European Commission

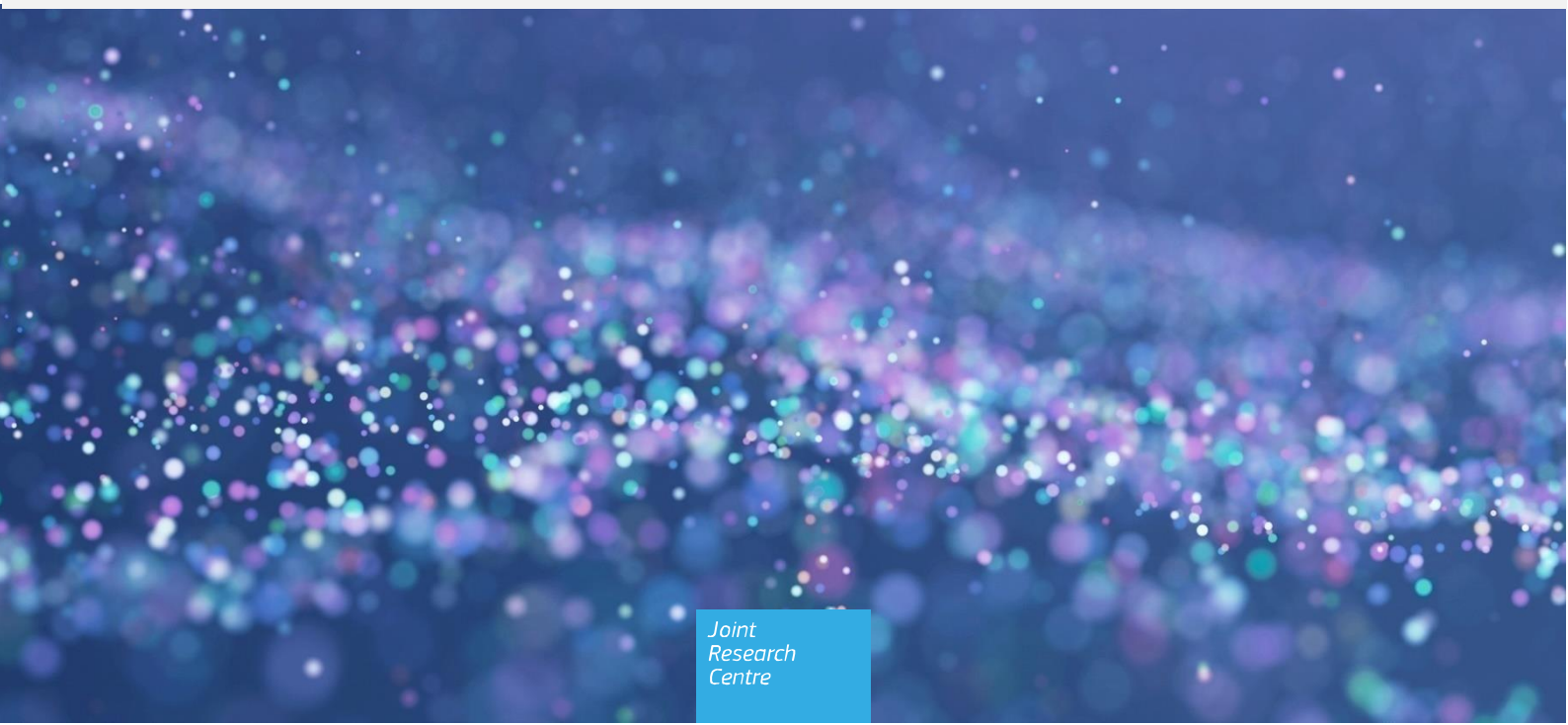
Final Report

Citizen participatory focus groups on Meaningful & Ethical Communications

Kantar, P.

Silva Almeida, M. (ed)
Smillie, L. (ed)

2024



Joint Research Centre

Contact information
Name: Mara Almeida
Email: Mara.SILVA-ALMEIDA@ec.europa.eu

EU Science Hub
https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu

PDF ISBN 978-92-68-15533-2 doi:10.2760/32390 KJ-09-24-283-EN-N

Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2024

How to cite this report: European Commission, Joint Research Centre, Kantar, P., *Citizen participatory focus groups on Meaningful and Ethical Communications*, Silva Almeida, M. and Smillie, L. editor(s), Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2024, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/32390, JRC137915.

Contents

1. Executive summary

The focus of this study is citizens' views on communications by public institutions. It builds upon the previous work of the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission that examined the relationship between online technologies and political behaviour, as well as that of values and identities in the political process. Through a series of focus groups with citizens from nine EU Member States, the study sought to understand citizens' expectations with regard to communications by public institutions, and the potential consequences of communication strategies that use new and different methods, tools and channels. The study also addressed the question of ethics in public communication and gathered citizens' views on practices seen as potentially unethical or inappropriate in the case of public institutions.

This study was commissioned to contribute to the fourth report in the Joint Research Centre's (JRC) multi-annual research programme, Enlightenment 2.0. The Enlightenment 2.0 programme examines the role of evidence-based policy-making in safeguarding democracies, fostering citizens' trust and ensuring the effectiveness of political decisions.

This study aimed to listen to and understand citizens' perspectives with regard to two overarching questions:

- How can governments ensure that their communications resonate more deeply with citizens without resorting to tactics that are potentially manipulative?
- How can government actors ensure their communications are both meaningful and ethical?

In its scope, the study focused on policy-related institutional communications, excluding party political, commercial communications and those of interest groups.

In practical terms, the study was implemented through three-hour long focus groups in nine EU countries. The final selection of countries included Malta, where a pilot group was undertaken, and two groups per country in Belgium, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. Participants were recruited to ensure the diversity of each group in terms of the participants' age, gender, education level, employment status, interest in the news and politics, and trust in government.

1.1 Citizens' understanding of institutional communication

Most of the participants had not previously considered the issue of institutional communication prior to the focus groups as they did not have distinct and established ideas about it. The discussions suggest that the participants' opinions were often influenced by their views and experiences of marketing and advertising in general, as practiced in the private sector.

Participants rarely spontaneously recalled specific public communications that they liked or disliked. Most of them had to search online to find examples of public communications. Only a few of them had memorable examples that struck them so that they could recall them when asked to identify examples of public communications that they appreciated (or did not appreciate). Health, road safety, finance and the environment were the most common topics of public communications brought up by participants. These were topics that concerned the participants directly, having implications for their day-to-day lives and actions. The fact that participants referred to examples that represented a clear call to action (promoting or disincentivising some types of behaviour or actions) suggests that they are mostly interested in public institutions communicating to them about concrete and actionable issues. This was also confirmed when participants were asked explicitly about their expectations of public communications as discussed below.

The clear signature of communication materials by public institutions was an essential marker for participants to understand that the source of the message was a public institution. Participants were typically able to identify communications as coming from a public institution owing to the use of an official logo. At the same

time the discussions revealed considerable confusion between institutional communications and the communications of political players, in particular politicians or persons holding office, since citizens cannot always distinguish between communications from political figures and those of the institution in which the politicians hold office.

Among the examples of institutional communication discussed, participants generally appreciated a communication if they liked the topic and agreed with the core message communicated. Their appreciation was therefore closely linked to the content of the communication rather than simply to its form. On the other hand, when they disliked a communication, this was often not because of the topic itself, but rather due to the way it was presented or communicated about. Participants across the focus groups showed a high level of consistency in approving communications that relied on strong visuals to convey a message. Straightforward messaging and links to sources of further information were also appreciated. On the other hand, participants disliked communications that were unduly lengthy, negatively framed or judgmental in tone, and visuals deemed childish. It was also noted that participants tended to consider public communications through their own "user experience" of a given public body. This suggests that citizens' views and ideas on institutional communication are also influenced by their previous interactions with the relevant institution, and not only its communications activities.

1.2 Citizens' expectations of institutional communication

Participants were primarily interested in receiving information that has direct implications for them. There was a perception among participants that public institutions have a duty to communicate to help and inform citizens in a timely manner. The justifiable reasons for communicating mentioned by participants include awareness-raising and conveying informative content about upcoming changes (e.g. changes in the law), urging behavioural change or calling citizens to action (as long as the desired action was made clear), and preventing harm. Participants took a less positive view of institutions communicating to showcase their work or enhance their reputation.

Participants considered that accessibility in terms of both the language and tone of the communication was essential. Information should be made easily understandable and accessible to citizens, regardless of the topic. Participants in the focus groups considered that good public communication should avoid jargon, and be transparent and sufficiently complete to enable citizens to assess its relevance to them. Participants also acknowledged that their attention to communication messages was limited and therefore public institutions needed to prioritise their communication and not overwhelm citizens with many messages at the same time.

Participants tended to see that public institutions and commercial brands communicate for different purposes. While commercial brands aim to enhance the appeal of their products or services, public institutions aim to inform or protect citizens. They also acknowledge that the two types of entities have different resources at their disposal to communicate and that they are accountable according to different criteria. Accordingly, public institutions should also use communication resources differently than private entities. Public entities also have different target audiences than commercial brands. Often public institutions target a much wider group of citizens, if not all of them, while commercial brands can choose to appeal only to a small subset. This also drives their tone of communication (more neutral for public institutions versus a more distinctive identity for commercial brands).

1.3 Citizens' preferences when it comes to institutional communication

Participants were divided on the issue of targeting specific groups by public institutions. On one hand, many did not approve of targeting specific groups, since they thought it was important for public institutions to convey their message to citizens in general. On the other hand, some participants also acknowledged the need for public communication to be cost-effective and, therefore, addressed to those citizens who most needed the information in question. Furthermore, participants considered the relevance of the information as highly important and, therefore, some made the link between targeting and relevance. They indicated that they did not want to be exposed to communications that they saw as not being directly relevant to them. This suggests a need for the layering of information and communication depending on the issue being communicated about and the extent to which it affects all or only some citizens.

A reoccurring finding throughout the focus groups was that many participants wanted public institutions to address them with due consideration. Participants often mentioned feeling infantilised by certain tones of communication or styles (cartoons, humour). They did not want to be talked down to. They also referred to examples where humour came across as ironic and was perceived as implying that the public institution

communicating was not taking a given issue seriously. Participants had an expectation that public institutions should adopt a serious or neutral tone (i.e. not taking a partisan position). Given that many citizens also voiced their preferences for simple wording and phrasing, institutional communicators need to strike a balance between avoiding a belittling tone and staying away from jargon.

The expectation of seriousness or neutrality, however, should not be mistaken for absence of creativity. There was a clear understanding that to be noticed, public communications needed to stand out and thus be creative.

Participants in several groups agreed that using language and a tone that evokes emotions can be an appropriate method for public institutions to convey their message more effectively. While participants tended to prefer messages that had a positive tone, they also said that provocative messages could be acceptable in some instances, even if they might offend the sensibilities of some citizens, for example in the case of provocative messages related to health and safety. However, some participants also noted the risk of escalation with shocking messages and imagery and the fact that, as citizens get used to this style, the new messages need to be even more extreme.

Participants across the focus groups recognised that communication required professional skills and resources. Participants in several groups commented that, just as for commercial communicators, it was important that public institutions should design their campaigns to reach the expected high standards.

1.4 Communication approaches and techniques

The focus groups examined four techniques used in temporary communications: personalisation, emotionally triggering content, influencers and value framing. The extent to which people would or would not be comfortable with the techniques discussed varied greatly among participants. Some participants readily accepted that techniques used by commercial entities could also be used by public ones, while others considered that public institutions needed to be more circumspect and transparent when communicating.

Overall, the majority of participants were either indifferent or supportive of the use of these techniques. The majority of participants raised no strong objections to the use of such techniques by public institutions. People tend to be familiar with and accept these techniques because they are a common part of the marketing mix of commercial brands. Often participants were guided by the notion that the end justifies the means and that public communications needed to be effective and efficient, and accordingly should use techniques available to attract attention and make the communications as persuasive as possible. However, this assumption was accompanied by a strong demand for transparency, in other words public institutions should not stoop to lying or exaggerating in their communications.

This research went further by examining cases where participants had felt ill-at-ease with communication approaches adopted by public institutions. Participants expressed concerns when communications were perceived to:

- attempt to change their attitudes or behaviours through emotionally triggering messages;
- use a moralising or blaming tone;
- make use of personalities (influencers) that are not seen as legitimate to speak on behalf of the public institution;
- require public institutions to use or collect personal data for personalisation;
- convey important information unequally among citizens;
- display the communicating institution in a specific light, one which serves its political intentions.

The risk of manipulation was seen as one potential source of discomfort (together with surveillance linked to the use of personal data). Another potential source of discomfort was the perception of a lack of or unclear value-for-money. Some participants expressed concerns about specific communication techniques (influencers) or objectives (showcasing past actions) because they thought that these did not represent worthwhile public expenditure.

When it comes to the four specific techniques discussed, the feedback can be summarised as follows:

1. **Personalisation:** most participants were familiar with the idea of communicators tailoring their messages and visuals to the characteristics of their intended audience. Participants did not clearly distinguish between use of targeting (tailoring the communications to specific audiences more generally) and the use of personalisation (use of personal data as a driver for specifically online targeting). The borders between the two were blurred for them and this partly explains the limited objections to the use of this technique. The two main concerns which were raised by participants concerning the potential use of personalisation in public communications were:

    a. the use of personal data and issues around the intrusion of privacy;

    b. the idea that personalisation would result in an uneven and unfair distribution of information from public institutions to citizens. Participants considered that all citizens have a right to know information disseminated by their public authorities, and that targeting could effectively deny people this right.

2. **Emotionally triggering visuals and messages:** the idea of emotionally triggering communications was also a technique familiar to participants across all groups. It is a technique with which they were familiar not only from private brand communications but also from public communications, in particular with regard to health and road safety. Participants across the groups expressed some concerns regarding this technique. The first relates to the potential harm that using, for instance shocking images, could cause, including the potential for causing distress to citizens that are not part of the target group. The second main issue highlighted the potential risk of escalation as citizens might become used to shocking images and become less sensitive to the communications. The third main issue related to the appropriateness of emotionally triggering communications for serious causes with high stakes versus more “day-to-day” matters. While participants believed this technique was justified for issues that represent an important risk, they did not consider it as proportionate for less urgent topics.

3. **Influencers:** most participants were also familiar with use of influencers, but did not associate them with communications by public institutions. Many comments from participants suggest that influencers are not perceived as being authoritative figures or having expert knowledge. The concerns raised about influencers included the legitimacy of influencers to speak on behalf of public institutions, (in)coherence between the topics on which influencers post routinely and what they would be communicating about on behalf of public institutions, concerns that citizens who do not follow influencers could miss out on important information, and the legitimacy of using public funds to hire influencers.

4. **Value framing:** the technique of value framing was the most complicated for the participants across the groups to understand. Where it was understood, participants agreed that it could be useful to target citizens depending on their characteristics, e.g. emphasising preservation of the environment in messages for younger citizens. Overall, there was little discomfort among participants regarding the use of value framing to personalise communications.

1.5 Citizens as communicators

The co-creation exercise was organised after over two hours of discussions and exchanges about institutional communications which prepared participants for this joint reflection and creative work. All the groups showed that they were relatively at ease with the task and were able to propose initial principles and choices for the campaign that they were asked to design.

The task also showed that, given a specific context, some of the issues that were initially seen as potentially problematic were perceived somewhat differently. For example, several groups thought about the targeting of households with high bills, which would require the use of sensitive information about energy bills. The objections raised by these groups to the use of this targeting related more to the extent to which the campaign should target everyone, rather than to the use of sensitive personal information.

Across all the groups there was a degree of similarity about the drivers behind the decisions. Even where participants made different choices and proposals in connection with the task (for instance, regarding whether to aim at a general audience or have a more targeted campaign), they often based their decisions on the same moral or ethical grounds, such as ideas of fairness/equal treatment and transparency.

When discussing their hypothetical campaign's audience, most groups considered the dilemma of whether to communicate with the population in general or to focus on specific subgroups, such as high energy users, bill payers, young families with children, teenagers or pensioners. In the end, most focus groups reached a consensus that fairness meant the campaign should focus on everyone, given the relevance of the topic of saving energy at home to all citizens.

Across the focus groups, the choice to opt for a positive message was striking. It can be attributed to the ideas voiced earlier by group participants, namely that they preferred positive messages, which they considered would be most the effective in motivating people to act (e.g. taking actions at home to save money on energy bills). This preference for a positive tone was also perceptible with the homely and benign imagery favoured by most groups. On the same note, many participants disliked the idea of communications with a moralising or judgmental tone related to the need to save energy or consequences if citizens failed to do so. Instead, there was strong preference for a positive tone, emphasising how individuals could make a difference for the better.

Most groups suggested that a multi-channel campaign, across TV, radio, social media and, sometimes, print media, would be the best way to reach their target audience of the general population. Groups that favoured a more segmented approach tended to agree that the mix of channels ought to be adjusted accordingly to reach subsets of the population. It should be noted that the groups were not given a hypothetical budget to work with and the issue of the resources needed for the campaign was very rarely discussed.

1.6 Overarching observations and their implications for citizen engagement

Commonalities

One of the most striking findings from this research is the degree to which participants across groups were in agreement in their attitude to many aspects of institutional communication. This relates to their expectations of what public institutions should be communicating about and how they should communicate. There was also a high degree of commonality among the focus groups when it came to where participants drew the line between communication techniques that were acceptable to them and those techniques or instances of using the techniques that they deemed went too far.

In terms of **the aims of communication**, the view that public institutional communicators should be (but are not always) guided by what is "good for the citizen" rather than what is in the best interests of the institution communicating was prevalent across groups. Participants generally agreed that public institutions have a duty to inform and to educate. Again, this implies making authoritative information available to citizens in sufficient detail. On the other hand, few participants approved of the idea of institutions promoting themselves to boost their own reputation, where this was not seen as conveying information of direct relevance or value to citizens' own lives.

The idea among participants of a duty to communicate encompassed their expectations that public institutions should be proactive in their communication, for example where governments communicate to encourage and enable citizens to prepare for disasters, changes in the law, etc., with a view to reassuring citizens.

In terms of **what citizens want from public institutions when communicating** transparency is high on the list. Yet, the discussions suggest that expectations for transparency go far beyond simply "telling the truth"; and the concept extends to the idea that public institutions should take pains to make information clear and understandable, even on the most complex of topics. Institutions should not seek to "hide" information, present it selectively or spin its presentation to distort citizens' perceptions. The concept of transparency is linked to the idea of providing citizens with complete information, and offering them the opportunity to find out more about a given topic if they so wish.

