terms of working on this report. But it wasn't just the survey, but I'll leave it at that.

David Pembroke:

And in terms then of sort of the big findings about the data collection, what were some of the things that you found?

Karine Badr:

Yes, sure. I'll pass on to Carlotta. And I can just complete to say that in addition to the survey, we've based this report on a very detailed, analytical framework that links kind of the information ecosystem with kind of the key principles of effective communication and kind of the outputs and impact that we want for it. And in addition to that, we co-produced and piloted the survey, but we then also did a series of data validation exercises, a series of online and in-person meetings, regional events to make sure that the survey kind of fit in different maturity areas, and many, many long nights of research to be able to develop this. So I'll pass it on to Carlotta on kind of the key findings of this.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

Thanks, Karine. I wanted to add another point to what you said about the methodology, because I think what is also distinctive about how we went to approach this survey, is that this is more the nature of the OECD methodologies. That we didn't survey communication departments on the perceptions of the people who work there. To the extent possible, what we did is that we tried to extract comparable, empirical measures, so official documents and procedures and protocols, numbers of staff. Dimensions that were measurable objective and comparable. We asked a couple questions that also speak to the perceptions, so the perceived challenges.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

But to the extent possible, we really wanted to get a valid and concrete picture that will not change with the change in staff, something that is a snapshot and a concrete one of the function across countries. To your question about the main findings and the areas that stood out about the report, there are perhaps three key themes that we identified that kind of connect a little bit the patterns and the questions and answers that we received, and some of the conversations we've had with the practitioners around the world. One is on the governance of the function. The second key theme is also on the institutionalisation and professionalisation of the function.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

And then third, we really saw some important aspects and gaps with the use of evidence as the basis for impactful communication. There's also a strand of work that focuses more on the disinformation side of things. And I think we're going to talk about it in a subsequent episode so I will not go into it now. But on the first point on the governance and mandates for communication, what we noted is that communication by and large is still not conducted very strategically

or linked to tangible policy objective. So for example, to give you a step from the report, we had less than half of the countries that responded that said they interact frequently with policy and programme teams.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

And often we also see that for these same countries, there's not a strategic approach behind communication. There's no concrete link between the comms and the policy objectives, or an objective driven approach in the communication. And if I can give you another example from the statistics of the report, is that when we asked communicators about the purpose of communication in their department, there is a prevalence of informing over dialogue, so speaking over listening, to use a good phrasing that Professor McNamara has proposed. And many countries, for example, seem to still use communication synonymous with media relations and PR.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

8% of the countries, for example mentioned that one of the main purposes of communication was to promote participation. And this is a very small percentage if we think about the role that information has in increasing the quality of participation in democracies. Similarly, just less than half, 45% said that one of the primary objectives of communication was to increase their transparency. So overall, this to us speaks to a gap, an existing gap between the potential of communication to fulfil a larger purpose that we see for it. And I'll say here that coming from the open government unit of the OECD, with our work focused on building a culture or governance that's centred on transparency, integrity, accountability, and participation, to make sure that citizen input and scrutiny into policy can produce better policies and better outcomes for citizens.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

With this mindset, which is how we approach the work on communication, the way that it is conducted very often, doesn't fulfil the potential for this function to really support democracy and to really support the increasing public trust, which are often objectives or goals that policy makers and communicators both indirectly speak about. And this is something that we are looking to build on in the sense that we really see the potential for communication to support this broader area work on democracy and open government.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

And we also see that there's a level of awareness and a sense of urgency among communicators about their role and the role of the function. And we want to promote it more actively, especially with more senior policy makers or with those who inside governments haven't seized the opportunity for more two way communication, for communication that really supports governance objectives. Sorry for the long answer, we can dive deeper into some of these points if you want.

Karine Badr:

Yeah. It's a 250 page report so there are a lot of key findings, but we're happy to touch upon just a few of them.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. Well, we can go through them I think, because there is so much to it in each of those answers. But I might just double back if I could just to get just a bit of the reasoning behind why, in fact, you chose this area of policy and what you did hope to find in your research when you got started, because I know you do come out of the open government area of the OECD. And Karine, I'll direct that question to you.

Karine Badr:

Yes. Thank you. So, as Carlotta was saying, we're the open government unit of the OECD's Public Governance Directorate, so we work on ensuring that citizens are at the heart of policy making. And this is because when you do this, you have improved policies and services and you have greater trust in government. And so for us, we really found that kind of communication did not have a role in this exercise, in this equation. The people in charge of open government strategies and initiatives were not necessarily working hand in hand with public communication.

Karine Badr:

And I know this is a recurring kind of challenge that public communicators face, whereby they're not always integrated in the policy design and implementation process from the very beginning, but even more so in the open government field, public communication was not necessarily considered as a government function that can help support transparency and

participation as much. So this is kind of where we looked into it. What else was there, Carlotta, in terms of the area of work and how we're linking the two?

Carlotta Alfonsi:

Of course. I would say also there's an important backdrop to this, which in the subsequent episode my colleague Craig will probably dive deeper into, but we come at a point where the information ecosystem has transformed significantly. Obviously on one hand you have the digitalization of media, social media, just internet transforming entirely how people perceive and consume information. And very often algorithms have a determining role in what you see in your feed and how you begin to perceive the world around you. So this is a very important factor for communicators to take into account because it changes their work, but it also changes the dynamics of how other actors communicate.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

And I think mis and disinformation is perhaps one of the most important manifestation of how the information ecosystem has shifted and transformed. And this is what makes this work all the more urgent. We're not talking about the same communication function that we had on our hands even five years ago. And there is also the question of trust. At the OECD this is an important part of our work. We have a team of colleagues who focus entirely on measuring and understanding this really dynamic and complex area. But from the data, we know that there is prevalently low levels of trust across OECD countries. So the latest figure was 51%, the figure of citizens who trust their government.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

But hand in hand with this, you have also a crisis of trust in information and multiple surveys and statistics from the Reuters Institute from Edelman Trust Barometer. They reiterate this point that people are finding it harder and harder to find sources of information that they trust, and they tend to gravitate towards their inner circles, family, friends, trusted figures, often now influencers or public figures that tend to align with people's views and realities. So all of this means that there's a clear dynamic between the transformation and ecosystem, the work of government and the resilience of democracy. And communication is a very important part of it, and it requires an urgent focus, which is why we're embarking on this work.

