



Message exchange: From government to community (and within community)

These insights have been drawn over the course of our work in the project communities. They may also be indicative or helpful when considering possible systems for message exchange in other places. These insights exclusively address communication from government to community members. They DO NOT address communication from community to government or communication and coordination between government departments. These are equally important aspects of good engagement and coordination, but not the focus of the list below.

Signs and Brochures

- In the past, signs and posters were often used to alert community members to upcoming events. These signs were commonly posted on walls and community noticeboards in high-traffic areas.
- When asked about how government should communicate around upcoming events, people often say that they remember when signs used to be put up at the store and other places, and how they appreciate this when it occurs.
- The shop (on the notice board and over the ATM), the school, the clinic and the airport are key locations where signs and brochures may be displayed; once appropriate permission has been sought.
- It is significant how images, logos and colours are used on printed materials. The arrangement of images and use of particular colours all indicate to community members who the message came from, who it is for and the kind of implications it may carry. For example, are government logos and colours prioritised? Is there equal significance given to logos of government and Indigenous organisations?
- It is also always immediately clear when photos or visual material are drawn from stock footage of Indigenous communities or faces. Where possible, community specific images should be used; they will generate interest and produce the best effect.

Community Facebook Pages

- Facebook is a very common and well used messaging medium in Indigenous communities
- Where there a vibrant and active Community Facebook page in operation, this can be an exceptionally effective system for communication and message exchange.
- The Elcho Island Notice Board is one example of this, and has been recommended by community members as a good place to post notices of events and other information. This site is widely used to communicate within the community, and for sending messages between family and organisations outside the community. It can be recognised as healthy because it carries a diversity of posts – football scores, job offers, notices of lost dogs, greetings to family, old photos of community and family, video clips etc etc.

- The situation in Ngukurr is slightly different. Here they have a community Facebook page ('Ngukurr Community News Page'), which is used but not as widely by community members as the notice board in Galiwin'ku. Ngukurr also has a local newspaper that is both printed and posted on Facebook ('Yugul-Ngukurr News'). There may be an opportunity to liaise with Daphne Daniels, the Yugul-Ngukurr News editor, to ascertain how this paper might support government message exchange in the community.
- In such cases as these, it is better if the government sees itself as a participant in existing processes for message exchange, rather than as a director or administrator of new ones. Community Facebook pages may be easily subscribed to using personal or organisational accounts and can then be used by government to post notices which will appear alongside any other messages circulating in the community at the time.

Loud Speakers

- Loudspeakers are used in some communities. These can be a highly effective communication mechanism, but the manner in which they are used is important.
- It is likely that there will be a group of a few people who commonly make any announcements; and it is more likely that messages will be listened to when coming from these familiar people.
- It is far more appropriate for a local community member to make an announcement in language than it is for a government worker to make an announcement in English.
- However, not all messages are appropriate to communicate over the loudspeaker.
- Announcements can be very penetrating for people who hear them – “when we hear that announcement to come to that meeting we feel bad inside” and “we know government have convinced those Yolngu to make the announcement” – and so care should be taken when negotiating an announcement. Is it a message that Countrymen would like to pass to other Countrymen? If not, perhaps another route is more appropriate.
- In communities where there is not a loudspeaker, it should be noted that messages will flow differently. There may not be as clear a way to generate an 'all of community' communication, and as such message flow might be expected to proceed through other routes and at a different pace.

Phone and Email

- The use of phone and email as a means for maintaining communication with people in communities is highly variable.
- Within the community, some people may maintain their same mobile phone number for years, others only for days or weeks. Some phones are the property of individuals, while others are shared within families.
- Saving phone numbers with both a name and a date can be helpful when trying to maintain an active list of phone numbers for people in community. This can help gauge the likelihood that a number is still active, and prevent confusion around multiple numbers.
- Many Countrymen do not use email, but there are some who are intermittent or very regular users. People often have a greater level of confidence around receiving and reading emails, than they do around sending a reply.
- It is best if the use of phone and email as a communication pathway is negotiated on a case-by-case basis (also recognising that an agreed arrangement may be subject to change at any point).

Word-of-mouth

- While it might be assumed that word-of-mouth is an effective form of message exchange within communities, this is not always the case.
- Members of the Local Authorities, and other committees, often express a sense of exasperation and fatigue around the expectation that they will disseminate information from these meetings to the wider community.
- For government and planning purposes, 'the community' is often considered to be a single unit within which communication might be assumed to flow from person to person in a smooth and uniform fashion (as gossip does). However, for Countrymen 'the community' is not necessarily a natural or homogenous entity. Information exchange involves crossing family and clan groups, and as such may encounter frequent stoppages.
- It may therefore be unreasonable to rely on word-of-mouth as a mechanism for communicating discussions and decisions to community, without the negotiation of other processes or mechanisms for message flow.