The idea of transparency also included using clear language: using language that all people can understand was seen as important by participants across the focus groups. Some suggested that governments needed to "get down from their pedestal" and communicate with people in everyday language. The desire for transparency was also reflected in attitudes towards the tone of public communications expressed by numerous participants, namely that such communications should tell citizens the truth in a matter-of-fact manner, not making light of serious situations but also resisting the urge to catastrophise and frighten. Across focus group a common idea was that while institutional communications should uphold a level of formality, these communications should not be limited in their creativity. Hence these communications can remain attractive without compromising the image and credibility of the entity communicating.

Taking **an inclusive approach to communicating** was also a theme that emerged in terms of how participants view the duty of public institutions to communicate. This included the idea that communication should ensure that vulnerable or marginal groups do not miss out on important information. This was raised both in terms of the availability of information in different languages and in terms of accessibility to groups which may be physically or cognitively impaired.

Dilemmas and tensions

The study highlighted eight tensions and balances that should be considered by public communicators. These were enlightened by what participants found relevant during the discussions.

- Participants found it hard to discern the difference between institutional and political communication. This implies that citizens might mistake a politician's opinion, ruling government's opinion or the communication of a public institution.

- Participants understand the need for a balance between the duty of the institutional communicator and the power of persuasion of communications. On one hand, participants recognised the duty that an institution might have to communicate on a specific topic. On the other hand, they wanted to be treated and spoken to as citizens and not as consumers of communication content, which imposes limitations in terms of the use of persuasion by public institutions.

- A balance should also be struck between the message and the creative execution. While the message is crucial for the communication to be perceived positively, the format and execution of the communication also greatly influence how it is received. When the creative execution was perceived as misaligned with the audience, it meant the whole communication was negatively received.

- Participants want concise communications while being given the necessary information to understand the context and how decisions are made. While participants wanted succinctness, at the same time they wanted to receive not only the message (recommendation) but also to understand the rationale underpinning the message.

- The transparency and positivity of communication are aspects that tended to provoke seemingly contradictory reactions among participants who, on one hand, wanted to be shielded from negative news but, on the other hand, wanted to receive information that is empowering and oriented towards problem solving, since they expect to receive raw information so that they can make up their own minds on different subjects.

- Participants acknowledge that public communications need to stand out to be noticed, but at the same time they have reservations about receiving shocking messages and visuals.

- Participants seem to attach the same level of importance to equal access to information between citizens and the need for public institutions to deliver information to the right people.

- Finally, the question of the budget that should be invested in public communications gave rise to some tensions. While participants appreciate the fact that effective communication needs to be professionally executed and disseminated, at the same time they believe that the matter of institutional budget allocation should not be taken lightly.

2. Description of the study

2.1 Background and objectives

2.1.1 Subject of the study

This study was commissioned to contribute to the fourth report in the Joint Research Centre's (JRC) multi-annual research programme, Enlightenment 2.0. The Enlightenment 2.0 programme examines the role of evidence-based policy making in safeguarding democracies, fostering citizen trust as well as in ensuring the effectiveness of political decisions.

The focus of this study is public communications. It aims to build upon previous work that examines the relationship between online technologies and political behaviour as well as that of values and identities in the political process. Through a series of focus groups with citizens from nine EU Member States, the study set out to understand the potential consequences of communication strategies that use new and different methods, tools and channels, as well as addressing the question of ethical communication. The research analysed what participants in nine EU Member States expected from institutional communicators. It also explored ethical questions that arise with regard to the communications of public institutions.

2.1.2 Study objectives

In addition to working with scientific experts from around the world, the JRC works with communities of public communicators to examine questions relating to the effectiveness of institutional communications. However, the issues relating to meaningful and ethical communications are not only those of theory and practice, since the JRC wanted, through this exercise, to hear from citizens. This study, therefore, is focused on listening to citizens to understand their expectations when it comes to public communications.

By listening to citizens the study aims to understand their perspectives with a view to answering the following overarching questions:

- How can governments ensure that their communications resonate more deeply with citizens without resorting to tactics that are potentially manipulative?
- How can government actors ensure that their communications are both meaningful and ethical?

In its scope, the study focused on policy-related, institutional communications, excluding party political, commercial communications or those of interest groups.

2.2 Study methodology

In view of its objectives, the study adopted a qualitative and participatory approach.

– During a first phase, the study team agreed with the JRC on the selection of countries for the focus groups and a recruitment strategy for the focus groups. During this phase the discussion guide was developed and finalised in consultation with an expert panel.

– The second phase consisted of the fieldwork, including the pilot in Malta and two groups in each of eight further Member States (as set out in practical terms below).

The final phase consisted of the analysis of the data collected (for more information on the analysis, see Annex 8 – Coding Structure), the drafting of this report, and its subsequent revision in light of comments received from the JRC.

Focus groups in nine countries

In practical terms the study was implemented through focus groups in nine EU countries. The final selection of countries was Malta (MT) where a pilot group was implemented, Belgium (BE), Germany (DE), Greece (EL), Italy (IT), Latvia (LV), Poland (PL), Romania (RO) and Slovakia (SK).

Figure 1: Overview of methodology

These countries were selected in order to provide diversity in terms of:

- Geographic coverage of the EU (north, south, east and west)
- Year of accession to the EU (pre- and post-2004 enlargement)
- Share of the EU population covered
- Levels of trust in different public administrations

Except for the pilot in Malta, two focus groups were organised in parallel in each country. The focus groups lasted three hours and each group was composed of five to six participants. In total, 98 citizens took part in the research. Participants were recruited to ensure the diversity of each group in terms of the following characteristics:

- age (from 18 to 65+)
- gender
- education level
- employment status (students, people in employment, job seekers, people on parental leave or another type of leave, and people not working and not looking for a job)

Furthermore, they were recruited so as to integrate diverse views and attitudes relating to their:

- interest in the news
- trust in government
- interest in discussing politics

Annex 2 shows the participant profiles in relation to these different characteristics.

2.2.1 Structure of the focus group discussion

The structure of the focus groups was developed in consultation with the JRC. A panel of experts in public communication and citizen engagement was also consulted[1]. The panel provided feedback on the discussion

[1] This panel of external experts consisted of: Laura Filardo Llamas (Senior Professor in English Language and Linguistics, Univerisidad de Valladolid), Jane Suiter (Professor in the School of Communications at Dublin City University and Director of the Institute for Future Media, Democracy and Society (FuJo)), and Carina Dantas

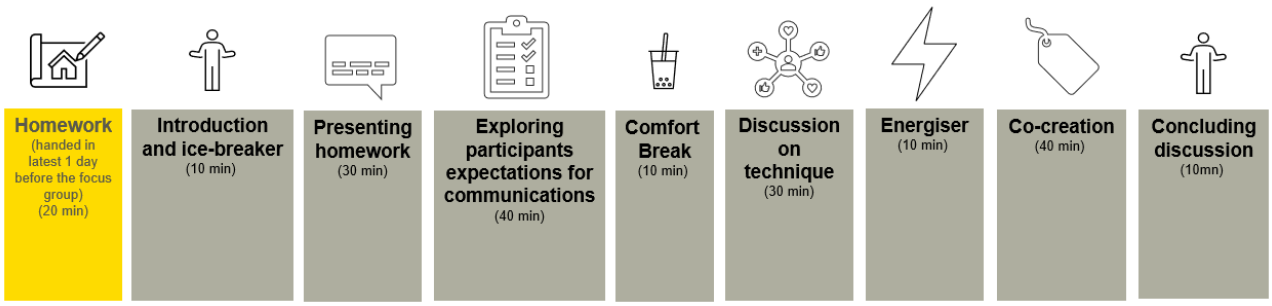
guide as it was being developed, and also observed the pilot in Malta and offered advice on the subsequent reworking of the guide to address the challenges that emerged during the pilot.

The focus groups were structured as follows:

- First, all participants were asked to undertake an individual **exercise at home** (hereinafter referred to as “homework”) in the days before the focus group. This involved finding two pieces of institutional communication: one that they liked and one that they did not like. This exercise was used to understand what (if anything) citizens imagine under the term “institutional communication”. They were also asked where they had found the piece of institutional communication, to identify the source of the text, to explain the tenor of the message, and why they did or did not like it.
- The focus group started with a short **introduction** and **ice-breaker exercise**. The participants then presented their homework regarding the pieces of institutional communication they had found. The objective was for participants to share their ideas on what they liked and disliked in terms of institutional communication based on the examples they found.
- The second section focused on exploring the **participants’ expectations for communications**. The objective was for participants to consider different communication techniques and express the extent to which they felt comfortable with public institutions using them. Each technique was described in general terms and an example was given.
- Following a comfort break, the third section involved a **discussion of a specific communication technique: value framing (mock-ups),** with the aim of testing how far a piece of communication could go without making citizens feel uncomfortable. The participants were shown three messages having the same objective, with each message using a different value framing to be persuasive. The objective was to make the communication technique more tangible, with participants reacting to concrete examples to test their boundaries of what is meaningful and ethical.
- The fourth section was a **co-creation exercise** which started with a short energiser. The objective was for participants to explore their own views on what makes for meaningful and ethical communications by taking a series of decisions to design their own institutional communications campaign.
- **Concluding discussion/wrapping up**: at the very end of the session, participants shared their thoughts on ‘dos and don’ts’ for institutional communicators.

The figure below provides an overview, showing how the focus groups were organised and the time dedicated to each section.

Figure 2: Overview of focus group



The screener used to recruit the participants and the discussion guide for the focus groups showing the full sequence of activities can be found in Annex 3 of this report.

3. Citizens' understanding of institutional communication

3.1 Synthesis

The purpose of this section was to explore what thoughts and ideas participants had regarding institutional communication, with the aim of understanding whether institutional communication was a topic they had thought about before and whether they had any preferences regarding such communication. The main findings of this section can be summarised as follows:

- It was clear during the focus group discussions that most of the participants had not previously considered the topic of institutional communication, and did not have strongly formed views on the issue. The discussions suggest that their opinions were often influenced by their views and experiences of marketing and advertising in general.

- Participants rarely recalled specific public communications that they liked or disliked (e.g. a memorable campaign). Instead, participants across all focus groups mainly searched online to find examples of public communications that they liked or disliked. The most common themes of the communications were health, road safety, finance and the environment. These were topics that concerned the participants directly and where they were essentially asked to do or stop doing something. Participants were typically able to identify communications as coming from a public institution due to the use of an official logo. Yet, the examples that participants found, and the ensuing discussions about them, suggest that citizens cannot always distinguish easily between communications by political figures and those of the institution in which the politicians hold office.

- Participants generally picked a communication because they appreciated or were interested in the topic of the communication or believed that it was important to communicate about it. They liked the communication if they agreed with the core of the message.

- On the other hand, their dislike for communications was mostly dictated by the way they were presented or communicated about, including inter alia the artwork used in the communication, or simply the framing of the message.

- Participants across the focus groups showed a high level of consistency in approving communications that relied on strong visuals to convey a message. Straightforward messaging, and links to sources for further information, were also appreciated. Conversely, participants disliked communications that were unduly long, messaging that was negative or judgmental in tone, and visuals deemed childish, e.g. cartoons. There was a lack of consensus regarding humour, which while promoting recall in some participants, was judged by others to be inappropriate and unserious for public institutions. In one group, participants even said that if public institutions communicated using humour, citizens would feel as though they were being made fun of.

- It was clear from the discussions that participants often thought (positively or negatively) about public communication through the lens of their own "user experience" of a given public body. This suggests that citizens' views and ideas regarding institutional communication can be influenced by their previous personal interactions with the relevant institution.

3.2 Methodological note

To identify the initial understanding and thoughts of participants on institutional communications a homework exercise was organised prior to the day of the discussion; this involved finding one piece of institutional communication that they liked, and one that they disliked. They were asked to provide the communication,

whether a video, social media post, poster/ billboard, news article or in any other format, to the research team. They were also requested to answer four short questions about each of the communications they picked (see below). For the communication piece they disliked, the questions were identical except for the final question, where they were asked what they disliked about the communication and why.

Table 1: Questions sent to participants as part of the homework exercise

Communication 1: the one you like
1. Where did you find the communication? e.g. online as e.g. on LinkedIn, on a government website, or on a billboard, newspaper ad)
2. What do you understand to be the message?
3. Who is the author (source) of the communication?
4. What do you like/dislike about this communication and why?

In answering these questions, the participants had to start thinking about what they understood by the term "institutional communication". This also triggered a reflection on their preferences concerning institutional communication. The research team gathered 192 examples of communication material that showed the breadth of what citizens consider to be institutional communication (for a more detailed breakdown of the homework, see Annex 6).

The research team provided the participants with instructions for the homework that included the following definitions:

- **Communication**: any material used to deliver information for a specific purpose, for example newspapers, tweets, brochures, videos, etc.
- **Public institutions**: participants were told that these could include local, regional or national government bodies, or European or international institutions.

To try and ensure that participants remained within the scope of institutional communication, it was also made clear in the homework instructions that the participants should avoid choosing examples from political parties, politicians, interest/lobbying groups, non-governmental organisations/charities, or commercial advertising. In some cases, the local team answered questions from participants who had encountered difficulties preparing the homework. One of the outputs of this homework exercise is the analysis of the examples selected by the participants along with the reasons for their choices (what they liked and disliked and why). The analysis also focused on unpacking what participants understood by the term "institutional communication", as implicitly revealed in their choice of examples.

As such, the homework and focus group discussion covering the homework (see Annex 6 – Additional data for more details) was analysed in terms of the six following themes:

- institutional communication
- topics of communication
- media and channels of communication
- likes and dislikes
- level of communication - local, regional, national or EU level
- the ease with which participants proposed communication materials as part of the homework.

Each of the following sub-sections is based on the analysis of the pieces of institutional communication submitted by participants according to the abovementioned criteria. An indication of scale can be achieved by counting the frequencies of communications provided and the responses given to the questions asked.

3.3 Institutional communication

Most participants said that, in response to the homework instructions, they had searched online for examples of institutional communication[2]. The majority of participants did not immediately and spontaneously recall examples of institutional communication that had struck them, either positively or negatively.

It was clear during the focus group discussions that most of the participants had not previously considered the topic of institutional communication. They did not have strong views on how and why public institutions do or should communicate with citizens.

It was clear from the discussions across the focus groups that the topic of the communication (i.e. its subject matter) was an important driver of participants' interest and appreciation of the communication. Participants provided communications on a variety of topics, but the most common topics were those where they were essentially asked to do or to stop doing something, i.e.:

- **Health**: participants proposed several communication campaigns related to vaccination. Other health-related topics involved blood donations, mammography tests, cancer research, and sexual health. Overall, participants were slightly more likely to dislike than like health-related communication materials, e.g. participants did not agree with their government's vaccination policy.

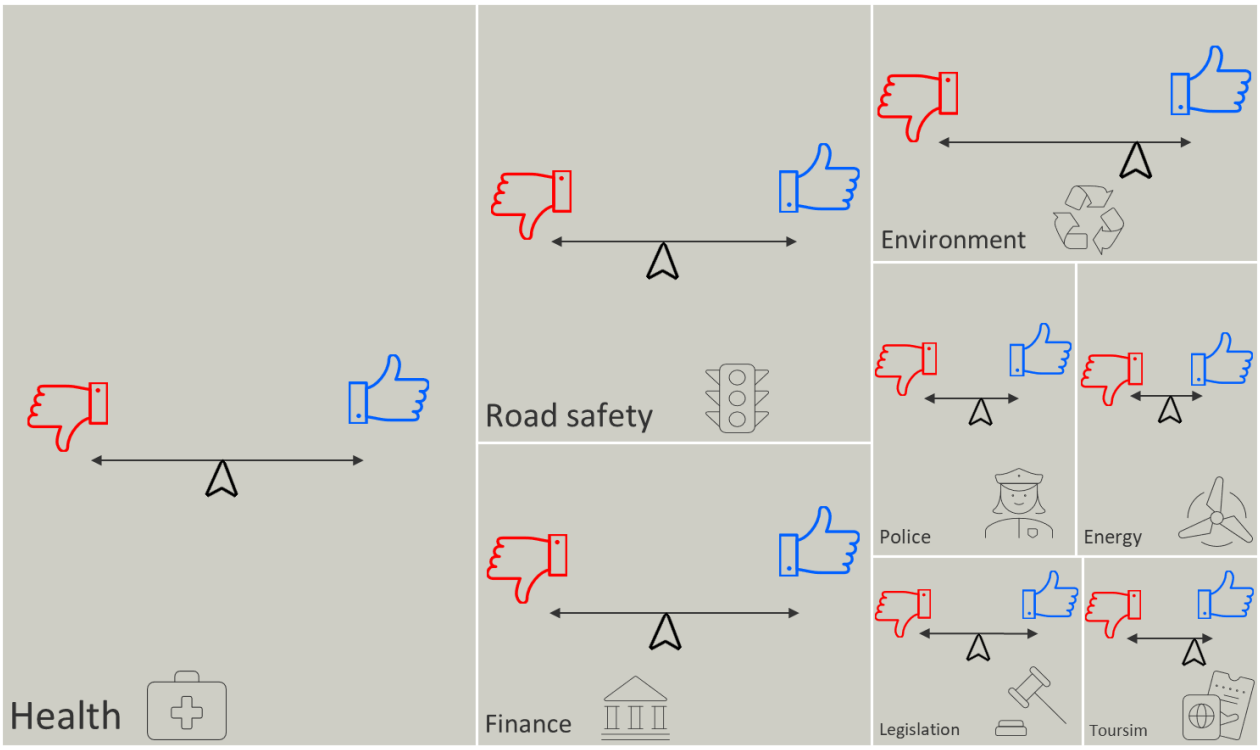
- **Road safety**: as with health, the participants were more likely to dislike than like road safety communications. While no one was against promoting road safety, the communications were sometimes found to be too graphic and emotional (e.g. using images of children in the communication) or, conversely, not emotional enough.

- **Finance**: most financial communications provided by participants presented data with numbers or figures. Here, simplicity and visual presentation played a big role in determining whether participants liked or disliked the communication, along with whether they agreed with the proposed changes. The examples covered a variety of topics, ranging from communications from the ministry of finance explaining an interest rate hike and inflation, to new budget proposals.

- **Environment**: including recycling and promoting a more climate-friendly lifestyle. The majority of these communications were liked by participants, for two main reasons: first, the communication gave instructions on what needs to be done or is expected by citizens and, secondly, the use of images that clearly conveyed the problem (such as an image of a dead bird with its stomach open and filled with plastic). In the cases where communications were disliked, participants explained that the communication was either too passive or did not give enough information for them to know what to act on.

[2] Where participants were able to recall specific campaigns, these tended to be prevention or awareness-raising campaigns at national level, e.g. in relation to drinking and driving, or getting a routine health check.

Figure 3: Portion of topics covered in the homework along with the extent to which it was liked or disliked by the participants.