David Pembroke:

So Karine to you, as Carlotta very clearly articulated, that it is a big change. Looking back it's just five years, the pace of change is enormous. That information ecosystem is rapidly changing, and it's not going to slow down anytime soon. You point to, in the report around the need for institutionalisation and professionalisation, and you also point out that there is this need to invest in structures and capacity, and that there is a need for more human resource and more need for coordination. Were they the big issues that were raised inside of the report? Is that what people are looking for? That they need more people, more coordination and more professionalisation to deal with the challenges of this rapidly evolving ecosystem.

Karine Badr:

Yes. Precisely David. I mean, we always hear about training. Our report findings point to a clear need to invest in structures and capacity. Human resources was among the top issues raised by communicators across the world as a key obstacle to their work. Communication as you know, it's become an increasingly specialised profession. It's no longer enough to be trained in kind of just communication. You need more and more experts on a wide range of different competencies. We've seen how digital in data is extremely problematic. We also saw for example, that half of the countries actually source expertise externally on issues like BI, for example.

Karine Badr:

So the issue about structures and capacity really links to kind of ensuring that public communication is considered as a profession in itself. And it's historically not always been the case, but as any profession it requires standards, guidance, skills. And so we've really seen how capacity, structures, skills, training came up for most countries that we've talked to. And this is actually quite linked with another key finding of the report, which is the focus on evidence and data. This continues to be a challenging area, continues to be an area that requires specialisation and expertise. How do you use evidence and data is obviously extremely important in informing your communication.

Karine Badr:



We've seen, for example, that evaluation was considered as one of the top three challenging competencies that governments struggle with. Part of it can be due to the fact that actually only about a quarter of centres of government who develop strategies actually include metrics for evaluation. So we're seeing kind of some structural issues in why this is a challenging area. Also, when you look closely into evaluation and the need for it to be enhanced is that, for the countries that actually do conduct evaluations of their public communication, a lot of it is focused on kind of outputs rather than the impact. And this was actually quite surprising for me, so only about a half of the countries that answered our survey measure behaviour change, which is quite surprising.

Karine Badr:

Only 40% of them measure changes in the uptake of services. So there's this mismatch in terms of conducting, sometimes really excellent communication efforts and initiatives, but there's a mismatch with kind of conducting evaluations for it and building your actions based on evidence and data. And this is also linked to, in a way, the use of audience insights, which is a fascinating topic, and there's a chapter dedicated to that in the report. Less than a quarter of the countries that have entered the survey say that they conduct audience insight systematically as the basis for designing effective communication. So this is also kind of telling of where we stand and what is challenging. You mentioned coordination, I'll pass it on to Carlotta for that.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. So the question there really is about that coordination, the coordination and the whole of government communication. Carlotta, what sort of insights did you gain from the survey about this challenge of coordinating government communication.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

Thanks, David. I think what's most fascinating about the answers we got on the areas of coordination, whole of government communication is that, this is one area where it seems that countries have very different models in place. And even for us to sort of go beyond the sort of multiple choice questions that we pose on this and get down to the qualitative insights about how this works in practise, you see that it works really quite differently. I think if I had to synthesise it in a simple way, about half of the countries have a system in which the centre of government, which is often the office of the prime minister or something like the cabinet office in the UK.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

A central sort of organising ministry tends to hold a pen on the overall strategy and direction of communication, the mandate and sort of the main capacity to support also the work of line ministries. But often enough, each ministry also has their own communication capacity and it's by and large disjointed from other ones. And there is no specific pattern in the types of countries that have different models in place. And we're quite curious about looking into this further when we continue our research in this area. We find it quite interesting that two fifths of the respondents to the survey for example, don't coordinate on the communication strategies, but all of them coordinate on media announcements. And this is interesting because media is now not necessarily the main aspect of communication.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

The press offices have that role, but there's a vast trove of other areas that require closer coordination between governments. Citizens actually look at the government as unitary. They don't understand or necessarily care about the silos of the internal bureaucracy of government. So when they see disjointed or not coordinated messages coming their way, it can create confusion, and it can actually undermine the efficacy of each of the communication of different ministries that might on their own be quite well crafted and effective. And I think COVID-19 provided a very good demonstration of the need for coordination and most of all of cohesive communication.

David Pembroke:

So if we look at the report and even in the answers that you've given you look at those priorities of the governance of the function, this challenge of professionalisation, the use of behavioural insights as that evidence based for communications, the need for coordination, there is just so much in this report. It's absolutely massive. What do the findings mean to you? Karine, I'll direct that question to you.

Karine Badr:

So overall, the findings tell us that there is really an urgent need to kind of review the mandate of public communication to really set a more ambitious role for this key government function, a role that really lives up to the potential of public communication. And so this needs to go hand in hand with all of the things that you've mentioned, building the necessary capacity, advanced skills, empowering communicators, setting the adequate mandates, building communication based on evidence and data. And this is really what will allow communication to fulfil its role and to create impact.

Karine Badr:

And this is also why the audience for the report is not only for public communicators. Many of them will be familiar with some of the findings, will agree to them, but hopefully what we're aiming to achieve with this report is also that the decision makers can understand how public communication can actually support their role, how communication can support policy. And so this for us is kind of a second key objective of this report, in addition to looking at where countries stand, what's the status quo in terms of public communication, we're really hoping that this is a call to elevate the public communication function.