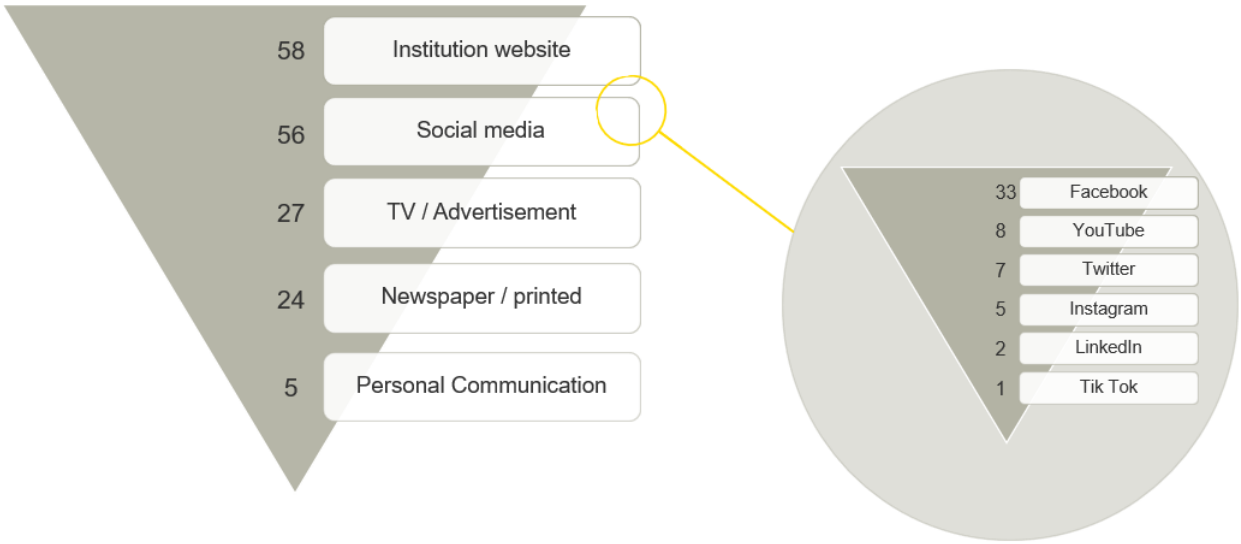
Note: Number of observations per category in scope: Health – 44, Road safety – 23, Finance, - 16, Environment – 9. Total number of homework examples received – 189.Participants were asked to find one communication they liked and one they did not like. This table showcases their preference without considering the justification for their preference.

3.4 Media and channels covered

The discussions suggested that the participants had a good understanding of the various formats and broad range of channels used by institutional communication. In their homework examples, most of the participants found digital communications rather than printed material. However, many proposed digital versions of poster campaigns that featured as posters in the street or campaigns that they had seen on TV on YouTube. On one hand, this is probably due to the nature of the homework, i.e. the fact that most people searched for examples at home. On the other hand, people also increasingly consume information in digital formats.[3]

[3] Standard Eurobarometer 98 – Winter 2022-2023.

Figure 4: Sources and channels that participants referred to and their related number of appearances



As shown in the figure above, most participants found examples from public institutions' websites or social media channels. Taking a closer look at social media specifically, Facebook was the platform where participants found most of their examples, including direct communications from public institutions through their official Facebook pages. Moreover, while only three examples were provided physically across different focus groups, leaflets and forms from institutions were considered as being a form of communication.

Another channel considered by participants was direct communication. Indeed in some cases, it was clear from the discussions that participants thought about public communication through the lens of their own "user experience" of a given government service. For example, in one focus group, participants provided examples of communications from institutions where they had interactions with employees of these institutions. This suggests that some citizens' views regarding institutional communication may be influenced by their previous personal interactions with the relevant institution. For example, one participant provided a communication from a city hall in their country as part of the homework assignment. When explaining why they liked the communication, they recounted the positive interaction they had with the staff in their city hall and how this improved their relationship with the city hall. While this was not explicitly stated, it was evident that the participant's previous interaction had impacted how they saw the current communication from the city hall.

> *I just think it is positive that they are providing information in a channel that is convenient for me.*
>
> *Latvia*

> *I believe that probably over time these channels change as well. It used to be newspapers, then magazines, then radio. Now I think Facebook is very effective because everybody uses it. I'm just thinking - those channels that are the most in demand, where you can reach the biggest audience, those should be used.*
>
> *Latvia*

3.5 What participants liked

A precondition for participants' appreciation of the communication was their agreement with the core of the message or whether they liked the topic that was being communicated about. Other elements that participants flagged as driving their appreciation of a communication were:

- visual support that is either striking (setting the communication apart from other content) and/or informative in itself (use of charts or infographics to support the message)
- clarity and immediate understanding of the message
- use of facts in the communication or a clear link for accessing additional factual information

Use of visuals

Participants across the focus groups mentioned that they liked the use of visuals in different forms, whether images, graphs or tables to visualise data, or a video, because these make it simpler, easier, and less time consuming for them to understand the message. A couple of participants in different Member States also mentioned how certain impactful images stay with them after having seen them once and serve as a reminder of the message. For instance, one participant gave the example of seeing an image of batteries amongst food as part of a recycling campaign. They found this striking and thought-provoking, and acted as a strong reminder to recycle used batteries.

Clarity of the core message

Linked to the use of visuals, participants across focus groups said that they wanted to apprehend quickly the message that the communication was trying to convey. The participants said that understanding the substance of what is meant would help them quickly grasp whether the message was personally relevant to them and if something was expected of them.

Possibility to get more information

While they want the communications to be short, most participants across the participant Member State focus groups said that they like it when communications make it clear where they can find more information, whether in the form of links to websites or QR codes. However, a smaller portion of participants did say that they did not want to have to search elsewhere to get more information. In both cases, citizens want their life to be made easier.

Use of humour

A topic without a clear consensus was the use of humour in communications. While in some of the groups participants were more favourable to the use of humour, this was not the case in others. It is not possible to differentiate whether this is due to the country context (as we observed differences across groups within a Member State, as well as similarities within the Member State in other cases) or the experiences of specific participants who had a strong view on the use of humour. In some focus groups participants appreciated the use of humour because they think it can make a boring topic more entertaining and therefore memorable. On the other hand, other focus groups disliked the use of humour because they believe institutions should only communicate in a serious manner.

The elements were found to be consistent across the different Member States.

3.6 What citizens disliked

In many cases, participants reported difficulties in finding examples of communications that they disliked. Some selected negative examples where they disagreed with the topic of the communication. Others provided examples where they disliked the style of the communication or the formulation of the message. For instance, in a communication about cybersecurity, a cartoon style was used which the participants considered too childish given the seriousness of the topic (see more examples in Annex 6 – Additional data).

Overall participants were negative about communications which they saw as:

- belittling, i.e. using visuals and style that they saw as too childish, or in some cases the humour of the communication could be seen as disrespectful of citizens)
- unclear or unfocused because of the length, thus showing insufficient understanding of the level of attention participants are willing to give to understanding public communications

- focusing on negative news and threats (to the country) rather than solutions and positive developments

Lengthy communications

The length of communications was mentioned repeatedly, with a strong dislike of lengthy communications in all focus groups. Citizens want to be able to quickly understand the message and know what it is trying to convey or what is expected of them.

> *I would agree that there is too much text. It's informative but it's not to the point so that you would know directly what it's about. You have to actually take those 2 minutes and read through it instead of just taking a quick look and knowing what it's about right away.*
>
> *Germany*

Childish visual style

Participants did not appreciate cartoons or a childlike style of presenting communications, as they do not consider that this is appropriate for institutions. Citizens want institutions to avoid this format of what they consider to be an unprofessional and informal communication style. Participants also dislike communications with a retro-touch depending on how citizens feel about a particular time period.

Threatening or judgemental tone

Overall participants across the different Member States did not like messages that conveyed a negative feeling or bad consequences. They prefer communications with a positive outlook. An example of this provided in the focus groups included a national defence ministry talking about war preparations. Instead of focusing on war, the participants agreed they would have preferred a focus on increasing security. However, it is important to note here that this does not mean that participants do not want to receive communications on difficult topics. Instead, it is about messages that seem to be catastrophizing a situation or making it seem worse than it is. As discussed later (in section 4.3 Expectations for institutional communications) a clear expectation that citizens have regarding institutional communications is that they should be truthful and not conceal information. Rather, it is more about the framing of the message focusing on the negative aspects instead of the positive one that some participants do not like. Despite participants saying they want this, we know from loss aversion studies that people are more sensitive to a loss framing and more likely to change their behaviour if framed as a loss rather than a gain.[4]

3.7 Conclusions

Several insights emerged when participants were considering communications that they liked or disliked. Based on the discussion of the homework and the answers participants gave when they submitted their homework, participants generally liked a communication if they liked the topic (for instance, health) that was being communicated about, or if they liked the core of the message in the communication. The fact that a message resonates with them appears to be an important factor driving their appreciation of the communication. On the other hand, where they disliked a communication, this could be because they:

- either disliked the communication style and the way the communication was executed, or
- disapproved of the message or disliked the topic (i.e. people reacted negatively to messages about vaccination based on their negative attitudes to vaccination policy)

This suggests that there is a strong connection between participants' attitudes to the message that is being communicated and their appreciation of the overall communication. The message and the content are key for participants to consider the communication worthwhile, along with the overarching topic of the communication.

[4] Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1981). The framing of decisions and the psychology of choice. *Science*, *211*(4481), 453-458.

4. Citizens' expectations when it comes to institutional communication

4.1 Synthesis

This section explores participants' expectations about institutional communication. This includes their views not only on why an institution should communicate, but also on the differences they expect between public institutions and companies when communicating.

- There was an expectation among participants that public institutions have a duty to communicate to help and inform citizens in a timely manner. From the perspective of participants, the reasons for communicating include raising awareness and conveying informative content about upcoming changes that have practical implications for citizens (e.g. changes in the law), urging behavioural change or calling citizens to action (as long as the desired action was made clear), preventing harm, and possibly also creating a sense of togetherness.

- Participants were less positive about institutions communicating to showcase their work or to enhance their reputation. They did not see the relevance of this type of communication.

- From the perspective of participants, the duty to communicate of public institutions encompasses the idea that relevant information should be made easily understandable and accessible to everyone, regardless of the topic. Participants considered that good public communication should steer clear of jargon and should be transparent and sufficiently complete to enable citizens to assess its relevance for them.

- Participants also acknowledged that their attention to communication messages was limited and therefore public institutions should prioritise their communications and not overwhelm citizens with too many messages at the same time.

Participants tend to consider that public institutions and commercial brands:

- communicate for different purposes (appeal versus information, protection)
- have different resources at their disposal to communicate
- are accountable according to different criteria and therefore should also use resources in different ways
- have differences in their target audiences which also drives their tone and the extent to which they need to appeal to everyone (and thus be more neutral) versus only target groups (thus preferring a specific distinctive identity)

Participants accept that public institutions should use a range of communication channels and techniques in order to be effective in reaching their audiences and objectives.

4.2 Methodological note

A key question for this study was to explore what meaningful communications encompasses for participants. The concept of meaningful communication was translated into more operational questions that could be understood by focus groups participants. These questions were as follows:

a) What do you think are the reasons for which the government needs to communicate with you?

b) What do you expect from public institutions when they communicate with you/citizens generally?

This was done by first asking participants to reflect individually and note down their thoughts and then to engage in a group discussion.

Insights regarding the expectations of participants regarding institutional communication were also collected at different times during the focus groups:

a) In the discussion around the “homework” activity and discussion about what people liked or disliked which also implicitly revealed participant’s preferences and expectations of public communication;

b) Other parts of the discussions also revealed participants’ views on what they think public institutions should or should not communicate about.

Finally, participants were also asked to share their thoughts on whether and how communications by public institutions do and should differ from those of commercial entities such as private brands.

4.3 Expectations for institutional communications

The participants had some ideas about the reasons why institutions should communicate to them. The underlying reasons participants gave for why institutions should communicate with citizens consisted of:

– Conveying informative content, including any changes that may be occurring (in terms of rules and regulations) or on how citizens should be acting on a specific issue (e.g., recycling)

– Attempting to change behaviours and preventing harm to help citizens adopt safe behaviours

– Attracting attention, to raise awareness of what the participants considered important topics (e.g., saving energy, cyberbullying)

– Creating belonging and a sense of togetherness

Participants understood and expected that public institutions would need to communicate with them across a variety of topics, from health to finances and new legislation. There was an expectation that public institutions have a duty to communicate in order to help and inform citizens in a timely manner.

As part of the focus group discussions on expectations with regard to institutional communication participants wrote on a piece of paper their three most important expectations. This was done before the group discussion was initiated to avoid any group think effects. A word analysis was done on the expectations the participants had written down to find the most prevalent expectations. The word cloud in Figure 5 below shows the words most commonly used by participants across all focus groups.

Figure 5: Words most used by participants when asked about their expectations of institutions.

The need for clear and truthful communication stands out, as does the participants' preference for short/concise communications in simple language, avoiding jargon. The participants' expectations are shown in full in the following table.

Table 2 Word cloud expectations

Word in chart	Related expectation
Accessible (language)	Should avoid jargon and complex language that could prevent some people from understanding the message
Clear	Should be unambiguous, i.e. not open to different interpretations
Truthful	Should reflect factual and transparent information
Reach-all	Should not exclude anyone
Concise	Should be able to express issues clearly without unnecessary words
Engaging	Should enable and encourage citizens to engage directly with institutions
Different channels	Should not be restricted to a single channel, must reach out to citizens through different channels
Informative	Its main goal should be to inform and raise awareness on issues
Involve (citizens)	Should aim at involving citizens n the decision-making process

Factual	Should rely on facts and avoid judgement
Adequate numbers	Should ensure that citizens are not overwhelmed by an excessive volume of communications
Timeliness	Should aim to communicate at the right moment
Efficient	Should not be wasteful of public resources
Positive	Should focus on a positive instead of negative framing of issues to avoid provoking fear
Inspire	Should aim to inspire citizens instead of discouraging them
Formal	Should adhere to a standard of formality
Imagery	Should have attention-catching attractive videos or images
Belonging	Should foster a sense of community
Ethical	Should remain ethical in ways of communicating
Respectful	Should be respectful of everyone whom the communication addresses
Connection	Should aim to create a sense of personal connection

Note: expectations are in order of importance, with the most frequently mentioned ones listed first.

The insights outlined below were obtained from an analysis of the discussion along with the notes of participants:

Providing an authoritative and up-to-date source of information

Across all focus groups, participants said that the role of public institutions is to make sure that easily understandable information is available to everyone, regardless of the topic. Any topic that might impact citizens' day-to-day life or be a source of risk for them should be communicated.

This expectation concerns the availability of informative and accessible content on all matters that affect citizens. However, participants did not explicitly call for this information to be proactively communicated in all cases. As noted below there is an expectation that public institutions should prioritise what is communicated proactively (as in using outreach techniques) versus what is communicated more passively and available where people search for it.

> *I expect institutions to take into account a collective need without forgetting the individual*
>
> *Italy*

Communicating to prevent harm and change behaviour

Communicating to protect citizens was clearly seen as a priority. The participants expect the relevant institution to advise them and give instructions on what they need to do, e.g. in cases of extreme weather conditions, or on issues affecting public safety. This includes communicating about different types of threats. Understandably, given the relatively recent experience, many participants spoke about communicating at times of a public health crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. In some focus groups participants also spoke about other types of emergencies, such as natural disasters related threats. As might be expected, this was more prevalent in the minds of citizens in countries that have experienced more extreme weather conditions and natural disasters, such as Greece.

In relation to changing behaviour, participants expect institutions to communicate about best practices in different situations (e.g. washing hands during the Covid-19 pandemic or how best to recycle). Adopting safe-driving habits was also a commonly discussed topic. While participants did not explicitly speak about changing behaviours they spoke about issues that imply changes in behaviour; and also mentioned examples of campaigns targeting such change.

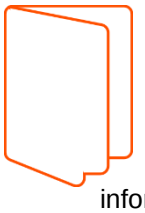
Creating a sense of belonging

A small number of participants also spoke about public communications as a means of creating a sense of belonging or inspiration. These citizens thought it was important for public institutions to create a sense that citizens are a part of a larger community, and that they have a part to play in something that will benefit their city, region or country. This was mentioned during the discussion about participants' expectations of public communications, but it also came up in the discussion about what participants liked about the communication examples chosen during the homework exercise. For example, one of the participants chose an example of the city hall communicating about a cause and showing solidarity with it. The participants mentioned their appreciation of this public display of values with which they were able to sympathise and were pleasantly surprised that they felt a sense of belonging after viewing the communication.

> *to encourage me to do something I would never do, but also to make me feel part of a community, explaining events, initiatives, statistics, or stories of people who are making the differences.*
>
> *Italy*

Using facts and data

Participants across the focus groups often said that they want background information and facts in communications from public institutions. In their view these should either feature in the communication directly or be referenced. The underlying driver for expressing this demand appears to be that participants want to be able to make up their own mind based on the evidence presented rather than rely only on statements. For instance, these types of reflections emerged when participants were discussing their experiences with communications around the COVID-19 pandemic.



Communicating truthfully, transparently, and exhaustively

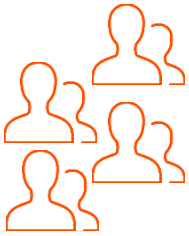
Participants across the focus groups said that they expect communications from public institutions to be truthful and complete. This includes not hiding information from them, avoiding opacity, or not giving the full picture of an event.

> *A State Agency that addresses so many people must have objective elements that can be practically understood by the people in order to implement the objectives that the Agency wants.*
>
> *Greece*

There appears to be an underlying concern among some participants that public institutions take a posture and communicate in a way that suits the image that they want to create. Participants seemed to perceive a risk that institutional communication could be partial or even manipulative. This was expressed by some participants in two focus groups across different Member States who explicitly mentioned feeling being manipulated by public institution communication. However this aspect was also raised implicitly among certain participants in regard to some topics such as vaccination.

There is a potential tension between the expectation that participants expressed regarding transparency and their wish for communications to focus on positive news and solutions. The latter point was made when participants discussed what they liked and did not like about the examples of communications stemming from the homework activity.

Avoiding overload



Participants in the focus groups were aware of the fact that they are exposed to a large volume of communication messages from a wide range of parties (commercial or public). They expressed their weariness with being constantly targeted by communications and their concerns about their capacity to apprehend and absorb messages in such a saturated context.

This information overload means that it is difficult for them to filter different messages to see what is personally relevant and to know what is true. In the case of communications from the public authorities, they feel that the message needs to be important. As participants expect the public communication to have implication for themselves (see point about being informative), they also want to make sure they are noticed. Subsequently participants expect public institutions to prioritise their communications to avoid overload.

Using logos in public communications

Participants expect any communication from an institution to carry the institution's logo. This clearly signals that the message is from an official institution and therefore from a source that citizens can trust.

4.4 Citizens have different expectations of public institutions compared with commercial communications

Most participants recognised that, given the differences in their objectives and responsibilities, and the resources at their disposal, to some extent "different rules apply" to public institutions when communicating, compared with commercial brands. Throughout the groups, reference was made to the approach taken by commercial communicators to get their message across, and there was widespread agreement that brands invest more (and also that they have more resources available) for communications. There was recognition that commercial communicators invest as much as they do in marketing and advertising because their business success depends on consumers choosing their brand and buying their products and services. By extension, participants accepted that public institutions were usually aiming not to sell, but to inform, educate, or what could be defined as nudge (a small size intervention in the decisional context that steers people's decisions)[5] or warn citizens. Just as big brands could "afford almost anything" when it comes to communicating, public institutions were restricted by their budget. And yet money was not the only perceived restriction the actions of public communicators. Participants also mentioned the idea that while brands could afford to be "frivolous" and court controversy to attract attention, they would not welcome public institutions taking a similar approach. Rather, public institutions should present information in a transparent, inclusive and factual way.

> *"Such popular companies take great care in marketing and advertising to get people to choose their products. Government institutions should present the actual reality in a clear, consistent way, not in an advertising way."*
>
> *Poland*

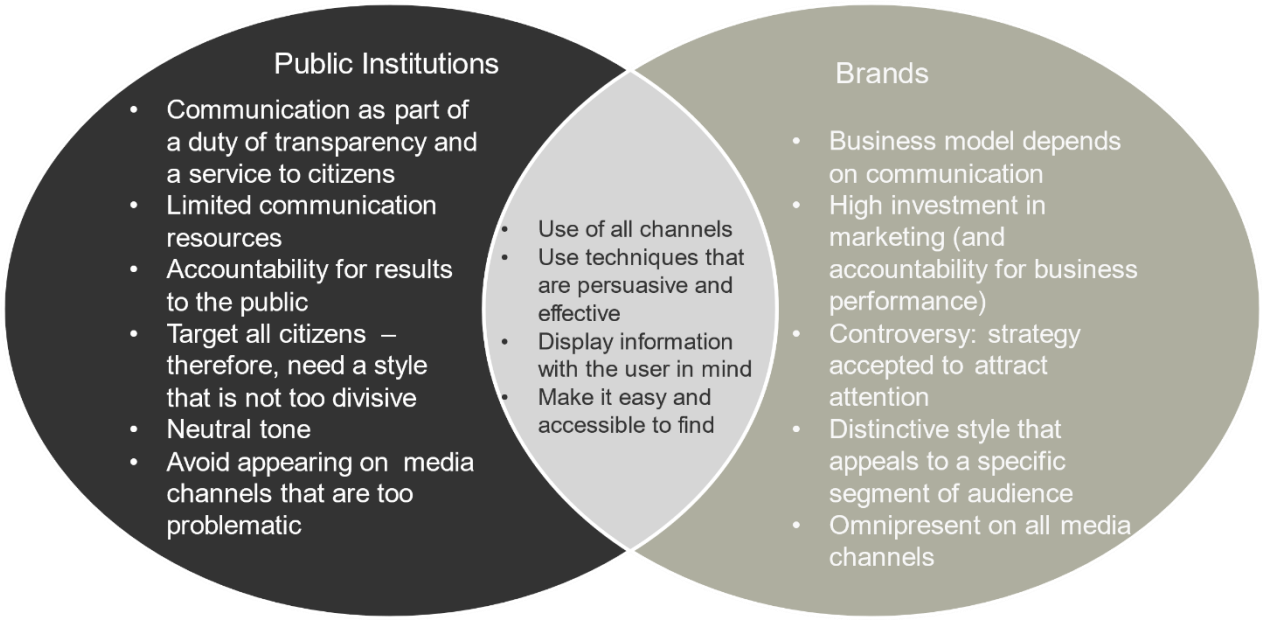
Overall participants also said that communications by public institution should have a more neutral tone compared with advertising by brands and organisations. Still, most participants were in favour of public institutions using the same channels and tools as brands to communicate with citizens (e.g. social media, TV, billboards). Some participants remarked how, by communicating in the same manner as companies, governmental institutions lose some credibility. Therefore, they should refrain from certain tactics used in the advertising industry (some participants mentioned for example using influencers to promote their messages).

Another distinction drawn between brands and public institutions relates to the level of exposure to communications, particularly online. Whereas participants accepted that commercial communicators, for instance online retailers and gambling websites, would do everything possible to display their advertising at every possible opportunity (through online banner advertising, in social media feeds, etc.), they did not want

[5] Sunstein, C. R., Reisch, L. A., & Kaiser, M. (2019) Trusting nudges? Lessons from an international survey. Journal of European Public Policy, 26(10), 1417– 1443.

public institutions to adopt the same approach. Instead, it was considered important that public institutions should develop an authoritative source of information on the topic in question that would be sufficiently extensive, transparent and easy to find.

Figure 6: Participant expectations for public institution communications vs. companies



Additionally, some participants complained that public institutions' websites were often "messy" in their organisation and not appealing in their design. The key point here seems to be that participants are often happy to go looking for relevant information from public institutions when they need it, but they expect institutions to help them find it by making their websites user-friendly and using formats that help rather than hinder citizens looking for relevant information.

5. Institutional communication: citizens' preferences

5.1 Synthesis

This section focuses on citizens' preferences regarding institutional communications with regard to the following aspects: the channels/tools used, the perceived tone of the communication and the timing of the communication. The main findings are summarised below:

- Many participants did not approve of the idea of targeting specific groups; rather, they thought it was important that public institutions should convey their message to the population in general. This links to the insights in section 4 (citizens' expectations for institutional communication) and the importance that most citizens attach to the idea that all citizens should be provided with information regarding changes that are important and relevant to them. However, there was no unanimity on this issue. Some participants also acknowledged the need for public communication to be cost-effective and therefore address those citizens who most need the information. Furthermore, participants considered the relevance of the information to be highly important (see previous section), with some making the connection between targeting and relevance, mentioning that they did not wish to be exposed to communications that they saw as not directly relevant.

- Many participants wanted public institutions to address them with due consideration, a reoccurring finding throughout the focus groups. Participants often mentioned feeling infantilised by a certain tone or style (cartoons, humour), with for example one of the participants explaining that they felt as if the messenger was not addressing them as "intelligent adults" capable of understanding complex matters. This was associated with a clearly expressed expectation that public institutions should adopt a serious or neutral tone. Given that many citizens also voiced their preferences for simple wording and phrasing, institutional communicators need to achieve a balance between avoiding a belittling tone and staying away from jargon.

- Participants in several groups agreed that using language and a tone that evoke emotions can be an appropriate method for public institutions to convey their message more effectively. While participants tended to prefer messages that had a positive tone, they also said that provocative messages could be acceptable in some instances, even if they might offend the sensibilities of some citizens, for example in relation to health and safety. However, some participants also noted the risk of escalation with shocking messages and imagery, on the basis that as we get used to this style of communication new messages need to be even more aggressive.

- The participants stressed the importance for public institutions to communicate at an "every-day" scale to be relatable and favour interaction with the population, with the need to insist on change by focusing on what can be done at an individual level instead of just being descriptive. They must take into consideration the specificities of their country and the population they want to target to be as relatable as possible.

- Participants made several suggestions related to the timeliness, frequency and urgency of communications, including using multiple channels and releasing information simultaneously, where applicable via primetime TV slots to ensure a wider reach on matters of national importance, and using SMS alerts for serious and urgent matters such as natural disasters. For non-urgent matters, such as legislative changes, participants would prefer an explanation of the change before it occurs.

- While participants expect public institutions to be present across a range of channels, the discussions also pointed to a grey zone linked to the personalisation of communications by leading figures. Participants noted that leading figures (politicians or senior civil servants) increasingly communicate

from their personal accounts. As a result, participants are unclear about what is the communication of the institution versus what is personal communication of the individual who at a given time has a leading function.

– Participants across the focus groups recognised that communication requires professional skills and resources. Participants in several groups commented that, just as for commercial communicators, it was important that public institutions design their campaigns to reach the expected high standards.

5.2 Methodological note

This section considers insights gained during the focus groups on *how* citizens would like public institutions to communicate with them to convey their intended message. The analysis is organised around different aspects of communication, namely: channels and tools, tone, language and vocabulary, and imagery. A discussion follows on topics of the timeliness of communications, and the extent to which participants appreciate that communication demands a certain set of professional skills. The section concludes by considering further participant insights into how citizens prefer to be communicated with.

Most of the analysis carried out in this section stems from the discussion based on the homework and the second section of the discussion guide regarding participants' expectations for institutional communication. It includes questions such as the differences between institutional communication and commercial communication (marketing and PR).

5.3 Channels and tools

The discussion on channels and communication tools was non-controversial in all focus groups. In general participants accept that public institutions should communicate on all the channels available in the same way as commercial entities. Participants generally saw the benefit of using several channels to reach as many citizens as possible, and were aware that different demographics use different channels to varying degrees. However, participants also expressed the desire not to be over-exposed to the same communication. This could suggest that public communicators should not refrain from using specific communication channels while attempting to avoid overlaps.

There were discussions in the focus groups regarding how different channels should be used to target certain age groups, such as using TV or radio to reach the older population, and social media to reach younger people. Many participants did not approve of the idea of targeting specific groups, since they thought that it was important for public institutions to convey their message to the population in general. This links to the insights from the previous section on the importance attached by most participants to the idea that citizens should be provided with information regarding changes that are important and relevant to them.

However, there was also some confusion between the channels of the public institutions and the personal channels of leading figures – whether elected politicians or high-level civil servants. In the homework exercise a number of participants provided examples of posts of leading figures on their personal social media accounts, considering these to be institutional communications. This could suggest that participants see the personification of communications of public institutions by leading figures that are increasingly addressing citizens from their own personal accounts and building their own audience.

5.4 Tone of communication

It occurred many times that participants would make unprompted remarks on the tone used by public institutions. Indeed, the question of tone only came about at the end of the focus groups. Nonetheless, participants spontaneously gave their opinion when discussing pieces of communication they disliked. Two relevant topics arose around tone, formality and the use of humour.

5.4.1 Seriousness and formality

A reoccurring finding throughout the focus groups was that many participants wanted to feel that they were being treated with consideration and respect in the communications of public institutions. One suggestion could be that participants may appreciate public institutions using a serious tone and avoiding humour or

styles that are too playful and seen as childish in their communications. They did not explicitly state that they wanted to be addressed as equal partners and as stakeholders by public institutions, but this appears to be the underlying driver highlighting a preference for formality and neutrality. Participants stated that they would like to avoid feeling that they are being addressed in a condescending manner, belittled (or even infantilised). In other words, the discussions on the tone of communication suggest the need to consider how a given message will be received by a wide range of citizens. When expressing their expectations on the tone of communications, participants stated the need for public communicators to recognise them as citizens (and taxpayers) and not consumers of information.

Participants often mentioned feeling infantilised, as if the messenger was not addressing them as "intelligent adults" capable of understanding complicated matters. Given that many participants also voiced their preferences for simple wording and phrasing, institutional communicators need to strike a balance between avoid a belittling tone and staying away from jargon.

Other more playful elements which create memorable anchors such as rhymes or slogans/ taglines were also welcomed by some participants in several different focus groups. Some participants suggested that rhyming[6] was a useful way of communicating, primarily because it promotes the ability of citizens to recall messages. A few participants also mentioned their appreciation of word play and slogans, again in relation to making a message stay with citizens for longer.

The participants that mentioned these techniques appreciated that they enabled communications to be more impactful. Therefore, it seems that expectation of seriousness do not imply an absence of creativity or playfulness.

Participants in several focus groups agreed that using language and a tone that evoke emotions can be an appropriate method for public institutions to convey their message more effectively. While participants tended to prefer messages that had a positive tone, they also said that provocative or shocking messages could be acceptable in some instances, even if they might offend the sensibilities of some citizens, for example in relation to health and safety. At the same time some participants acknowledged that there was a risk of citizens getting familiarised with shocking language and communication, and that this style can lead to escalation.

While seriousness and formality was seen as a recurring matter of importance for participants, this section reveals that participants are not only open to a sense of creativity but expect a level of creativeness. Indeed, across all focus group, beyond the idea that institutional communication should uphold a level of formality, there is a feeling that such communication should not be limited in terms of creativity. Accordingly, such communication should aim to remain attractive without compromising the image and credibility of the entity communicating.

5.4.2 Use of humour

Similarly to the point above participants often felt that humour was inappropriate in the context of the issues that public institutions need to communicate about. It was also noted that it was not appropriate to use humour when addressing issues that entail public expenditure. For example, a public agency launched a recruitment campaign which used self-derision playing on its easy work-pace reputation which was seen as very inappropriate by a focus group's participants discussing it, considering the public resources invested in that agency.

However, the use of humour was not unanimously opposed. There were also participants who felt that humour can be an appropriate means to convey a message, but this requires very good understanding of the context and of the target audiences. They reasoned that this would be appropriate to attract attention and improve recall, i.e. helping citizens to retain the message more easily.

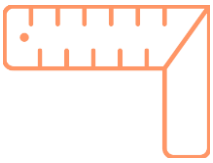
5.5 Imagery

In terms of images used, participants highlighted concerns in relation to shocking and negative imagery. The use of shocking imagery was seen as potentially a double-edged sword: on one hand effective by being eye-

[6] https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/sjop.12069

catching, on the other hand potentially demoralising, not always immediately actionable and potentially losing its impact over time (see the point made later about escalation in section 6.6.2).

At different moments during the focus groups, participants also called for the use of colour. Participants in several groups favoured the use of colour to attract attention but also as a means of increasing the clarity of the message, e.g. by using different colours to segment information for different age groups. When the subject of colour was raised, participants showed a clear preference for eye-catching, cheerful colours. This call for colours could suggest a desire for public communications to be pleasurable and not only informative.



Reflecting their preferences for concise messages, many participants said they preferred visual (or audio-visual) communications that were limited in size and that did not try to encompass too much in terms of their scope. Participants said that it was easier to relate to communication material (text and videos) that was shorter in length and used focused, straightforward messaging.

Finally, the image must fit the target audience and the media on which it is relayed. For example, people expect the image to be of high quality when presented on the television or on social media.

5.6 Timeliness of the communication

Participants in most focus groups commented on the importance of timely communication from public institutions on important matters, particularly health. Timeliness is seen as essential for the communication to be relevant. However, perceptions of timeliness depend on the type of issue that is being communicated about. When discussing timeliness, participants were somewhat influenced by their experience of communications during the Covid-19 pandemic and referred to examples with a need for very rapid communication (crisis situations).

Participants made multiple suggestions related to the timeliness, frequency and urgency of communications, including using multiple channels and releasing information simultaneously, where applicable via primetime TV slots to ensure a wider reach on matters of national importance, and using SMS alerts for serious and urgent matters such as natural disasters.

On the other hand, some participants also discussed the timing of communications regarding legal reforms that have implications for them. They felt there was a need for this to be communicated also during, for example, the reform process and not only on adoption of the changes. One possibility could be that expectations of communication about ongoing reforms stems from a different demand than the demand to be informed about the practical implications of an adopted reform. It could be that what drives the demand for communication about an ongoing reform is more about the demand for accountability of the government and ensuring that changes are justified. This could be linked to expectations regarding the communication of the facts that underpin a decision. However, this was not directly discussed during the focus groups.

5.7 Skills and competence of public institutions

As part of the discussions on how citizens wish to be communicated with, participants recognised that communication requires professional skills and resources and that public sector communicators should be as professional as marketing professionals working for brands.

Due to the considerable presence of advertising, participants demonstrated their ability to make judgements about what they consider professional or well-executed communication and what is not. They apply the same standards to institutional communication as to communication from brands when it comes to creative execution or copywriting.

Participants in several groups gave specific examples where they thought that institutional communicators had excelled in conveying their message. An example was the Facebook page of the Ministry of Welfare which was said to provide clear, concise and effective information about accessing benefits, partly relying on imagery. An advertisement by the Ministry of Health was praised for using emotional language to target women who might not otherwise prioritise undergoing a mammogram. In general, public institutions' efforts in communicating in a direct and to-the-point manner tended to be appreciated as professionally appropriate. For instance, a campaign by an authority for data protection asked its viewers simply and directly, "do you know what phishing is?". Participants in several groups recognised that, just as for commercial

communicators, it was important that public institutions should design their campaigns by sharing and assessing ideas, as part of a skilled team working together, to reach the expected high standards.

5.7.1 Use of research for communication and resources

The topic of research was not often raised spontaneously by the participants. When it was raised it was either to question the quality of the information given by the public institution or to question the format of the communication itself. While participants did not spontaneously call for research they did flag problems around understanding, appeal or emotional reaction that pre-tests should have identified. The most frequent topic of discussion concerning the quality of the information was Covid-19. When participants questioned the format of the communication itself, they were curious to know whether the way in which the communication was designed was the most effective. One of the examples frequently mentioned was traffic safety, namely drink-driving, where participants questioned whether the tone and target of the institutional communication were the right ones to deter such behaviour.

Participants (a) demonstrated a degree of understanding that wide-reaching, well-executed communication requires resources and indicated that public institutions should be able to draw on communication budgets that allow them to fulfil the ambitions; and (b) underlined the need for accountability and ensuring that budgets were well spent.

Some groups commented on how communication via social media is more economical and effective than via newspapers. Participants said that if government communications are effective and well executed the costs of production are justified. In a few groups, participants expressed the wish for a higher budget allocation to improve the quality of communication. When participants complained about the high costs of public communication it was usually because they considered the information provided by the government (content of the message) to be wrong, pointless, or both.

> *in September 2022 from the Ministry of Health have made there so an information campaign […] that was also in the newspaper, a huge whole newspaper page, that has cost a total of 27 million euros, I find that now a negative thing, because some facts are wrong or simply not been proven*
>
> *Germany*

> *People have been unsettled by the campaign and the high costs are also negative and after more than two years of pandemic, people have already formed their own opinion. I am of the opinion that the money would have been better spent elsewhere, for example, they should have put money into the exploding energy prices*
>
> *Germany*

6. Communication approaches and techniques

6.1 Synthesis

This section investigated participants' opinions and thoughts on the use of techniques and approaches that can support public communications. For this purpose, four communication techniques were presented and discussed. For each technique, participants were asked about the perceived usefulness of the technique as well as whether they found any ethical issues that could arise from the use of these techniques by public institutions.

The views on the use of these techniques varied significantly among participants and between focus groups. Some participants strongly supported the idea that techniques used by commercial entities could also be used by public ones, while others considered that public institutions had to be more prudent and transparent when communicating.

➔ There was no consensus against the use of these techniques. In fact, the most prevalent finding that emerged from this exercise was that the majority of participants have no strong objections to public institutions using such techniques, based in general on the belief that the end justifies the means with an important caveat regarding transparency.