David Pembroke:

And I think the report certainly does that. Having read it really is comprehensive, it's detailed, and it does clearly articulate the role and indeed the benefit that can be derived if indeed some of these challenges are accepted by the leadership of governments and public sector organisations around the world. But in terms of your own work, you've now really set about, as I say, this first and very important research paper, which is set a bit of a benchmark around issues and really around how those issues are being managed. What next for you in terms of the work that you have to do? And I'll direct that question to you, Carlotta.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

Thank you, David. So, as you said, this is sort of a starting point for us if you will. Now that we have these findings, we're looking to work with some communicators who have helped us refine our understanding of the challenges and priorities for the function. And we're looking to really use the full capacity of the OECD as a forum and as a platform to support some of the changes that the report calls for. And there's definitely some more research needed on key themes. And we've mentioned inclusion and accessibility is one that we're exploring. We're also looking at some of the trends and innovations that have emerged after COVID-19, particularly for increasing how responsive communication is. But I'll leave the floor to Karine to also elaborate on some of the other aspects that we're working on.

Karine Badr:

Yeah. Just to say that really we're seeing more and more with COVID, obviously now with the war happening in Ukraine, this work is really at the heart of democracy. And it's at the heart of an initiative that the OECD's Public Governance Directorate has launched on reinforcing democracy. So the OECD is committed to the values of democracy, rule of law, human rights. And we can see from many different angles, how public communication plays a role in this, especially as it links to mis and disinformation, we'll be discussing this in a different podcast. But really what we're trying to see is through the kind of community of practitioners that we've developed as we went on working on this report, we want to work together to support some of the changes that the report identifies.

Karine Badr:

There's a lot more research that needs to be conducted. Some key themes will be on inclusive and accessible communication, innovating communication, mis and disinformation and public communication responses to that. There's also a lot of interest in kind of regional analysis. So we see that whether it's in Latin America, Southeast Asia, there are a lot of regions where bringing communities together, sharing lessons learned, sharing experiences can really go a long way. And one of our key priorities is also to support the professionalisation of the communication function at a global level. So it's really a really exciting time to be working on communication, and we're looking forward to kind of the next steps. Because for us, this report was really just a starting point and a launchpad, and we're excited about what's next.

David Pembroke:

So just in terms of inside the OECD, were either of you surprised at the level of interest and engagement that you received once you started this work? Because clearly the OECD, its roots are in economics and economic analysis to support evidence based policy making and other things, whereas this is a bit of a new area. So what was the sentiment around the OECD as you started to pull this work together? Was it attracting attention?

Karine Badr:

We kind of launch this work, started working on the survey in 2019, and then COVID happened and communication was front and centre for everything. And so we had just launched the survey and were collecting data as the pandemic unfolded, and as we saw the crucial role of public communication. So I guess, we can't disassociate the timeliness of this, but given everything that's happened, we've seen how public communication has saved lives at the end of the day. And so we're really glad to be able to do what the OECD does best, which is collect data and share good practises from its different member countries to together build standards and try to advise on better policies for better lives on this particular topic.

David Pembroke:

Okay. We're getting towards the end of our conversation today, but I'd like to sort of direct a question, sort of a personal question to both of you, because clearly you've been heavily involved in the discussions, heavily involved in pouring over the data, and the numbers. You're looking at 10 dimensions, 50 questions, 63 institutions, 46 countries, plus the European Commission, it's a vast exercise that has taken many, many months and years of work. Just what surprised you the most about this particular research? What did you find out that perhaps you didn't expect to find out? And Carlotta, I'll put that question to you first.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

Thanks, David. Actually, one of the most interesting aspects in digesting the data and unpacking the findings was that the process of the data cleaning itself and validating the figures and answers that we got through the surveys, it was quite articulate in the sense that we found throughout the process that, although we provided definitions and spelled out each concept and term in the survey, it seemed that communicators in different countries actually have quite different understandings of the same concepts. And this was something that we had assumed based on the literature we read and the conversations we've had at the outset with some practitioners and professionals.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

But one of the main takeaways actually is that the function itself is structured and understood quite differently from one country to another in bigger ways than we expected. Having these conversations with communicators around the world and validating the data and understanding their particular context and perceptions was one of the more valuable aspects of this research. And it really informed how we think about this work going forward and how we have framed a lot of the findings in the report.

David Pembroke:

Excellent. And for you, Karine, what was your big takeout from the work that you've done?

Karine Badr:

A few basic things actually surprised me quite a lot. So in the policy world, we often hear about how strategies are not implemented, that there aren't enough resources or time to implement them, et cetera. So it was surprising for me to find that over two fifth of countries actually do not develop public communication strategies, which was not something that I was expecting. So for us, this is like a kind of a key centrepiece of the work going forward. But it was also baffling to learn how hard it was for communicators to actually communicate around their actual budgets.

Karine Badr:

So a section of the survey kind of focus on, what budgets do you have available to you for public communication? And not a lot of countries were able to actually respond to this. And when we dugged a little bit deeper, it was for a variety of reasons, whether communication budgets were ad hoc, what was the definition of public communication, and this is something that Carlotta just touched upon. Not being able necessarily to link an actual budget to a communication initiative. So this was quite surprising to me as well. And then finally, something that I mentioned a bit earlier in our discussion around, what were communicators linking their initiatives too.

Karine Badr:

And so the figure that I mentioned around measuring behaviour change, measuring service take-up, these are two things that are not necessarily being used as often or across the world, and they would actually be extremely useful in building the case for a bigger investment of communication. Because this is where you can really show the impact of it, and you



can really show kind of, thanks to this communication campaign or initiatives, we were able to go from A to B. And so for us, this was kind of the key kind of tools that communicators can use to push for a bigger mandate and a bigger... A bigger mandate basically for public communication.