This research went further into the cases when participants were ill-at-ease with communication approaches taken by public institutions. Concerns arose when communications:

- could be seen as manipulative to portray the institution in a specific light. This was highlighted when participants shared concerns that information being presented would be partial or only select facts that suited the institution;
- tried to manipulate them to change their attitudes or behaviours. Some participants felt ill-at-ease with the idea of a communication that played on their emotions in order in order to promote change. Others on the other hand had no objections to this;
- used a moralising or admonishing tone. Throughout the focus groups participants expressed the feeling that they should be treated as citizens and not talked down to by public institutions. This also underpinned their views on communication approaches (section 5) and during the co-creation exercise (section 7);
- used public figures that are not seen as legitimate to speak on behalf of the public institution to achieve a greater reach and appeal to a specific audience. In this regard, participants also expressed their concerns about the expertise of such public figures and the use of public funds for them to speak about a public issue. Indeed, participants did not welcome the idea of influencers being paid with public money to promote a public institution. Many participants across most countries objected strongly to the use of influencers by public institutions;
- required public institutions to use what could be seen as private data for personalisation purposes. However, while some participants were concerned about this issue, others had no such concerns;
- suggested information would be conveyed only to a subset of citizens rather than being accessible to everyone. This was linked to personalisation with participants considering that it created an information asymmetry among different citizens. However, there was also a clear discrepancy between participants acknowledging that they would only like to receive

communication relevant to them, while at the same time wanting to have access to all of the information. Therefore, on one hand they were concerned about not having access to certain information because of personalisation, but on the other hand they acknowledged that they did not wish to receive information on all matters. Overall, it could be that their concerns have two layers – on one hand accessibility of information for those searching for it (transparency to citizens) and on the other hand the use of "paid" and proactive messages targeting specific citizens to avoid irrelevant communications.

While the risk of manipulation was seen as one potential source of irritation (together with surveillance linked to the use of personal data), another potential source of discomfort was the perception of value-for-money. Some participants expressed concerns about specific communication techniques (use of influencers) or objectives of communication (showcasing past actions) because they consider these not to be worthy of public expenditure.

With regard to the four specific techniques discussed the feedback can be summarised as follows:

- Most participants were familiar with the idea of communicators tailoring their communications to the characteristics of their intended audience. Internet advertising was mentioned by numerous participants across the groups as an example of personalisation. Two major concerns were raised by participants concerning the potential use of personalisation in public communications. The first concerned the use of data and privacy and intrusion issues. The question of how personal data would be collected raised concerns among many participants, who felt uncomfortable with the idea that their behaviour would somehow be monitored to glean the insights needed for personalisation purposes. The second major concern related to the idea that personalisation would result in an uneven and unfair distribution of information from public institutions to citizens. The main objection among participants was that all citizens have a right to be aware of information disseminated by their public authorities, while personalisation could effectively deny citizens this right.

- The idea of emotionally triggering communications as a technique was also familiar to participants across all countries. Participants frequently referred to anti-smoking campaigns that used graphic images to convey their message. They expressed several concerns. The first concerned the usefulness of using shocking images to attract attention and foster recall. Some participants expressed concerns regarding the potential harm that using, for instance, shocking images, could cause, including the potential for causing distress to citizens that are not part of the target group. The second main issue related to the potential risk of escalation as citizens become used to shocking images and, therefore, less sensitive to them. The third related to the appropriateness of emotionally triggering content for serious causes with high stakes versus more "day-to-day" matters.

- Most participants were also familiar with influencers but did not associate them with communications by public institutions. Many participants' comments suggest that they did not perceive influencers as being authoritative figures or having expert knowledge. The concerns raised about influencers included the legitimacy of influencers to speak on behalf of public institutions, (in)coherence between the topics on which influencers post routinely and what they would be communicating about on behalf of public institutions, citizens who do not follow the influencers could miss out on important information, and the legitimacy of using public funds to employ influencers.

- The technique of value framing was the most difficult for participants across countries to understand. Where it was understood, participants agreed that it could be useful to target citizens depending on their values, e.g., emphasising preservation of the environment in messages for younger citizens. Overall, participants were not troubled by the idea of using value framing to personalise communications.

6.2 Methodological note

Sections 4 and 5 explored participants' expectations and preferences for institutional communication. Another key question for the study concerned the ethics of institutional communication. Citizens were encouraged to reflect on approaches and techniques that could potentially make them feel uncomfortable and explore what they would consider as unethical in terms of public communication.

Potential ethical concerns of participants were explored through a set of stimulated interactions where they were asked to provide feedback on specific communication techniques. Participants were shown examples and descriptions of several techniques and were asked to reflect on where they would draw the line between communication techniques with which they felt comfortable and those which, in their view, went 'too far'. Participants were ask to consider several techniques that are frequently used in communications and marketing, namely personalisation, emotionally triggering content, the use of influencers, and value framing.

Each technique was discussed following a brief introduction showcasing how public institutions could use the technique. For this introduction a one page support document was provided. Each technique was presented to the focus group participants with the aim of understanding their level of familiarity, perceived usefulness and their ethical concerns with regard to the technique. Participants were prompted about the extent to which there were examples of institutional communication approaches that could made them feel uncomfortable by means of a set of questions. An analysis of participants' views on the four techniques is presented below.

Findings from other parts of the focus groups relevant to this section are discussed at the end of this section. The issue of feeling comfortable (or uncomfortable) with specific approaches or messages also came up during other parts of the focus group discussions (for example, when discussing what participants liked or disliked about the examples of institutional communications that they had identified).

6.3 Personalisation

Personalisation was the first technique presented to participants. Personalisation as a communication technique by public institutions was showcased to participants using the following example.

Figure 7: Presentation of the personalisation technique

Using data about citizens (often available in their online behaviour), personalisation involves tailoring messages to individuals. In this case, the institution can send different kinds of messages to different individuals.

For example: in 2018, the UK government launched an advertising campaign to reduce knife crime among young people. By using real-life stories of young people who made the decision not to carry knives, the #knifefree campaign aims to highlight the consequences of carrying a knife and to inspire young people to pursue positive alternatives.

Research indicates that fans of drill music – a subgenre of hip-hop music that tends to have particularly violent lyrics with criminal themes – are more likely than others to carry a knife.

YouTube can easily identify its users who regularly watch drill music videos, and so the government **personalised its campaign by showing the adverts to fans of drill music** on YouTube. The government hoped to show their message to more knife carriers in this way.

Please note that this exercise and its reporting do not constitute in any way an evaluation of the abovementioned campaign. The campaign was used solely to exemplify the technique discussed in the focus group.

Most participants were familiar with the idea of communicators tailoring their communications to their intended audience. Internet advertising was mentioned by several participants across groups as an example of personalisation. It must however be mentioned, for contextual reasons, that participants did not clearly distinguish between the use of targeting (tailoring the communications to specific audiences more generally) and the use of personalisation (use of personal data as a driver for targeting specifically online). As the presentation of the technique portrayed both aspects of the technique together, the borders between the two were blurred for participants which partly explains some of the objections to the use of this technique.

Participants were generally acceptant of this technique and the discussions went in depth to find what aspects of the use of this technique participants might not be comfortable with.

Two major concerns arose among participants around the potential use of personalisation in public communications. The first concerned the use of data and privacy and intrusion of privacy issues. The question of how personal data would be collected raised concerns among many participants who felt uncomfortable with the idea that their behaviour would somehow be monitored to assemble insights for personalisation purposes. In general, there was a lack of clarity among participants regarding the type of data that would have to be collected, as well as how this would be gathered and analysed, for the use of personalisation. This contributed to the unease that many participants felt with the technique.

The second major concern related to the idea that personalisation would result in an uneven and unfair distribution of information from public institutions to citizens. Numerous participants in several countries criticised personalisation by comparing it with stigmatisation campaigns targeting specific subsets of the population. The main objection among participants was that all citizens have a right to know information disseminated by their public authorities, but personalisation could effectively deny people this right. To a lesser degree, participants feared that there was a risk that personalisation would not be carried out effectively, leading to members of the intended target group being missed, e.g. because they were not using the social media channel targeted by the 'personalised' campaign.

A few participants said that personalisation would be more acceptable to them if they were targeted with positive news. In a few cases, participants acknowledged that using personalisation would allow institutions to be more cost-effective by exclusively communicating to citizens for whom a message is relevant, rather than the population at large.

6.4 Emotionally triggering visuals

The use of emotionally triggering visuals by public institutions was demonstrated as a communication technique to the focus group participants using the following content. It was, however, called "attention-grabbing" during the focus groups.

Figure 8: Presentation of the emotionally triggering communication technique

Attention-grabbing communication is designed to capture citizens' attention, to stop and make them think. It often involves somewhat shocking or emotional content.

For example: in 2006, the UK government launched a new advertising campaign to improve road safety and ultimately reduce the number of road deaths.

The campaign "It's 30 For A Reason" highlights that going just 10 mph over the speed limit can be the difference between life and death.

The posters for the campaign use vivid imagery, shown here, to make the clear point to citizens. The corresponding video for the campaign depicts the ghost of a girl who has been killed by someone who is speeding.

Please note that this exercise and its reporting do not constitute in any way an evaluation of the abovementioned campaign. The campaign was used solely to exemplify the technique discussed in the focus group.

Participants across all focus groups were familiar with the idea of emotionally triggering visuals as a communication technique. They frequently referred to anti-smoking campaigns that had used graphic images to convey their message.

Three main issues in relation to emotionally triggering visuals techniques were raised by participants across the focus groups. The first concerned **the usefulness of using shocking images to attract attention and foster recall** and the trade-off with the potential harm that using them could do. Some participants recognised that the technique plays on emotions and that it is a good way to attract attention and make the message more memorable. They argued that negative and graphic images tend to remain longer in citizens'

minds compared with positive images because of the shock they create. Although this was then criticised because it could create unwanted emotions and feelings that could make people uncomfortable. Some participants understood and agreed with the reasoning why some institutions might use this technique. This could suggest that some of the participants find such a technique useful. Reflecting deeper on the usefulness of this technique, participants raised the issue that it could create a sense of guilt among citizens exposed to the communication. For instance, one of the groups used the example of people turning vegetarian after watching an advertisement showing chickens being slaughtered. Additionally, the issue of causing distress to citizens that are not part of the target group was raised. For example, several mentioned they would not want their children to see an advertisement with pictures of dead children (as in the example provided). A solution proposed for dealing with this issue was the use of a symbol or warning sign to ensure that no children or more sensitive individuals are shocked by the images.

The second main issue related to **the potential risk of escalation as citizens become accustomed to shocking images** and, therefore, less sensitive to them. The specific example of the dead child upset some participants who found the approach to be too morbid. The participants expressed worries about a possible escalation once people get **accustomed** to the images, meaning that images would need to be increasingly shocking to remain impactful. Some participants considered this would become counter-productive and potentially harmful. For example, while referring to cigarettes and the graphic images present on the packages, participants mentioned they would become immune to this type of communication if there was too much of it. This technique gave rise to divergent views on communications throughout several groups. However, there was no consensus on the use of the technique, with some groups agreeing that such images should not be used. In general, while some participants were very much against the idea, others were more amenable to it because they saw the purpose of the technique.

> *If I think about cigarettes, they are also completely useless. I think they are bad to see. But this one doesn't. When I saw this child, I thought that if I drove at 100 km/h on a street where the limit is 50 km/h, his face would pop up in my mind. I would really think this could happen to me, that I could ruin my life by killing a child. And I would slow down. I would think about that*
>
> *Italy*

The third main issue related to **the appropriateness of emotionally triggering communications for serious issues** with high stakes versus more "day-to-day" matters.

In terms of ethical concerns, emotionally triggering communications were the technique that provoked the most discussion around whether the 'ends justify the means' (as described in the first issue). Thus, the topic of the communication is seen as key when discussing the potential impact it could have. For example, in some countries this technique was accepted for prevention purposes. It was even once mentioned that public entities such as the police, hospitals, firefighters and traffic authorities should be the only entities that use this technique. On the other hand, the relevance of this technique was questioned when dealing with non-life-threatening topics. Participants also mentioned that they would simply ignore topics that were irrelevant to them. While this points to a limited understanding of who usually conducts prevention campaigns, it does indicate that citizens are amenable to emotionally charged messages when it involves life-saving communications. However, it must be mentioned that participants across countries who accepted the use of emotionally triggering communications in the case of life-saving communications had a difficult time picturing something other than the example portrayed. During the different discussions participants mentioned various topics for which they found the technique could be

> *If a campaign like this is done and it's presented bluntly, then we can say: wow, this could lead to me losing my arm*
>
> *Poland*

> *Because in general I think that we already have too much anxiety and stress in our daily lives to be burdened in an additional way.*
>
> *Greece*

> *This image with a ghost of a child… I wouldn't do that. If I want something harsh, it must be true; I don't need a ghost.*
>
> *Italy*

both acceptable and useful, for example health, safety, animal abuse, sexual crimes, ecology/environment, drug addiction and finally banking/finance.

In terms of the impact of emotionally triggering communications, some participants were very outspoken about the pictures used not being fake. They appreciated that the communication would need to create a shocking experience and for that they suggested using real images or a text that is very clear.

6.5 Use of influencers

The use of influencers by public institutions was demonstrated as a communication technique using the following content.

Figure 9: Presentation of the influencer technique

> Instead of communicating directly with citizens, a public institution might choose "social media influencers" to convey the message for them.
>
> For example: to ensure access to reliable information – and limit the spread of false information – during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Finnish government partnered with social media influencers.
>
> The goal was to provide reliable information and show with their own actions how to follow the government's instructions and restrictions. Hundreds of social media influencers were involved in the campaign.
>
> Government advice sent to bloggers, rappers and writers to get to those not reached by traditional media.
>
> Please note that this exercise and its reporting do not constitute in any way an evaluation of the abovementioned campaign. The campaign was used solely to exemplify the technique discussed in the focus group.

Most participants were familiar with influencers but did not associate them with communications by public institutions. In general, participants associated the term 'influencer' with (typically, young) social media personalities, engaged in promoting products or services online. Many participants' comments suggest that they did not perceive influencers as being authoritative figures or having expert knowledge.

Four main issues arose across the focus groups in reaction to the (potential) use of influencers by public institutions.

This first main issue concerned **credibility and the legitimacy of influencers to speak on behalf of public institutions.** Participants saw issues related to the credibility and legitimacy of the use of influencers. Their credibility was often questioned due to the fact that they might be paid in parallel by private entities, but also because although some of them might be experts in unrelated topics (food, make-up, fitness or video games) they are certainly not seen as experts in health, for example. This suggests the need to have a certain level of trust in the influencer for the message to be accepted. In one of the focus groups, participants indicated that they found the technique to be inappropriate for all topics but social ones.

On issues concerning legitimacy, participants insisted that the influencer used should have seemingly similar values to the institution it would potentially represent. This idea was taken further by participants advising on using only influencers who are legitimate public figures and who are "serious" actors, more specifically public figures who correspond to the topic and who are appreciated. The consistency between the message of the campaign and the profile of the influencer seems key for the support of citizens. For example, a professional athlete would be a good choice for a public institution encouraging citizens to practice more sport.

> *"I just feel that if this person/influencer that was chosen, does not work as a role model, I do not feel that s/he has the credentials to convey this important communication/information from the part of the state. It loses credibility. It will annoy me.*
>
> *Greece*

Some participants found it hard to understand how influencers could help public institutions, considering that while the use of influencers by private brands was clearly relevant, this was not the case for public entities.

The second main issue related to the profile of the influencers and **the coherence between the topics on which influencers post routinely and what they would be communicating on behalf of public institutions**. One group strongly emphasised that the messages shared by influencers should be carefully verified to ensure they are conveying the institution's message. Some participants feared that influencers could follow their own preferences. Participants also raised the question of the difficulty of knowing when the influencer is talking on behalf of a public institution or not. Some participants also mentioned that institutions could lose their neutrality with their tone being tainted by the influencer.

It was mentioned that influencers can be useful to create empathy on some topics when describing something that has happened to them, but this could not be perceived to have been scripted by a public institution. The example of night club "drugging" was used by one participant to portray this technique as very useful in one of the focus groups. Another participant mentioned the appeal of using influencers for cost reasons.

The third issue related to **participants' concerns that this type of communication only targets citizens who follow a given influencer and excludes those that do not**. Concerns were also expressed around the idea of unequal access to information. In fact, participants were not happy with the idea that some citizens would get access to information to which they would not get access unless they followed specific influencers.

> *It depends on who it is. It must be someone you trust. If I think of a rapper who makes jokes on TikTok, then no.*
>
> *Germany*

> *Also, for me, public institutions are something very serious. It's something very neutral. The influencer is closer to the young people…*
>
> *Greece*

> *There was a campaign about vaccination with well-known personalities. But I view it in a negative way, though. They were paid for that. So, I don´t know if it can be believable and whether it had achieved its effect.*
>
> *Slovakia*

The use of influencers is also seen as problematic in smaller countries where citizens tend to follow influencers from other countries. There is therefore an issue of reach in smaller countries where citizens do not follow many local influencers, but also an issue of spill-over where citizens might follow influencers communicating on behalf of another country's public institutions. Citizens in Slovakia for example recalled the use of influencers in the Czech Republic.

Among those that accepted this technique it was often mentioned that it would be suitable to reach younger people and those that might not trust in their government. Reach tended to be one of the main arguments for the use of influencers, with influencers being seen by some participants as a vehicle to reach citizens that are currently not interested in either politics or government affairs or public communication at this stage in their life.

> *For health, yes, of course, anything to do with health, if they [Public institutions] tell us something, done, we do it.*
>
> *Romania*

The fourth main issue brought up by participants concerned **the legitimacy of using public funds to pay influencers.** In some groups citizens could not detach themselves from the idea that celebrities, for example, used as influencers would be paid by a public institution. The fact that influencers would be paid for their role is not perceived positively by citizens who consider that it would tarnish their reputation. It was made clear in several groups that public money should not be used to pay influencers.

6.6 Value framing

The box below presents the exercise using value framing as a communication technique with the messages that participants saw during the exercise. As analysed later, it was during this exercise that many participants commented about the complexity, specificity and clarity of the language. The value framing technique was not initially intended to stimulate discussion about language and style. It was intended to stimulate discussion about the ethics of using this approach as with the other techniques discussed in section 6.

Figure 10: Presentation of the value framing technique - messages

One exercise in the focus groups exposed citizens to different messages to assess their views on specific written content. Three messages were created with the same objective – convincing citizens to move away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy sources. The messages were presented as follows.

Message 1 – Preserving nature: It's beneficial to invest in renewable energy because it is more sustainable. Compared to the extraction of fossil fuels, renewable energies are more respectful of the natural world.

Message 2 – Conserving current lifestyle: It's beneficial to invest more in renewable energy because it will protect our way of life. In order to maintain our way of life today, we cannot rely only on fossil fuels because their supply is limited.

Message 3 – Gaining a leadership position on the international stage: It's beneficial to invest in renewable energy because it would make our country a technological leader. Investing in technologies for renewable energy would strengthen the economy and allow us to have a significant influence on the world stage.

The way these messages are written illustrates a communication technique called value framing: this involves appealing to a specific belief, feeling, or "value" in order to effectively change citizens' attitudes or behaviours.

Although they have the same objective, the messages go about this in different ways. They aim to activate people's core values, which usually vary. While the first message explains the problem by placing the emphasis on valuing nature, the second message emphasises the need to switch to protect our lifestyles and security, and the third one focuses on the pride of being a global leader with the new technologies strengthening our economy. The assumption is that people with different values will react to these messages in different ways.

This technique was the most complex for participants across countries to understand. There were some cases of participants understanding and pointing out the prevalence of values throughout the messages. In some groups participants understood quickly that the technique focused on the values of individuals, recognising that the message would be personalised for different audiences. Some participants recognised the use of different values between the messages. However, as the following subsections 6.6.1 and 6.6.2 will discuss, many of the discussions in the groups was not about the values, but rather about how the messages were formulated and what the images were conveying. Many participants barely saw the differences in terms of values among the messages and even less so when matching them with the images. The most prevalent understanding of this technique relates to participants seeing that it could be used to reach different citizens.

The focus groups however did reveal that participants do react differently to value-framed messages, as participants chose the ones that seemed aligned with their values. The depth of the discussion was able to portray which specific aspects of the messages citizens liked or disliked (see next section 6.6.1). Participants across focus groups tended to be more tolerant of the message relating to lifestyle preservation for different reasons. The message relating to nature was thought to be the simplest, while the message relating to the international stage and competition felt too political for participants. However, in all groups, participants

differed in their preferences between the messages. There was no group in which there was a clear consensus for a specific message. This points to the relevance of the technique, whereby different messages appeal to different citizens depending on their values and the ones portrayed through the message.

Participants paid special attention to the second message (lifestyle preservation) when discussing the link with images. They linked it with the image of climate hazards and the image of a chimney. The argument of conserving their current lifestyle was especially appealing because it is related to the citizen's self-interest.

Some participants stated that this technique was useful to communicate with citizens with different backgrounds or characteristics. For example, they mentioned that the messaged framed around the conservation of nature was quite relevant to younger people they knew, such as their children. When prompted to pick a message they found the best, participants were often divided in the groups. This could suggest the relevance of value framing as participants clearly have diverse preferences.

Overall, the coupling of value framing and personalised communications prompted little unease. Participants did not raise objections about the use of this technique when the technique was eventually explained to them. However, it needs to be acknowledged that at this point they had already discussed three other techniques and there was a degree of fatigue in the groups which may have affected the depth of this discussion.

6.6.1 Language and vocabulary

As part of the value framing discussion, the issue of language used in public communications came up very often, especially in the discussion about the messages used. While this was not intentionally prompted it came up frequently in many focus groups across several countries.

Overall participants expressed a very clear expectation that communications should use language that is precise, specific and accurate. They were sceptical about the use of broad concepts that they found hard to relate to (for example "sustainability"). They questioned language that they saw as not being precise (for example when the message said "we invest" they were doubtful about who was "we"). Finally, they saw inaccuracies (in terms of spelling) as discrediting the message or even the institutions. The latter was particularly perceptible when participants spoke about daily interaction with public institutions and their user experience of communication through means such as letters or websites.

The table below portrays the variety of opinions on the content of the messages shown to participants. The comments refer to the wording and formulations of the messages as well as their actual content.

Table 3: Reactions to the messages - content

	Nature (1)	Lifestyle (2)	World stage (3)
	It's beneficial to invest in renewable energy because it is more sustainable. Compared to the extraction of fossil fuels, renewable energies are more respectful of the natural world.	*It's beneficial to invest more in renewable energy because it will protect our way of life. In order to maintain our way of life today, we cannot rely only on fossil fuels because their supply is limited.*	*It's beneficial to invest in renewable energy because it would make our country a technological leader. Investing in technologies for renewable energy would strengthen the economy and allow us to have a significant influence on the world stage.*
Negative	The message was seen as too simplistic. Participants found that it lacked detail. Others mentioned that it was incomplete. Participants found it vague. Some were uncertain about the real meaning of some of the terms used. The information was obvious for some, and it was not striking compared with the other messages.	Participants found it portrayed a very selfish approach. The concept of the current lifestyle was problematic as most find the current situation inadequate. Some found that the message was too limited, i.e. to renewable energy, as the solution.	Most of the negative comments on this message related to the implausibility of the statement. Some participants do not enjoy the idea of being in competition with other countries for the sake of the environment. Participants found it too commercial or too political.
Positive	Most found it very clear and concise. The language was approachable. Simple and to-the-point, clear cause and effect. The logic is easily understandable.	Participants found it to represent the reality. It was found to be rational. Some appreciated the fact that it contains only proven facts.	Some participants appreciated that it mentioned their country as leader, giving them a feeling of pride. Participants appreciated that it focused on business, as this would have the most impact on the environment.

Note: This is a summarised version of the reactions to the messages. The entries in this table are representative of the different ideas that were generated in reaction to the message. It is to be noted that some reactions are contradictory as they are from different participants.

> *I like the second one the best because that's the one that applies to me personally the most, in the sense of adapting our way and our lifestyle because it's logical that there's not an infinite amount of fossil fuels. I like the third message the least, because it's not very much about the environment but more about how to advance progress.*
>
> *Germany*

> *It lifts me up so much. I am that citizen who can do something for his country after all. I am honoured. I could do something so that my state is recognised as this leader. That magic word - technology leader. I like the choice of vocab*
>
> *Poland*

> *[Discussing the first message] And it's too general. How much more respectful are they? 1% more? It doesn't give me more information. It's a phrase at the end that doesn't give me anything. It's not saying something valid. It may be true under certain condition and not true under some other conditions! It is not a general truth.*
>
> *Greece*

As noted above, the discussion on the messages also brought out issues that are not specifically about the content. Participants clearly identified structural elements of the messages that differentiated them which are not linked to the content, but rather to the language used. These were:

a) Vocabulary: it raised many questions and prompted discussion. The issues revolved around the fact that some terms or concepts were perceived as unclear and open to different interpretations. For instance, many participants mentioned that the word "sustainable" is unclear. This word was seen as

a very broad concept that people could not grasp because it is potentially very multi-faceted. The use of unclear, broad terms seemed to give rise to suspicion or hesitation about the meaning.

b) Target audience: some participants commented on the fact that messages two and three referred to "us" but it is not clear who was designated by that wording. While the initial intention was probably to include the audience in the use of the word "we" and "us" this was not necessarily perceived as being inclusive by everyone, and it raised questions among participants as to whom this language structure is meant to cover.

c) Length: some participants expressed a preference based on the length of the message. Indeed, the one with the least number of words and with less complicated language was often preferred. These participants mentioned that the shorter message would be the most effective. In contrast, the longer ones were also criticised for being too long or too complicated.

d) Clarity: participants commented that message one was easy to understand, while messages two and three were more difficult to appreciate. This was mostly due to the way in which messages two and three brought in dimensions that participants felt were not immediately linked to the issue at stake. The link between renewable energy and way of life or economic growth was not immediately obvious to participants (compared with the one with the link with nature). This could suggest that the messages requiring more effort to understand are thus seen as more difficult.

6.6.2 Images

Similarly, as with the theme of language, participants' expectations of visuals used in institutional communications were discussed on numerous occasions during the focus groups. The participants discussed the use of different visual styles when stimulated with images linked to the value framing technique.

More information on how the value framing technique stimulated participants to reflect on matching the images with the different messages can be found in the box below.

Figure 11: Presentation of the value framing technique - images

Just as the messages set out above, participants were presented with images to go with the messages in a hypothetical campaign aimed at changing people's behaviour. Participants were presented with three images and asked to match each image with one of the three messages. They were also prompted to discuss how and why the images best corresponded to the messages.

Following the initial discussion, the facilitators explained to the group that the images had the same objective, to help convince citizens to move away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy sources. They were supposed to support the messages and focus on different values. The first image was intended to help participants envisage a future where their country is a leader in renewable energy. The second image focused on natural disasters, and how the world is being impacted by fossil fuels. Finally, the third one focused on the actions of individuals that are contributing to climate change. Depending on a citizen's values, each image can make the communication more effective at reaching citizens.

Image 1 (technology)	Image 2 (climate hazards)	Image 3 (chimney)
		

These pictures were carefully chosen to reflect the values with which they were associated. Image two was used to portray the will of individuals to conserve nature, image three to conserve their lifestyle and image one related to the position on the world stage.

Lastly, participants were told how the value framing technique works in communication and asked whether this would change their views on the messages and images.

The reactions to the images shown suggest that:

a) Participants prefer visuals that are familiar to them (if the creative concept uses a realistic visual style) because these are more easily relatable. For example, participants felt that the images representing climate hazards (image 2), in order to try and change types of behaviour, were ineffective. They highlighted that there is a disconnect between the constant mediatisation of massive climate hazards which are used to alert citizens about climate change, and the fact that citizen are not directly affected by them in their everyday life. The scale of climate change in the image makes individuals unable to relate to and to link it with their everyday behaviour. For example, participants explained that they have seen similar images in the last twenty years without having changed their behaviour. On the other hand, it was also mentioned that those who were already impacted by climate change could relate more readily to the picture of climate hazards because they encounter them in their daily life (droughts in Lombardi or fires in Greece).

b) Participants are tired of having "bad news" repeated or being faced with alarmist images, so much so that they become ineffective. Some participants were very critical of being exposed to what they see as an excessive number of communications about natural disasters and the resultant anxiety created by the repetition of such images (still in reaction to image 2). In this specific context the picture of climate hazards could become counter-productive.

c) Participants need to see a direct link between the image and the message. It is seen as ineffective when the link is too indirect and requires a mental effort for participants to establish the link (as in images 1 and 3). For the majority of participants, for a communication to be successful it is essential that the message and the image ae consistent. The aim of the image is to illustrate the message and create emotions in citizens by addressing what they encounter in their daily life.

d) Participants consider that it is important for public institutions to communicate using familiarity but also using visuals that make citizens feel that can have an influence – especially when it comes to issues such as climate change. There is a need for the visual aids to show situations that enable participants to see how they can personally address the issue and to which they can relate. They also need to reflect differences in country contexts and thus be localised.

e) Participants appreciate visuals that show how they can take action, and which are therefore empowering and enabling, rather than admonishing or simply shocking. It seems that the more the image is related to the every-day life of citizens, the more they feel they can relate to and engage with it. In addition, participants noted that presenting negative images does not contribute anything as to how people should act.

> *I think the worst is maybe image 2 [...] There are so many disasters nowadays that I wouldn't really have an impact. But if you talk about your way of life, well, you're going to feel more concerned.*
>
> *Belgium*

> *Personally, if I see an image of what the renewable sources are and what they lead to, that would make me understand better the message that they're trying to send.*
>
> *Malta*

> *If I had to imagine it on TV, and this guy was trying to tell me "Listen, you need to change your lifestyle because of climate change," and I saw a bunch of cars throwing out exhaust, I would feel more impacted than if I just saw a feature of "Look how nice the solar panels are".*
>
> *Malta*

6.7 Spontaneous ethical concerns

Throughout the focus groups, the participants sporadically expressed concerns about the ethical boundaries of different aspects of public communication. These are issues that arose from parts of the focus groups that did not encompass the techniques but were mentioned without prompting from the moderators. The most frequently recurring themes were the cherry-picking of information and attempts to scare or blame citizens.

Cherry-picking of information

Throughout the discussions participants were very vocal about the use of facts in institutional communications. Indeed, as seen in the earlier sections, participants were very keen on facts and data being shared. There were, however, numerous hints across the focus groups that some of the data used and statements presented by public institutions might not be completely representative of the truth or reality. This suggests an ethical consideration and relates to participants' views mentioned above: the perceived truthfulness of the message. We found that across all focus groups, several participants expressed their suspicions regarding the use of institutional communications not only to enhance the reputation of the institution itself, but also to frame an institutional or political development in a favourable manner to suit its own political goals.

While it is difficult to ensure that institutional communications are perceived as transparent by the population, this section suggests that clarity and the avoidance of vague terms and concepts enhance participants' perception of truthfulness and transparency.

Self-promotion by public entities

The issue of participants not being at ease with communications that aim to showcase what a given institution has been doing was also discussed in section 4. Some participants felt concerned about the use of public resources to show "proof points" justifying the existence or action of a given institution. This was not seen as being relevant to participants as it had limited implications for them and at the same time the

purpose of such communication is about creating a positive brand for an institution rather than actually informing or protecting citizens. This was an area where some participants questioned whether public funds should be spent. This issue came up several times in different focus groups and, as mentioned above, it also arose in the discussion about the use of influencers.

Do not scare me or blame me

The other ethical consideration that was repeatedly raised concerned the emotional response to a stimulus. In fact, both the use of shocking images and the excessive use of emotional language seem to trigger feelings that some participants do not consider appropriate in the case of public institutions. For instance, the use of fear in communications was mentioned. Participants made it clear they were against being scared into adopting a certain type of behaviour or taking an action such as getting vaccinated (note that smoking was not mentioned). Additionally, messages that foster feelings of guilt were also mentioned as practices that participants do not feel comfortable with. Communications that exacerbate guilt were exemplified with the mention of “citizens’ responsibility”.

While discussing their expectations with regard to communications from public institutions, one group of participants in one of the countries discussed personalisation and emotions. This group mentioned that they did not want public institutions to communicate by personalising messages to people using their emotions. Instead, this group argued that they preferred personalisation based on individual logic or reasoning as, in their opinion, the aim of public institutions should be to inform. Their concerns seem to relate to the objectivity of public institutions and the need to avoid subjective content that can be misinterpreted.

6.8 Conclusions

In general, participants were comfortable with the use of the techniques, other than the use of influencers which was mostly considered inappropriate, and the use of personalisation, which gave rise to ethical concerns. There was also a high degree of familiarity with the techniques across participants and countries, as the majority had encountered at least one of these techniques previously. The exception was value framing with which participants were not familiar. There was also a general understanding of why and when certain techniques could be used and be useful in communications, which came up several times in the discussions.

Overall participants were fairly comfortable with the use of emotionally triggering communications. They saw this technique as widespread in commercial communications and mostly raised few objections to this technique being used in public communicators. Emotionally triggering communications as a technique was also spontaneously discussed by participants from the early stages of the focus groups, and most participants acknowledge the need for institutional communications to stand out from the rest and believe that emotionally triggering content or, in other words, the use of strong and potentially shocking images and messages, helps them attract attention. This is seen by most participants as facilitating recall and contributing to the effectiveness of the communication.

Participants were familiar with the use of personalisation as a technique. This technique did provoke some dilemmas in terms of acceptance by participants. On one hand, most participants accept that to be effective communication needs to be personalised to match the target audience and also distributed on those channels where that audience is present. On the other hand, participants raised concerns about:

- the use of personal data which they saw as necessary for the personalisation technique to be applied; and
- the potential stigmatisation of a specific group as a result of the profiling/segmentation which underlies the technique; this latter concern was most probably driven by the example used to describe this technique.

The use of influencers was seen as highly controversial by many participants. Some people understand the need for public institutions to tap into the existing audiences of influencers and they also understand that this approach can be highly cost-effective. However, some participants expressed their concerns about:

- the legitimacy of influencers to speak on behalf of public institutions, and
- the “brand safety” of public institutions as they should be careful to not appear in communications with brands that can be negatively perceived by the population. They should also select influencers

that are not controversial and negatively perceived by the population and ensure their backgrounds match the institution's values. Participants clearly understood the risk that stems from a potentially insufficient alignment between the influencer and the public institution.

7. Citizens as communicators: choices and dilemmas

7.1 Synthesis

This section relies on the findings gathered through the co-creation exercise of the focus groups. This creative exercise built on previous discussions and allowed participants a significant level of freedom. The main findings are summarised below.

- The co-creation exercise came after over two hours of discussions and exchanges about institutional communication which prepared participants for this joint reflection and creative work. Based on what they had discussed and understood earlier, participants were asked to design a campaign. All the groups were relatively as ease with the task and were able to propose initial principles and choices for the campaign that they were asked to develop.

- The task also showed that some of the issues that were initially seen as potentially problematic were seen somewhat differently. For example, several groups thought about the targeting of households with high bills which would require the use of sensitive information about energy bills. The objections to the use of this targeting were not so much about the use of sensitive personal information but rather about the extent to which the campaign should target everyone. This was surprising as participants in the previous discussion were vocal about the intrusiveness of the use of personal data to target communications.

- Across all the groups there was a degree of similarity about the decision drivers. Even where participants made different choices and proposals regarding the task (for instance, whether to aim at a general audience or to have a more targeted campaign), they often based their decisions on the same ethical grounds, such as ideas of equal treatment and transparency.

- When discussing their hypothetical campaign's audience, most groups considered the dilemma of whether to communicate to the population in general or to focus on specific sub-groups, such as high energy users, bill payers, young families with children, teenagers or pensioners. In the end, most focus groups reached a consensus that equal treatment meant that the campaign should focus on all citizens, given the relevance to all citizens of the topic of saving energy at home. Simply put, it would not be right if people missed out on information from which they could benefit, even if some citizens recognised that this would be less efficient than a more targeted approach.

- It was striking that across the focus groups they opted for a positive message, in all likelihood because of the ideas voiced earlier by participants in the group, namely that they preferred positive messages; and that they would be most effective in motivating people. Even participants who thought that messages on saving money would be more relevant to some citizens than others still tended to agree that conveying a positive message (e.g. it was possible to save money on energy bills) was more likely to result in at least some people acting.

- In many groups, participants said that they disliked the idea of communications with a moralising or judgmental tone related to the need to save energy or of having consequences if citizens failed to do so. Instead, there was strong preference for a positive tone, putting the emphasis on how individuals could make a difference for the better.

- Most groups suggested that a multi-channel campaign across TV, radio, social media and, sometimes, print media, would be the best way to reach their target audience, i.e. the general population. Groups that favoured a more segmented approach tended to agree that the mix of channels had to be adjusted

accordingly to reach subsets of the population, e.g. social media for younger citizens, newspapers for older citizens.

– The homely and benign imagery favoured by most groups for their campaigns tended to reflect the preferences expressed across the groups for public communications to carry a positive message and avoid being heavy-handed or emotionally charged. Instead, the participants chose in most cases to put their point across using settings they considered citizens would find relatable, to enable them to absorb the information presented and decide how they should act as a result.