David Pembroke:

And would there be anything that you would change in the work that you've gone about and done? Sort of reflecting, looking back, are there things that you wouldn't have done, that you did?

Karine Badr:

I think this is... It's really an ongoing conversation. None of this prescriptive and we have a really great community of practitioners, both public communicators, people working in open government, people that work on innovative citizen participation, and we're in constant discussions with all of these different groups. And so this helps us in a way to, I mean, you always learn from what you do, but given that we keep talking to all of these different counterparts, we're kind of able to keep the conversation going and refocus it on any of the areas where we see adjustments need to be made.

David Pembroke:

And Carlotta for you, anything that you look back on and think, I would've saved myself a whole lot of time if I'd have decided to do something else, or if I changed my approach?

Carlotta Alfonsi:

No, Dave. Nothing in particular in that sense. I think the more I work on this, the more I see future areas where I would go back and do more research. But I think this is part of the start of the journey, and really, I think we've had a wonderful and supportive community as Karine was saying, and we have a lot of appetite for growing this area of work. There's a lot of interest and we kind of look forward and not backward in that sense. We have a lot to do, and I think the best approach is to focus on what we can do next.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. Well, I think what the report certainly does is to, as I described earlier, just set that benchmark. Because it does feel in many ways like the profession is in the foothills. It's in the very, very early stages of its understanding of what it is, where it fits, and also how it changes as you described a little earlier Carlotta. This rapidly changing digital ecosystem and the rapid impacts that it's having on people's behaviour and the way that they consume information, the way information is developed, the way it's distributed. It is such a big change, a rapid change, a fast change.

David Pembroke:

And it seems to me like there is going to be no end of areas where you are going to have to continue to look at to make recommendations as to where can you strengthen the performance of the profession, such that it can make the contribution that clearly you've articulated around that strengthening of democracy and the improvement of trust in government and public sector organisations. So I wish you well in the enormous amount of work that you have in front of you, and congratulations on being the people who pulled this together.

David Pembroke:

Because I think for many of us who've worked in the profession for many years, it's been something that's been sadly lacking, that there hasn't been a global view. And for you to be able to come in and do this high quality piece of work, it's fantastic I think for the profession to start to think about itself a little bit more as a profession, I think. Because that really hasn't come to pass. So where can the audience find this research? Where can they get access to it?

Carlotta Alfonsi:

So our report is available on the OECD website. It's easy to search for it. It's the only public communication report. The full title is Public Communication: The Global Context and the Way Forward. And if you follow us on Twitter, you can find both Karine and myself searching for our names. We have tweeted plentifully about it. So the links are there. And I suppose in the show notes for this episode perhaps.

David Pembroke:

We will certainly promote that. And we certainly look forward to part two of our conversation with the OECD because a very important part of this particular research is around disinformation. And what'll be discussing is about good practise principles and dealing with disinformation and misinformation. I think it couldn't come at a more opportune time as we all sit back in horror and observe what is going on in the Ukraine at the moment and indeed the role of misinformation and disinformation and public information in that context. I don't think we'll get into the notion of warfare, but we certainly will look at those issues of disinformation. So we certainly look forward to that as well.

David Pembroke:

So a very big thanks to my friends from the OECD who have joined us, Karine Badr and to Carlotta Alfonsi, thank you so much for coming on the programme and thanks for your contribution with this great piece of research. And to you, the audience, thank you for coming back once again, very grateful as always. If you would like to give us a rating or a review in your favourite podcast catcher, always helps and always helps for it to be found. But it's interesting, it's great to see the numbers for the podcast growing, and indeed the diversity of the numbers who come and listen each week to our discussions about government communications.

David Pembroke:

Because as Carlotta and Karine have told us, it's global practise and people are very, very interested. So thank you for coming back once again and let your friends know. But for the moment, we'll be back in a fortnight's time with another great topic from the world of government communications. We'll have part two of our discussion with the OECD, but for the moment it's bye for now.

Outro:

You've been listening to the GovComms Podcast. If you enjoyed this episode, be sure to rate and subscribe to stay up to date with our latest episodes.

Karine Badr:

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Citizens actually look at the government as unitary. They don't understand or necessarily care about the silos of the internal bureaucracy of government. So when they see disjointed or not coordinated messages coming their way, it can create confusion and it can actually undermine the efficacy of each of the communication of different ministries that might on their own be quite well crafted and effective.

Speaker 3:

Welcome to the GovComms Podcast, bringing you the latest insights and innovations from experts and thought leaders around the globe in government communication. Now, here is your host David Pembroke.

David Pembroke:

Well, hello everyone. And welcome once again to another episode of GovComms, the podcast that he examines, the practice of communication in government and the public sector. My name's David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. Today we bring you a two part series where we dive into the recently launched OECD report into public communication. The report was officially launched in December, but then out to the world in January of this year, for those of you unfamiliar with the OECD, it stands for the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, and it's an international organisation that works to build better policies for better lives.

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With over 60 years, experience the OECD serves to shape policies that foster prosperity, equality, opportunity and wellbeing for all. In this episode, we'll be discussing the mission of the OECD in tackling the policy area of public communication, and take a deep dive into the findings of this report and what it provides in terms of actions, not only for the OECD but member countries. I'm joined today by two of the OECDs policy analysts who worked on the report and they worked tirelessly to bring this together, Karine Badr and Carlotta Alfonsi.

David Pembroke:

Karine is leading the OECD's work on public communication reform and its contribution to openness and democracy. She's been working with reformers both inside and outside government for more than 10 years to strengthen transparency, integrity, accountability, and participation in public life. She's formally advised governments in the Middle East and North Africa during the Arab spring on anti-corruption reforms. Karine, welcome to GovComms.

Karine Badr:

Thank you very much, David. It's a pleasure.

David Pembroke:

Carlotta Alfonsi works with Karine in the OECD's open government unit on the very same issues. And she looks at analysis of responses to both mis and disinformation. Before transitioning to the policy side, she used to work to advise governments and not for profits as a communications practitioner in London. Carlotta, welcome to GovComms.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

Thank you, David. Pleasure to be here.

David Pembroke:

Karine, I might start with you if I may just to get some background into the report, which is the first of its kind as I understand it, that's been undertaken by the OECD.

Karine Badr:

Yes, of course. And I can tell you a little bit about kind of the methodology that we used for it. And I must say it was quite a daunting task, more challenging than what we had initially imagined, but also very much more rewarding, and I'll explain why. So our report, the OECD's public communication report, is largely based on a survey containing 10 dimensions and over 50 questions. And we have around 63 institutions from 46 countries, plus the European commission who have responded to it. And so we launched our survey in January 2022, and I'm sure you can imagine what that entailed in terms of timing. But it was challenging not only for the timing, but also the relevance.

Karine Badr:

So we had chosen to focus on two entities, the first being the structures located at the center of government. So basically those serving the highest level of the executive, prime minister's office, president's office, but we also wanted a service providing ministry. So we wanted to analyse the contribution of communications to concrete services. And we wanted to focus on the ministry whose services and policies were affecting citizens directly. So we first thought of ministries of education, then we thought maybe ministries of health could be a good idea. And in the end we ended up choosing health, and I'm sure you can guess how that played out.

Karine Badr:

So really, at the beginning of this podcast, I just wanted to mention how extremely grateful we are for really all of these heroic public officials who are going out of their way in terms of communication to save lives and who are also providing evidence for question 34.b Of the OECD survey. So this is just a quick overview of how the survey unfolded and the role it took in terms of working on this report. But it wasn't just the survey, but I'll leave it at that.

David Pembroke:

And in terms then of sort of the big findings about the data collection, what were some of the things that you found?

Karine Badr:

Yes, sure. I'll pass on to Carlotta. And I can just complete to say that in addition to the survey, we've based this report on a very detailed, analytical framework that links kind of the information ecosystem with kind of the key principles of effective communication and kind of the outputs and impact that we want for it. And in addition to that, we co-produced and piloted the survey, but we then also did a series of data validation exercises, a series of online and in-person meetings, regional events to make sure that the survey kind of fit in different maturity areas, and many, many long nights of research to be able to develop this. So I'll pass it on to Carlotta on kind of the key findings of this.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

Thanks, Karine. I wanted to add another point to what you said about the methodology, because I think what is also distinctive about how we went to approach this survey, is that this is more the nature of the OECD methodologies. That we didn't survey communication departments on the perceptions of the people who work there. To the extent possible, what we did is that we tried to extract comparable, empirical measures, so official documents and procedures and protocols, numbers of staff. Dimensions that were measurable objective and comparable. We asked a couple questions that also speak to the perceptions, so the perceived challenges.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

But to the extent possible, we really wanted to get a valid and concrete picture that will not change with the change in staff, something that is a snapshot and a concrete one of the function across countries. To your question about the main findings and the areas that stood out about the report, there are perhaps three key themes that we identified that kind of connect a little bit the patterns and the questions and answers that we received, and some of the conversations we've had with the practitioners around the world. One is on the governance of the function. The second key theme is also on the institutionalisation and professionalisation of the function.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

And then third, we really saw some important aspects and gaps with the use of evidence as the basis for impactful communication. There's also a strand of work that focuses more on the disinformation side of things. And I think we're going to talk about it in a subsequent episode so I will not go into it now. But on the first point on the governance and mandates for communication, what we noted is that communication by and large is still not conducted very strategically or linked to tangible policy objective. So for example, to give you a step from the report, we had less than half of the countries that responded that said they interact frequently with policy and programme teams.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

And often we also see that for these same countries, there's not a strategic approach behind communication. There's no concrete link between the comms and the policy objectives, or an objective driven approach in the communication. And if I can give you another example from the statistics of the report, is that when we asked communicators about the purpose of communication in their department, there is a prevalence of informing over dialogue, so speaking over listening, to use a good phrasing that Professor McNamara has proposed. And many countries, for example, seem to still use communication synonymous with media relations and PR.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

8% of the countries, for example mentioned that one of the main purposes of communication was to promote participation. And this is a very small percentage if we think about the role that information has in increasing the quality of participation in democracies. Similarly, just less than half, 45% said that one of the primary objectives of communication was to increase their transparency. So overall, this to us speaks to a gap, an existing gap between the potential of communication to fulfil a larger purpose that we see for it. And I'll say here that coming from the open government unit of the OECD, with our work focused on building a culture or governance that's centered on transparency, integrity, accountability, and participation, to make sure that citizen input and scrutiny into policy can produce better policies and better outcomes for citizens.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

With this mindset, which is how we approach the work on communication, the way that it is conducted very often, doesn't fulfil the potential for this function to really support democracy and to really support the increasing public trust, which are often objectives or goals that policy makers and communicators both indirectly speak about. And this is something that we are looking to build on in the sense that we really see the potential for communication to support this broader area work on democracy and open government.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

And we also see that there's a level of awareness and a sense of urgency among communicators about their role and the role of the function. And we want to promote it more actively, especially with more senior policy makers or with those who inside governments haven't seized the opportunity for more two way communication, for communication that really supports governance objectives. Sorry for the long answer, we can dive deeper into some of these points if you want.

Karine Badr:

Yeah. It's a 250 page report so there are a lot of key findings, but we're happy to touch upon just a few of them.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. Well, we can go through them I think, because there is so much to it in each of those answers. But I might just double back if I could just to get just a bit of the reasoning behind why, in fact, you chose this area of policy and what you did hope to find in your research when you got started, because I know you do come out of the open government area of the OECD. And Karine, I'll direct that question to you.