7.2 Methodological note

In the last part of the focus group, the co-creation exercise, participants were presented with a hypothetical scenario where they were asked to design a government communication campaign on the topic of energy savings at home. The moderators guided the participants through the exercise, asking them to discuss their ideas for the campaign, considering specific issues such as the target audience, message, tone, tools and channels, and imagery. The aim of the exercise was to analyse how the participants would respond when they were in the driving seat, making decisions on a government communication with the public. The exercise also provided an opportunity to observe the extent to which participants remained consistent with the views they had expressed earlier in the focus group, including the extent to which they felt comfortable using communications techniques such as personalisation, value framing or influencers.

In most groups, it seems that the earlier discussions in relation to specified communication techniques had influenced participants, whether or not they expressly acknowledged such. For instance, one group decided that using emotionally triggering communications to show a city plunged into darkness would be the best way to convince citizens of the urgent need to save energy and avoid the lights going out. Other groups raised the idea of using personalisation to focus the campaign on consumers with higher-than-average energy bills. Moreover, some facilitators later said that it was unlikely that the activity would have gone so smoothly and generated as many ideas had the participants not been primed by their earlier discussions.

7.3 Co-creation exercise

The main findings from the co-creation exercise in relation to each of the five aspects of a communication campaign by a public institution that participants were asked to consider showed a high degree of similarity across the groups. Even where participants made different choices (for instance, regarding whether or not to aim at a general audience or have a more targeted campaign), they often based their decisions on the same ethical grounds, such as equal treatment and transparency.

Audience

When discussing their hypothetical campaign's audience, most groups considered the dilemma of whether to communicate with the population in general or to focus on specific sub-groups, such as high energy users, bill payers, young families with children, teenagers or pensioners. In the end, most focus groups reached a consensus that equal treatment meant that the campaign should focus on everyone, given the relevance to all citizens of the topic of saving energy at home. Simply put, it would not be right if people missed out on information from which they could benefit.

> *[The audience should be] anyone who is forced to pay their bills. And if I'm forced to pay my bills, it applies to me. I think the only ones who are not affected are kids. I don't count them; they don't have to pay out of their own pocket.*
>
> *Latvia*

> *This concerns everyone. Not only those with low energy consumption or only those with high energy consumption. It concerns everyone!*
>
> *Greece*

The groups that thought a more targeted campaign would be appropriate then grappled with the idea of who they should target. The decisions taken by these groups regarding the target audience tended to focus on citizens for whom the information would be most relevant and/or groups that would be most likely to be in a position of influence to reduce energy consumption at home, such as bill payers or 'heads of household'. A few groups suggested it would be a good idea to try to have citizens who were relatively new to paying bills (such as young individuals who had recently moved out of the family home) and who might be the least accustomed to thinking

energy savings.

In most cases, the groups agreed that adults, who pay energy bills, rather than children or teenagers – who were sometimes suggested as contributing to excessive energy use – ought to be the campaign's focus. Some groups were driven by a rather stereotypical view that careless children and teenagers are often to blame for high energy bills.

The decision taken by many participants to focus on all adults reflected the recognition that they should target citizens in a position of influence (in this case, over their household's energy consumption). Nevertheless, several groups agreed that the best way to motivate adults would be to frame the message of energy savings as an investment in the future, specifically that of their children. This points to a level of acceptance of communication techniques aimed at countering cognitive biases such as the present bias[7], although it must be mentioned that no participant explicitly referred to this approach as a technique.

Message and tone

The focus of the hypothetical campaign's message varied between groups, but there were a few overarching trends.

The choices that participants made in relation to the campaign's message and tone favoured positive messages and the idea of empowerment was reflected in most groups' preferences. This trend was observed across the focus groups.

Several groups favoured promoting **practical tips and ideas to help citizens save energy at home**. In some cases, this included providing quite specific information on which household appliances and devices consumed the most energy. This was in some ways unsurprising: the subject matter of the hypothetical campaign (saving energy) clearly lent itself to this kind of 'tips' approach.

> *You still can reduce your consumption if you have appliances of a certain type. The fact that someone can't afford it, that's another issue again. But at least you put this information in front of him, that if you do this, that's an alternative. When will you do it – maybe after 10 years, maybe you will never do it – but you are giving him an idea.*
>
> *Latvia*

Empowerment was another theme that stood out in terms of the campaign message. The idea of putting the emphasis on positive messages (explaining what citizens could do to save energy) rather than a negative focus (on the dire personal and climate-related consequences of failing to save energy at home) was in synch with much of what participants had said earlier during the discussion on their expectations regarding public institutions communication.

Across the focus groups, the choice to opt for a **positive message** was striking and in line with the views expressed earlier by participants in the group, namely that they preferred positive messages and that such messages would be most effective in motivating people to act. Participants in several groups conceded that messages related to saving money would be more relevant to some citizens than others. Not everyone would be able to afford to go out and buy new, lower energy appliances and act on the advice to save energy. Nevertheless, the groups still tended to agree that conveying the positive message (e.g. it was possible to save money on energy bills) was more likely to result in at least some people taking action.

The groups that favoured positive messaging wanted to emphasise the benefits of saving energy and thus money and/or the climate, rather than messages that sought to induce fear, worry, anxiety or other negative emotions. In one focus group this was described as putting a 'positive spin' on the message. Rather than emphasising the idea of deprivation and thus suffering, the focus should be on the money saved that could be put to other uses. This idea was echoed by participants in most of the countries. By saving money on energy now, citizens would be taking positive action for their own future, whether the benefits were material ("buying a computer"), familial ("putting a child through college") or more societal and environmental ("doing your bit for the planet").

[7] The present bias refers to the tendency of people to give stronger weight to payoffs that are closer to the present time when considering trade-offs between two future moments. O'Donoghue, T., & Rabin, M. (1999). Doing it now or later. American Economic Review, 89(1), 103-124.

The positive approach favoured by most groups translated into wanting to generate a **positive sentiment** among the campaign audiences. This meant helping citizens save rather than admonishing them for wasting energy. Interestingly, this idea of helping citizens meant that some groups said they were open to the idea of using personalisation to target the campaign at the citizens who might need the most help: homeowners with higher energy consumption or families with children. This might see homeowners with higher-than-average bills receiving advice on cutting back their consumption in response to their high energy bills.

Other groups, despite agreeing with the idea of a positive tone for the campaign, still disliked the idea of personalisation, because they felt that the same message should be conveyed to everyone, given the subject's general importance.

> *Should this [message] be based on the money saved from a lower bill or on behaviours that allow you to be more sustainable, with less pollution? I would address the second one because I can notice by myself that the bill is too high, and I need to find a way to reduce it.*
>
> *Italy*

Another common choice by participants was to opt for a **light-hearted campaign message**. This was favoured in several groups across different countries. Again, the topic of energy savings lent itself to a less serious approach. In one of the focus groups, for example, participants collectively decided that their campaign would rely on humour, focusing on getting teenagers to consider the impact of excessive energy use through the charging of their mobile devices. Another focus group suggested the slogan "Saving is saving", meaning saving energy equals saving money.

In many groups, participants said that they disliked the idea of communications with a moralising or judgmental tone related to the need to save energy or its consequences if citizens failed to do so. Instead, there was strong preference for a positive tone, putting the emphasis on how individuals could make a difference for the better.

Lastly, a trend that is perhaps less surprising: the groups that decided children ought to be part of the target audience, favoured playful messages, cartoon characters, and colourful graphics. Where teenagers were the target, the tone needed to be adjusted appropriately and one group agreed that using slang would be crucial to engaging that specific audience.

Channels and tools

There was broad recognition across the focus groups that the campaign's mix of channels and tools would need to reflect the target audience. The participants appreciated that reaching that audience would not necessarily be easy and there was some recognition that doing so would require careful consideration of the communication tools that are typically at the disposal of public institutions.

Most groups did not consider the financial implications of the campaigns they were proposing. As a result of this lack of constraint, participants often felt free to suggest that a multi-channel campaign, across TV, radio, social media and, sometimes, print media, would be the best way to reach their target audience.

Groups that favoured a more segmented approach tended to agree that the channel mix ought to be adjusted accordingly, in order to reach subsets of the population. Some participants said that social media would be appropriate for reaching younger citizens, while senior citizens could be better reached through TV, radio and newspaper messages.

Some participants made suggestions that were clearly rooted in communication campaigns and material they had previously encountered. Examples included the 'just in time' idea of sending energy saving tips together with the electricity bill, and relying on tech savvy influencers to make credible suggestions for energy-saving appliances. Indeed, the use of influencers to convey information, which as a technique had proven generally less popular earlier in the focus groups, was not ruled out by several groups. For some, this was because the topic was perceived to be mainly about common sense rather than requiring specialist knowledge.

Imagery

As with the four campaign elements outlined above, the themes of empowerment and positive messaging were also evident in the participants' choice of campaign visuals. The images chosen by participants for their campaign materials (e.g. posters, TV spots or online advertising) tended to fall into the following categories:

- practical (e.g. showing the devices that should be turned off at home to save on energy);
- facts and figures (related to money that could be saved on energy bills);
- nature (some groups thought that highlighting the impact of climate changes on their country or region's landscapes could encourage citizens to change their habits regarding energy);
- emotionally triggering content (e.g. a city in darkness after the lights went out).

Reflecting earlier choices in relation to the campaign message and tone, most groups did not favour melodramatic or aggressive visuals. Instead, they preferred scenes focused on the family, the home and the environment. One group suggested that scenes from the family home would be more relatable and effective in getting the point across: if people saw a home where a washing machine was running only half-full, no-one watching a TV left switched on, the Wi-Fi router on, while a child was playing on a console, they would be more likely to recognise themselves and act to save energy by taking a more mindful approach to energy use. Another group suggested linking the campaign's message to images relating to protecting the local environment and nature, to emphasise the idea that by cutting back on energy consumption citizens would be doing their part to make sure the nearby mountains remained snow-capped in winter.

The homely and benign imagery favoured by most groups tended to reflect the preferences expressed across the groups for public communications to carry a positive message and avoid being heavy-handed or emotionally overwrought. Instead, the participants chose in most cases to use settings that citizens would find relatable, enabling them to absorb the information presented and letting them decide how they should act as a result.

7.4 Dos and don'ts

The focus groups concluded with a recapitulating exercise whereby citizens were asked to consider the three hours discussion they had been part of and write down their 'dos and don'ts'. This was meant to allow them time to think, in an individual manner, about their expectations as to how institutions should be communicating with them while considering the implications discussed previously.

The following table is a summary of the ideas written down by participants.

Participants' ideas for institutional communication 'dos and don'ts'

At the very end of the session, participants identified several 'dos and don'ts' which translate into good practices for institutional communicators:

Be transparent

- Public institutions should be sufficiently open, not 'hiding' information (or presenting it selectively), and offer citizens the opportunity to find out more information if they wish.
- Several groups emphasised that public institutional communicators should be guided by what is 'good for the citizen' rather than what is in the best interests of the institution communicating. This meant telling citizens the truth in a matter-of-fact manner, not making light of serious situations but also resisting the urge to catastrophise and frighten people.
- Participants generally agreed that public institutions had a duty to inform and to educate. This implied making authoritative information available to citizens in sufficient detail.

Use clear language

- Using clear language that normal people can understand was seen as important by participants across the Member States. Some suggested that governments needed to 'get down from their pedestal' and communicate with people in everyday language.
- Unsurprisingly, participants wanted institutional communicators to avoid using vulgar language or jargon.

Avoid being vague

- Participants disliked overly general or vague communication, without clear relevance to citizens' lives.
- Similarly, few participants approved of the idea of institutions promoting themselves to boost their own reputation, particularly where this was not seen as conveying information of direct relevance to citizens' lives.

Humour is sometimes acceptable

- The idea of using humour divided participants. Most did not think it should be entirely excluded, and some even approved of the use of edgy or black humour in institutional communications, particularly if that meant the message would be more likely to stay with recipients.

Be proactive and inclusive

- Several participants called for a proactive approach to communication. This would enable citizens to prepare for disasters, changes in the law, etc. while feeling reassured that their institutions were also doing something to help them adjust to new and changing situations.
- Adopting an inclusive approach to communicating was also raised by some participants, so that vulnerable or marginal groups would not miss out on important information. In Latvia, for example, some participants suggested this should include making more complex information (for instance, explaining a change in the law) available in Russian for members of the country's Russian-speaking minority.

8. Overarching observations and their implications for public communication

8.1 Commonalities

One of the most striking findings from this research is the degree to which participants across countries were in agreement in their attitude to many aspects of public communication, including their expectations with regard to institutional communication and how institutions should communicate. There was also a high degree of consistency among the focus groups when it came to where participants drew the line between communication techniques that were acceptable to them, and those that were deemed to go too far.

In terms of **the aims of communication**, the view that public communication should be guided (although that is not always the case) by what is 'good for the citizen' rather than what is in the best interest of the institution was prevalent across countries. Participants generally agreed that public institutions have a duty to inform and to educate. Again, this implies making authoritative information available to citizens in sufficient detail. On the other hand, few participants approved of the idea of institutions promoting themselves to boost their own reputation, particularly where this was not seen as conveying information of direct relevance or value to citizens' own lives.

The idea of a duty to communicate encompassed expectations among participants that public institutions should be proactive in their communication. Obvious examples of this would be governments communicating to encourage and enable citizens to prepare for disasters, changes in the law, etc.). This reassures citizens that their institutions are taking action to help them adjust to new and changing situations.

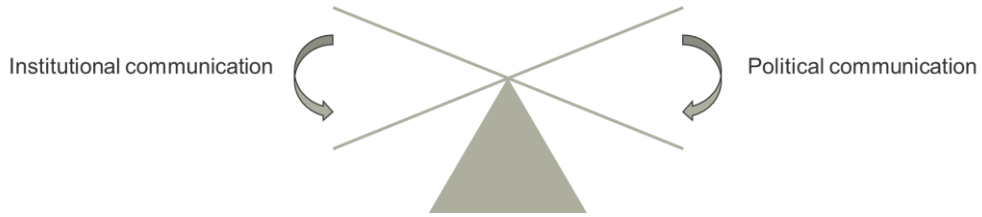
In terms of **what citizens expect from public institutions when communicating**, unsurprisingly, transparency is high on the list. Yet, the discussions suggest that citizens' expectations for transparency go far beyond simply 'telling the truth'; the concept extends to the idea that public institutions should take measures to make information clear and understandable, even on the most complex of topics. It is argued that institutions should not seek to 'hide' information, present it selectively, or spin its presentation to distort citizens' perceptions. The concept of transparency is also closely linked to the idea of providing citizens with complete information, and offering them the opportunity to find out more about a given topic if they wish.

Using clear language was also part of the idea of transparency. Using language that all citizens can understand was seen as important by participants across the focus groups. Some suggested, in their own words, that public institutions needed to "get down from their pedestal".

8.2 Dilemmas and tensions

The focus group discussions provided insights on a number of tensions not only being participants but also individually. This may be partly due to institutional communication not being a topic that participants have previously thought about or on which they had specific views. There were questions in which it was not clear how best to manage issues with regard to formality and informality in communications, transparency and positivity. Therefore, the focus groups raised several questions on issues requiring further reflection. These are discussed below.

1. Institutional communication and political communication

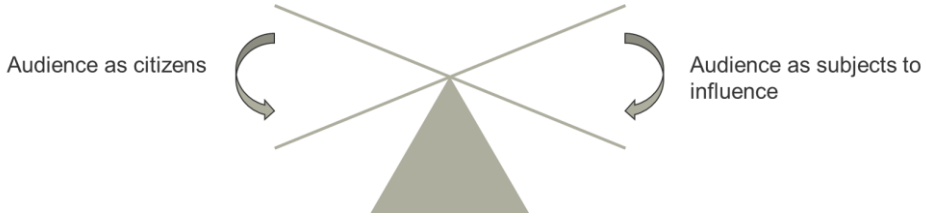


The lines between what is political and what is institutional communication were unclear for participants. This could be linked to several factors:

- leading political figures speaking on behalf of institutions;
- using personal (social media) accounts to present institutional positions;
- institutions presenting their work with a specific partisan or value-based view;
- use of communication to showcase past actions and highlight institutions' image as a means of branding the institution; this could be seen as the institution positioning itself more politically with the aim of being re-elected for instance.

The fact that leading figures (political or high-level civil servants) are increasingly being shown as the voice of the institution can contribute to this confusion. On one hand this is intended to give the institutions a familiar face and voice, but on the other hand it could be seen as politicising the institution's image.

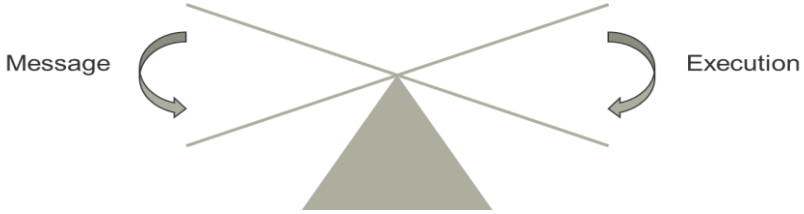
2. Audience as citizens and as subjects to influence



An underpinning theme that surfaced at different points of the discussions was the desire of citizens to be addressed as citizens rather than simply as an audience. Participants do not want to be talked down to or belittled. They want to have transparent information so that they can make up their own minds.

At the same time, they acknowledged that institutional communication has a role in protecting them and in preventing harm, including harm that stems from a particular type of behaviour (see examples of road safety or health related topics discussed). This was one of the fundamental differences pinpointed by participants between the communications of public institutions and those of commercial entities. While participants expect and accept that brands want them to buy their products and use sophisticated techniques to reach this goal, they do not accept the same from public institutions when communicating.

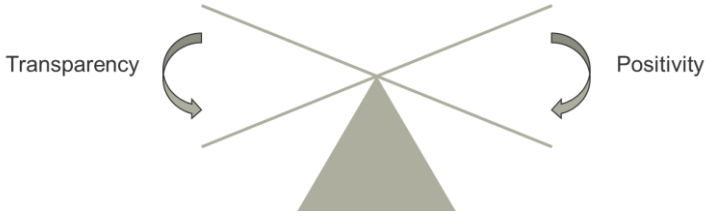
3. Message and execution



The message (the underlying goal of the communication) was generally a strong driver for appreciation of the communication. The attitudes of participants towards the core message strongly indicated whether or not they would pay attention to and appreciate the communication. On the other hand, participants also saw the importance of execution (how the communication was presented, the channels used, and the approaches and techniques used) and the need for public institutions to ensure that communications are professionally executed. They had views about creative styles considered appropriate (or not) to be used by public institutions. In the focus groups where participants mentioned feeling a personal relationship or connection with institutions, they mentioned their feeling was primarily driven by the emotions portrayed by the

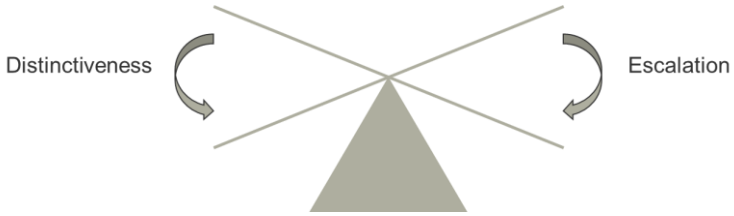
institution. In this sense the quality of the creative execution could more quickly be interpreted wrongly (being seen as confrontational, belittling or childish).