Karine Badr:

Yes. Thank you. So, as Carlotta was saying, we're the open government unit of the OECD's Public Governance Directorate, so we work on ensuring that citizens are at the heart of policy making. And this is because when you do this, you have improved policies and services and you have greater trust in government. And so for us, we really found that kind of communication did not have a role in this exercise, in this equation. The people in charge of open government strategies and initiatives were not necessarily working hand in hand with public communication.

Karine Badr:

And I know this is a recurring kind of challenge that public communicators face, whereby they're not always integrated in the policy design and implementation process from the very beginning, but even more so in the open government field, public communication was not necessarily considered as a government function that can help support transparency and participation as much. So this is kind of where we looked into it. What else was there, Carlotta, in terms of the area of work and how we're linking the two?

Carlotta Alfonsi:

Of course. I would say also there's an important backdrop to this, which in the subsequent episode my colleague Craig will probably dive deeper into, but we come at a point where the information ecosystem has transformed significantly. Obviously on one hand you have the digitalization of media, social media, just internet transforming entirely how people perceive and consume information. And very often algorithms have a determining role in what you see in your feed and how you begin to perceive the world around you. So this is a very important factor for communicators to take into account because it changes their work, but it also changes the dynamics of how other actors communicate.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

And I think mis and disinformation is perhaps one of the most important manifestation of how the information ecosystem has shifted and transformed. And this is what makes this work all the more urgent. We're not talking about the same communication function that we had on our hands even five years ago. And there is also the question of trust. At the OECD this is an important part of our work. We have a team of colleagues who focus entirely on measuring and understanding this really dynamic and complex area. But from the data, we know that there is prevalently low levels of trust across OECD countries. So the latest figure was 51%, the figure of citizens who trust their government.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

But hand in hand with this, you have also a crisis of trust in information and multiple surveys and statistics from the Reuters Institute from Edelman Trust Barometer. They reiterate this point that people are finding it harder and harder to find sources of information that they trust, and they tend to gravitate towards their inner circles, family, friends, trusted figures, often now influencers or public figures that tend to align with people's views and realities. So all of this means that there's a clear dynamic between the transformation and ecosystem, the work of government and the resilience of democracy. And communication is a very important part of it, and it requires an urgent focus, which is why we're embarking on this work.

David Pembroke:

So Karine to you, as Carlotta very clearly articulated, that it is a big change. Looking back it's just five years, the pace of change is enormous. That information ecosystem is rapidly changing, and it's not going to slow down anytime soon. You point to, in the report around the need for institutionalisation and professionalisation, and you also point out that there is this need to invest in structures and capacity, and that there is a need for more human resource and more need for coordination. Were they the big issues that were raised inside of the report? Is that what people are looking for? That



they need more people, more coordination and more professionalisation to deal with the challenges of this rapidly evolving ecosystem.

Karine Badr:

Yes. Precisely David. I mean, we always hear about training. Our report findings point to a clear need to invest in structures and capacity. Human resources was among the top issues raised by communicators across the world as a key obstacle to their work. Communication as you know, it's become an increasingly specialised profession. It's no longer enough to be trained in kind of just communication. You need more and more experts on a wide range of different competencies. We've seen how digital in data is extremely problematic. We also saw for example, that half of the countries actually source expertise externally on issues like BI, for example.

Karine Badr:

So the issue about structures and capacity really links to kind of ensuring that public communication is considered as a profession in itself. And it's historically not always been the case, but as any profession it requires standards, guidance, skills. And so we've really seen how capacity, structures, skills, training came up for most countries that we've talked to. And this is actually quite linked with another key finding of the report, which is the focus on evidence and data. This continues to be a challenging area, continues to be an area that requires specialisation and expertise. How do you use evidence and data is obviously extremely important in informing your communication.

Karine Badr:

We've seen, for example, that evaluation was considered as one of the top three challenging competencies that governments struggle with. Part of it can be due to the fact that actually only about a quarter of centers of government who develop strategies actually include metrics for evaluation. So we're seeing kind of some structural issues in why this is a challenging area. Also, when you look closely into evaluation and the need for it to be enhanced is that, for the countries that actually do conduct evaluations of their public communication, a lot of it is focused on kind of outputs rather than the impact. And this was actually quite surprising for me, so only about a half of the countries that answered our survey measure behaviour change, which is quite surprising.

Karine Badr:

Only 40% of them measure changes in the uptake of services. So there's this mismatch in terms of conducting, sometimes really excellent communication efforts and initiatives, but there's a mismatch with kind of conducting evaluations for it and building your actions based on evidence and data. And this is also linked to, in a way, the use of audience insights, which is a fascinating topic, and there's a chapter dedicated to that in the report. Less than a quarter of the countries that have entered the survey say that they conduct audience insight systematically as the basis for designing effective communication. So this is also kind of telling of where we stand and what is challenging. You mentioned coordination, I'll pass it on to Carlotta for that.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. So the question there really is about that coordination, the coordination and the whole of government communication. Carlotta, what sort of insights did you gain from the survey about this challenge of coordinating government communication.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

Thanks, David. I think what's most fascinating about the answers we got on the areas of coordination, whole of government communication is that, this is one area where it seems that countries have very different models in place. And even for us to sort of go beyond the sort of multiple-choice questions that we pose on this and get down to the qualitative insights about how this works in practice, you see that it works really quite differently. I think if I had to synthesise it in a simple way, about half of the countries have a system in which the center of government, which is often the office of the prime minister or something like the cabinet office in the UK.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

A central sort of organising ministry tends to hold a pen on the overall strategy and direction of communication, the mandate and sort of the main capacity to support also the work of line ministries. But often enough, each ministry also has their own communication capacity and it's by and large disjointed from other ones. And there is no specific pattern in

the types of countries that have different models in place. And we're quite curious about looking into this further when we continue our research in this area. We find it quite interesting that two fifths of the respondents to the survey for example, don't coordinate on the communication strategies, but all of them coordinate on media announcements. And this is interesting because media is now not necessarily the main aspect of communication.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

The press offices have that role, but there's a vast trove of other areas that require closer coordination between governments. Citizens actually look at the government as unitary. They don't understand or necessarily care about the silos of the internal bureaucracy of government. So when they see disjointed or not coordinated messages coming their way, it can create confusion, and it can actually undermine the efficacy of each of the communication of different ministries that might on their own be quite well crafted and effective. And I think COVID-19 provided a very good demonstration of the need for coordination and most of all of cohesive communication.

David Pembroke:

So if we look at the report and even in the answers that you've given you look at those priorities of the governance of the function, this challenge of professionalisation, the use of behavioural insights as that evidence based for communications, the need for coordination, there is just so much in this report. It's absolutely massive. What do the findings mean to you? Karine, I'll direct that question to you.

Karine Badr:

So overall, the findings tell us that there is really an urgent need to kind of review the mandate of public communication to really set a more ambitious role for this key government function, a role that really lives up to the potential of public communication. And so this needs to go hand in hand with all of the things that you've mentioned, building the necessary capacity, advanced skills, empowering communicators, setting the adequate mandates, building communication based on evidence and data. And this is really what will allow communication to fulfil its role and to create impact.

Karine Badr:

And this is also why the audience for the report is not only for public communicators. Many of them will be familiar with some of the findings, will agree to them, but hopefully what we're aiming to achieve with this report is also that the decision makers can understand how public communication can actually support their role, how communication can support policy. And so this for us is kind of a second key objective of this report, in addition to looking at where countries stand, what's the status quo in terms of public communication, we're really hoping that this is a call to elevate the public communication function.

David Pembroke:

And I think the report certainly does that. Having read it really is comprehensive, it's detailed, and it does clearly articulate the role and indeed the benefit that can be derived if indeed some of these challenges are accepted by the leadership of governments and public sector organisations around the world. But in terms of your own work, you've now really set about, as I say, this first and very important research paper, which is set a bit of a benchmark around issues and really around how those issues are being managed. What next for you in terms of the work that you have to do? And I'll direct that question to you, Carlotta.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

Thank you, David. So, as you said, this is sort of a starting point for us if you will. Now that we have these findings, we're looking to work with some communicators who have helped us refine our understanding of the challenges and priorities for the function. And we're looking to really use the full capacity of the OECD as a forum and as a platform to support some of the changes that the report calls for. And there's definitely some more research needed on key themes. And we've mentioned inclusion and accessibility is one that we're exploring. We're also looking at some of the trends and innovations that have emerged after COVID-19, particularly for increasing how responsive communication is. But I'll leave the floor to Karine to also elaborate on some of the other aspects that we're working on.

Karine Badr:

Yeah. Just to say that really we're seeing more and more with COVID, obviously now with the war happening in Ukraine, this work is really at the heart of democracy. And it's at the heart of an initiative that the OECD's Public Governance

Directorate has launched on reinforcing democracy. So the OECD is committed to the values of democracy, rule of law, human rights. And we can see from many different angles, how public communication plays a role in this, especially as it links to mis and disinformation, we'll be discussing this in a different podcast. But really what we're trying to see is through the kind of community of practitioners that we've developed as we went on working on this report, we want to work together to support some of the changes that the report identifies.

Karine Badr:

There's a lot more research that needs to be conducted. Some key themes will be on inclusive and accessible communication, innovating communication, mis and disinformation and public communication responses to that. There's also a lot of interest in kind of regional analysis. So we see that whether it's in Latin America, Southeast Asia, there are a lot of regions where bringing communities together, sharing lessons learned, sharing experiences can really go a long way. And one of our key priorities is also to support the professionalisation of the communication function at a global level. So it's really a really exciting time to be working on communication, and we're looking forward to kind of the next steps. Because for us, this report was really just a starting point and a launchpad, and we're excited about what's next.

David Pembroke:

So just in terms of inside the OECD, were either of you surprised at the level of interest and engagement that you received once you started this work? Because clearly the OECD, it's roots are in economics and economic analysis to support evidence based policy making and other things, whereas this is a bit of a new area. So what was the sentiment around the OECD as you started to pull this work together? Was it attracting attention?

Karine Badr:

We kind of launch this work, started working on the survey in 2019, and then COVID happened and communication was front and center for everything. And so we had just launched the survey and were collecting data as the pandemic unfolded, and as we saw the crucial role of public communication. So I guess, we can't disassociate the timeliness of this, but given everything that's happened, we've seen how public communication has saved lives at the end of the day. And so we're really glad to be able to do what the OECD does best, which is collect data and share good practices from its different member countries to together build standards and try to advise on better policies for better lives on this particular topic.

David Pembroke:

Okay. We're getting towards the end of our conversation today, but I'd like to sort of direct a question, sort of a personal question to both of you, because clearly you've been heavily involved in the discussions, heavily involved in pouring over the data, and the numbers. You're looking at 10 dimensions, 50 questions, 63 institutions, 46 countries, plus the European Commission, it's a vast exercise that has taken many, many months and years of work. Just what surprised you the most about this particular research? What did you find out that perhaps you didn't expect to find out? And Carlotta, I'll put that question to you first.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

Thanks, David. Actually, one of the most interesting aspects in digesting the data and unpacking the findings was that the process of the data cleaning itself and validating the figures and answers that we got through the surveys, it was quite articulate in the sense that we found throughout the process that, although we provided definitions and spelled out each concept and term in the survey, it seemed that communicators in different countries actually have quite different understandings of the same concepts. And this was something that we had assumed based on the literature we read and the conversations we've had at the outset with some practitioners and professionals.

Carlotta Alfonsi:

But one of the main takeaways actually is that the function itself is structured and understood quite differently from one country to another in bigger ways than we expected. Having these conversations with communicators around the world and validating the data and understanding their particular context and perceptions was one of the more valuable aspects of this research. And it really informed how we think about this work going forward and how we have framed a lot of the findings in the report.

David Pembroke:

Excellent. And for you, Karine, what was your big takeout from the work that you've done?

Karine Badr:

A few basic things actually surprised me quite a lot. So in the policy world, we often hear about how strategies are not implemented, that there aren't enough resources or time to implement them, et cetera. So it was surprising for me to find that over two fifth of countries actually do not develop public communication strategies, which was not something that I was expecting. So for us, this is like a kind of a key centerpiece of the work going forward. But it was also baffling to learn how hard it was for communicators to actually communicate around their actual budgets.

Karine Badr:

So a section of the survey kind of focus on, what budgets do you have available to you for public communication? And not a lot of countries were able to actually respond to this. And when we dug a little bit deeper, it was for a variety of reasons, whether communication budgets were ad hoc, what was the definition of public communication, and this is something that Carlotta just touched upon. Not being able necessarily to link an actual budget to a communication initiative. So this was quite surprising to me as well. And then finally, something that I mentioned a bit earlier in our discussion around, what were communicators linking their initiatives too.

Karine Badr:

And so the figure that I mentioned around measuring behaviour change, measuring service take-up, these are two things that are not necessarily being used as often or across the world, and they would actually be extremely useful in building the case for a bigger investment of communication. Because this is where you can really show the impact of it, and you can really show kind of, thanks to this communication campaign or initiatives, we were able to go from A to B. And so for us, this was kind of the key kind of tools that communicators can use to push for a bigger mandate and a bigger... A bigger mandate basically for public communication.

David Pembroke:

And would there be anything that you would change in the work that you've gone about and done? Sort of reflecting, looking back, are there things that you wouldn't have done, that you did?

Karine Badr:

I think this is... It's really an ongoing conversation. None of this prescriptive and we have a really great community of practitioners, both public communicators, people working in open government, people that work on innovative citizen participation, and we're in constant discussions with all of these different groups. And so this helps us in a way to, I mean, you always learn from what you do, but given that we keep talking to all of these different counterparts, we're kind of able to keep the conversation going and refocus it on any of the areas where we see adjustments need to be made.

David Pembroke:

And Carlotta for you, anything that you look back on and think, I would've saved myself a whole lot of time if I'd have decided to do something else, or if I changed my approach?

Carlotta Alfonsi:

No, Dave. Nothing in particular in that sense. I think the more I work on this, the more I see future areas where I would go back and do more research. But I think this is part of the start of the journey, and really, I think we've had a wonderful and supportive community as Karine was saying, and we have a lot of appetite for growing this area of work. There's a lot of interest and we kind of look forward and not backward in that sense. We have a lot to do, and I think the best approach is to focus on what we can do next.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. Well, I think what the report certainly does is to, as I described earlier, just set that benchmark. Because it does feel in many ways like the profession is in the foothills. It's in the very, very early stages of its understanding of what it is, where it fits, and also how it changes as you described a little earlier Carlotta. This rapidly changing digital ecosystem and the rapid impacts that it's having on people's behaviour and the way that they consume information, the way information is developed, the way it's distributed. It is such a big change, a rapid change, a fast change.

David Pembroke:

And it seems to me like there is going to be no end of areas where you are going to have to continue to look at to make recommendations as to where can you strengthen the performance of the profession, such that it can make the contribution that clearly you've articulated around that strengthening of democracy and the improvement of trust in government and public sector organization's. So I wish you well in the enormous amount of work that you have in front of you, and congratulations on being the people who pulled this together.

David Pembroke:

Because I think for many of us who've worked in the profession for many years, it's been something that's been sadly lacking, that there hasn't been a global view. And for you to be able to come in and do this high quality piece of work, it's fantastic I think for the profession to start to think about itself a little bit more as a profession, I think. Because that really hasn't come to pass. So where can the audience find this research? Where can they get access to it?

Carlotta Alfonsi:

So our report is available on the OECD website. It's easy to search for it. It's the only public communication report. The full title is Public Communication: The Global Context and the Way Forward. And if you follow us on Twitter, you can find both Karine and myself searching for our names. We have tweeted plentifully about it. So the links are there. And I suppose in the show notes for this episode perhaps.

David Pembroke:

We will certainly promote that. And we certainly look forward to part two of our conversation with the OECD because a very important part of this particular research is around disinformation. And what'll be discussing is about good practise principles and dealing with disinformation and misinformation. I think it couldn't come at a more opportune time as we all sit back in horror and observe what is going on in the Ukraine at the moment and indeed the role of misinformation and disinformation and public information in that context. I don't think we'll get into the notion of warfare, but we certainly will look at those issues of disinformation. So we certainly look forward to that as well.

David Pembroke:

So a very big thanks to my friends from the OECD who have joined us, Karine Badr and to Carlotta Alfonsi, thank you so much for coming on the programme and thanks for your contribution with this great piece of research. And to you, the audience, thank you for coming back once again, very grateful as always. If you would like to give us a rating or a review in your favourite podcast catcher, always helps and always helps for it to be found. But it's interesting, it's great to see the numbers for the podcast growing, and indeed the diversity of the numbers who come and listen each week to our discussions about government communications.

David Pembroke:

Because as Carlotta and Karine have told us, it's global practice and people are very, very interested. So thank you for coming back once again and let your friends know. But for the moment, we'll be back in a fortnight's time with another great topic from the world of government communications. We'll have part two of our discussion with the OECD, but for the moment it's bye for now.

Outro:

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