4. Transparency and positivity



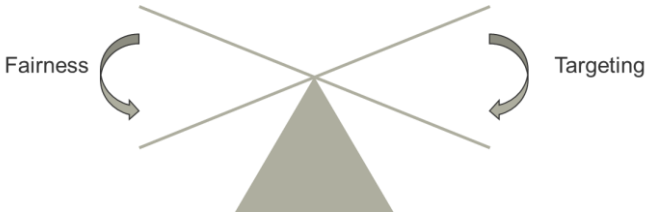
On the one hand, participants called for information to be presented transparently and in an informative manner, including negative effects and “bad news”. At the same time, however, participants in general expressed concern that “bad news” coverage makes them disinterested and disengaged, calling instead for solution-oriented, empowering and positive messages. The call for transparency (and information) could be based on the desire for participants to have control over their decisions. They are concerned about manipulation or influence that framing of news in a catastrophic way could have, and want to be able to make up their own mind about what is best for them. At the same time, they expect public communications to be focused on actionable messages that show how they can take action. The latter seems to drive the wish for positive and empowering messaging.

5. Distinctiveness and escalation



At different points during the focus groups participants spoke about the need for communications to be distinctive in order to stand out and be noticed. The use of shocking or emotionally triggering images and messages seems to be one way of achieving such distinctiveness. They recognised the need for this approach in the current context of advertising saturation. At the same time, they were concerned about potential escalation, i.e. what is distinctive today will no longer be distinctive tomorrow, leading to ever stronger messages and visuals. They were concerned about the confrontational effect of such content and visuals, and wondered whether this might alienate some citizens.

6. Fairness and targeting

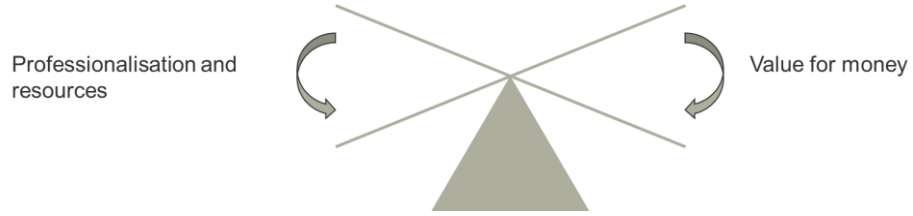


Recurrent debates during the focus groups were about making sure that everyone could access information from public institutions versus targeting specific groups of people that are the most relevant to address. Though not explicitly discussed in the focus groups it seems that this could be reconciled with a layered approach to communications which ensures that:

a) information is accessible to all – i.e. it is displayed on institutional media (websites and social media channels); and

b) proactive communication and outreach notably through paid media (e.g. whether advertising or other) to be focused on those groups that would benefit the most from it (including using personalisation).

7. Professionalisation & resources and value for money



Finally, the focus groups participants acknowledged that communication requires adequate financial and human resources. They are aware that only professional execution will ensure that objectives of the communication are reached. In addition, advertising spots require investment as does the maintenance of institutional media. At the same time, however, they were concerned about the good use of these resources and making sure that these were prioritised effectively in terms of:

a) what messages are most relevant and important to citizens (e.g. there was strong opposition to communications that are self-celebratory, but have few practical implications for the target audience);

b) how the communication is executed so that it achieves its goals.

Annex 1 – Discussion guide

This annex has been sent separately due to its size.

Annex 2 – Participants' profiles

TOTAL	Total Participants	98
Age	18-25	19
	26-35	22
	36-45	17
	46-64	23
	65+	17
Gender	Men	47
	Women	50
	Non-binary (if any)	1
Education	Below High school	7
	Secondary school - High school	42
	University Bachelor's/Technical School	34
	Master or PhD	13
Employment status	Still studying	16
	Employed	39
	Job seeker	10
	Freelancer	13
	Parental leave or other type of leave	1
	Not working and not looking for a job	19
Following the news	High	47
	Medium	27
	Low	24
Trust in government	High Trust	30
	Medium Trust	35
	Low Trust	33
Discussing politics	High Interest	34
	Medium Interest	39
	Low Interest	25

Annex 3 – Recruitment screener

	Project: Meaningful and Ethical Communication, JRC **RECRUITMENT QUESTIONNAIRE**

Date: XX/01/2023
 	
Recruiter: _____
	Job number: 235220366
	Project Name: Citizen participatory focus groups on meaningful and ethical communications
	Type: 8 focus groups (one per country) + a pilot group (Malta)
	Methodology of the exercise: Homework (2 days prior to the group) and in-person discussion
	Number of participants per group: 10 in each group (12 participants to be invited per group, to provide a back-up)
	Target audience:
	• **Age:** 18+ y.o., with the requirement of the youth (18-25 y.o.) and the elderly (65+ y.o.) to be represented in each group
	• **Gender:** An even spread between men and women. Non-binary, LGBTQI+ individuals (if any).
	• **Relatedness to the issues of meaningful and ethical communication:**
	  ○ A fair mix/diversity in:
	  ▪ Interest in politics
	  ▪ Their trust in the government
	• **Education, Financial & Employment status:** Fair spread between different education levels, as well as between different financial and employment statuses.
	Area: A 50%|50% split between capital and non-capital cities. No rural areas.
	Country (9): Malta (MT), Belgium (BE), Germany (DE), Greece (EL), Italy (IT), Poland (PL), Romania (RO), Slovakia (SK), & Latvia (LV)
	Duration: 180 min.

INTRODUCTION

Good ... (morning / afternoon / evening). My name is ... calling on behalf of Kantar Public.

We are conducting a number of workshops with citizens for the European Commission where we will invite people to come and discuss their opinions in small groups. In preparation of this discussion, we will also ask participants to bring two pieces of institutional communication – one that you like, and one that you dislike. If you cannot find anything that you like or dislike, bring whatever you can find. There are no right or wrong views or perceptions during these discussions; we are simply interested in what you have to say and think. The objective of the discussion will be to help the European Commission understand what its citizens think and feel about the way they communicate, and what they think is acceptable, and how they think this might be improved.

Your co-operation is completely voluntary and all the responses you share during the group discussion will be treated as completely confidential. The information collected will be thoroughly anonymised and all identifiable information will be removed before they are provided to our client. For more information on how we collect and use your personal data, please consult [LINK] or provide us an email so that we can send you the privacy statement. Anything you say at the meeting will be kept private. Neither the client nor third parties will know who took part in the study, although they might observe the focus group.

Just to make sure we are talking to lots of different people I need to ask you a few more questions. This should only take one to two minutes. Is it OK to ask these now? (IF NOT MAKE AN APPOINTMENT TO CALL BACK)

The European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) requires us to obtain your consent regarding the collection and use of your personal information. The personal data privacy notice we shared with you defines what personal information we can collect and how we may use it. Do you agree with these terms and conditions?

- yes	- 1 => CONTINUE
- no	- 2 => STOP INTERVIEW

NOTE RECRUITER:

Considering that some groups are segmented following one of the focus below, NOT ALL the questions are asked all the time to all participants. Please STOP INTERVIEW if for any of the following questions the person prefers not to answer the question.

Q1.a Have you ever attended a Research group discussion or individual interview?

- yes	- 1 => CONTINUE TO Q1b
- no	- 2 => CONTINUE TO Q2
- do not know / cannot remember	- 3 => CONTINUE TO Q2

Q1.b What was the discussion about?

- similar subject to this study	- 1 => STOP INTERVIEW
- different subject	- 2 => CONTINUE
- do not know/cannot remember	- 3 => CONTINUE

Q1.c How long ago did you attend a Research group discussion?

- in the last 6 months	- 1 => STOP INTERVIEW
- longer ago than 6 months	- 2 => CONTINUE
- do not know / cannot remember	- 3 => CONTINUE

Q2 Are you a [Maltese / German / Greek / Italian / Polish / Belgian / Slovakian / Latvian / Romanian /] permanent resident?

- yes	- 1 => CONTINUE
- no	- 2 => STOP INTERVIEW

Q3 Which city/ town do you live in?

……..

Q4. How old are you?

Less than 18	- 1 => STOP INTERVIEW
18-25	- 2 => CONTINUE
26-35	- 3 => CONTINUE
36-45	- 4 => CONTINUE
46-64	- 5 => CONTINUE
More than 65	- 6 => CONTINUE
Refusal	- 7 => STOP INTERVIEW

INT: We aim at a fair mix of different age groups. Note that there needs to be 1-3 representatives of the 18-25 age group and 1-3 representatives of the 65+ age segment.

Q5. What gender do you identify with?

- Man	- 1 => CONTINUE
- Woman	- 2 => CONTINUE
- Non-binary / Do not recognize yourself in above categories	- 3 => CONTINUE
- Refusal	- 4 => CONTINUE

INT: a 50/50 balance between male, and female / nonbinaries

Q6.a What is the highest level of education you completed?

- Below Secondary School	- 1 => CONTINUE
- Secondary school - High school	- 2 => CONTINUE
- Technical school degree	- 3 => CONTINUE
- University – Bachelor's	- 4 => CONTINUE
- Master or PhD	- 5 => CONTINUE
- Refusal	- 6 => STOP INTERVIEW

*INT: If possible, please make sure that there is an **even spread** between different education levels.*

Q6.b What is your current employment status?

- Still studying	- 1 => CONTINUE
- Employed	- 2 => CONTINUE
- Job seeker	- 3 => CONTINUE
- Freelancer	- 4 => CONTINUE
- Parental leave or other type of	- 5 => CONTINUE

leave	
- Not working and not looking for a job	- 6 => CONTINUE

INT: please, ensure a mix of different types of employment

Q7. Do you work in the following areas?

(INT. READ ONE BY ONE - SEVERAL ANSWERS POSSIBLE)

- government institutions	- 1 => IF YES STOP INTERVIEW
- behavioural science	- 2 => IF YES STOP INTERVIEW
- marketing	- 3 => IF YES STOP INTERVIEW
- the European Union	- 4 => IF YES STOP INTERVIEW
- communication	- 5 => IF YES STOP INTERVIEW
- NGOs / think tanks	- 6 => IF YES STOP INTERVIEW
- none of these	- 7 => CONTINUE

INT: We do NOT want people that are studying in these areas as well. If they are studying in any of these areas, STOP INTERVIEW.

Q8 Could you tell us to what extent you follow the news (whether online, on TV, by reading the newspaper or magazines)??

Don't know	- 1 => IF YES STOP INTERVIEW
Do not follow the news	- 2 => CONTINUE
Never	- 3 => CONTINUE
Two or three times a month + less often	- 4 => CONTINUE
Two or three times a week + once a week	- 5 => CONTINUE
Everyday/Almost everyday	- 6 => CONTINUE

*INT: If there is a response of "Don't know" to this question, stop the interview. Please make sure there is an even spread of representation for each of the relevant categories - Low, moderate, and high interest in news. Low interest participants, respond "Never" and/or "*Two or three times a month + less often". Moderate interest responds, "Two or Three times a week + once a week", and High interest participants "Everyday/Almost every day".

Q9 Please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement:

How much trust do you have in the [NATIONALITY] government?

Trust it completely	- 1 => CONTINUE
Tend to trust it	- 2 => CONTINUE
Neither trust nor distrust it	- 3 => CONTINUE
Tend not to trust it	- 4 => CONTINUE
Do not trust it	- 5 => CONTINUE

INT: Please make sure there is an even spread of representation for each of the relevant categories, from high to low trust in government. Both "Trust it completely" and "Tend to trust it" constitute high trust in government. "Neither trust nor distrust" is considered medium trust, and "Tend not to trust it" and "Do not trust it" is considered low trust. Ideally, even proportions of each answer option.

Q10 Over the last four weeks, how often did you discuss something about politics with family, friends, or acquaintances?

More than three times	-1 => CONTINUE
Two or three times	- 2 => CONTINUE
Once	- 3 => CONTINUE
Never	- 4 => CONTINUE
I don't know	- 5 => CONTINUE

INT: Please make sure there is an even spread of representation for each of the relevant categories, from low to high interest in politics. Both "Never" and "I don't know" constitute low interest in politics. "Once" and "Two or three times" is considered medium interest, and "More than three times" is considered high interest. Ideally, even proportions of each answer option.

INVITATION TO ATTEND THE FOCUS GROUP

We would like to invite you to a focus group discussion that will take place in-person.

The group will be held on <DATE>

It will start at <TIME> and last about 3 hours.

Prior to the group, we will ask you to find and pick two examples of institutional communication. This can be in either paper form (brochure, newspaper, etc.) or something you have found online (tweet, webpage, etc.). *Try* to find an example of a communication you liked, and one that you did not like, and bring them to the discussion.

Your contribution will be rewarded with an incentive of <AMOUNT>

Would you be able to attend?

- yes	- 1 => NOTE CONTACT DETAILS
- no	- 2 => STOP INTERVIEW

(INT: NOTE CONTACT DETAILS OF RESPONDENT)

Kantar follows strictly the most up-to-date guidelines regarding protection, storage and sharing of personal data[8].

Name and surname:

Email address:

Age:

City:

I would like to thank you in advance for taking part. You will receive the link to take part in the study by email on <DATE>.

Date and time end of recruitment interview:	

[8] For any survey we conduct the fieldwork team works under the strict measures we have set up in our Kantar Data Protection Framework as well as Data Protection policies, processes and procedures. The Kantar Data Protection Framework is based on the European General Data Protection Regulation which we have adopted as the Gold Standard for Data Protection. The requirements of the Framework apply globally across all Divisions and Functions. Where local legislation differs or requires additional Data Protection measures, these are incorporated into the Framework and are complied with as appropriate.

Annex 4 – Evaluation of the workshops

This deliverable has been sent separately.

Annex 5 – Citizen summary reports

This deliverable has been sent separately.

Annex 6 – Additional data

Homework:

Table 4: Examples of campaigns that participants remembered or had on top of mind

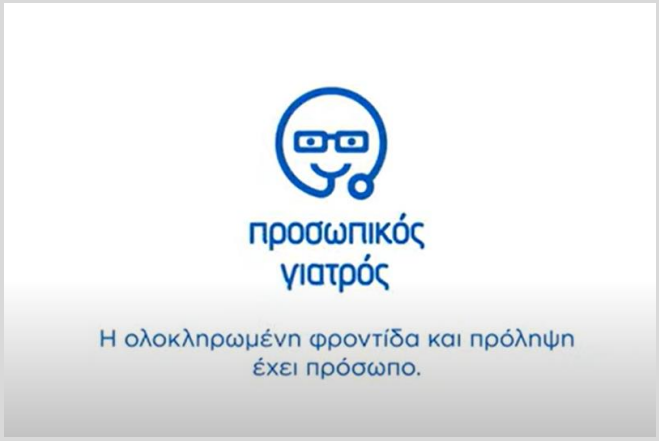
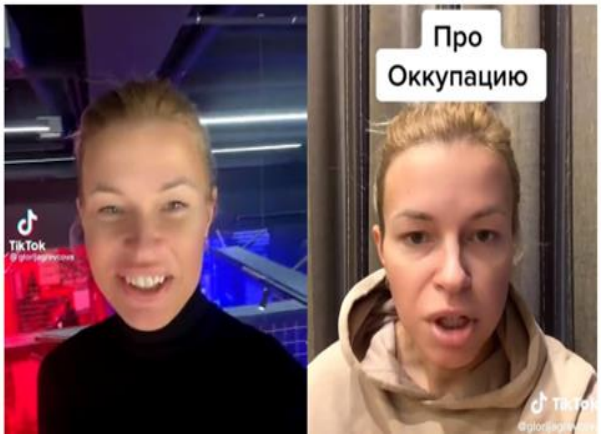
Campaign	Short summary
	This is one of a series of posters from a long-standing road safety campaign in Belgium where BOB is the person who doesn't drink and drives others. *Source: Ministry of Transport and Ministry of Justice, Belgium*
	Screenshot of a TV advertisement of an ongoing campaign informing people that they should go visit their doctors if they feel they have any health issues. *Source: Ministry of Health in Greece*

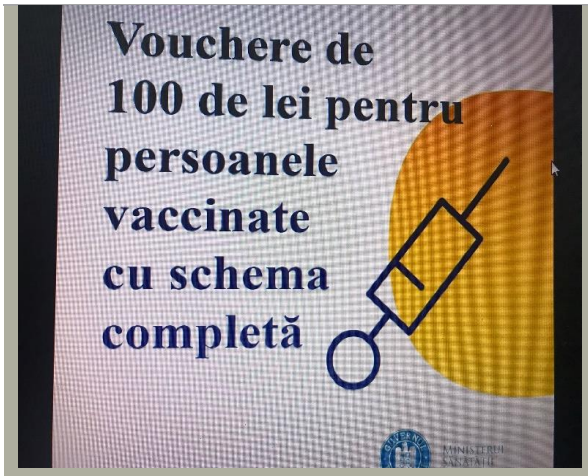
Table 5: Examples participants brought that was not within the scope of the assignment



TikTok video from Glorija Grevcova (Latvian Government Minister) discussing the Latvian occupation museum exhibition.

Facebook post from the mayor of Bruyère about Covid-19. It is unclear if this is communication is coming directly from the mayor or an official message from the city.

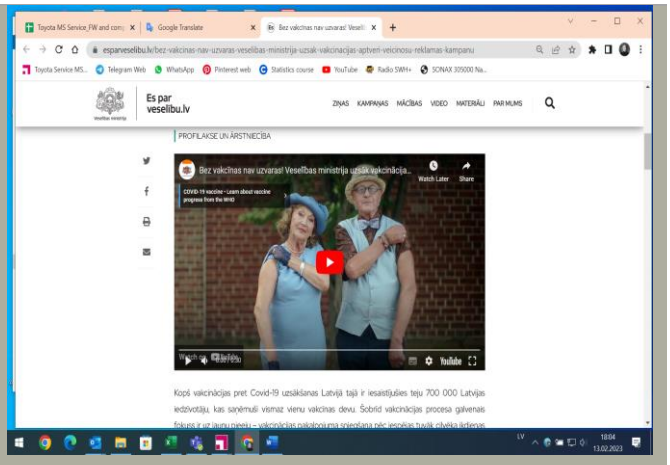
Table 6: Health related examples



A vaccination campaign from the Ministry of Health in Romania incentivising people with money to get vaccinated.

The participant thought this was a waste of money that could be better spent on updating the hospitals.

Source: Ministry of Health, Romania



A vaccination campaign video from the Ministry of Health in Latvia.

The participant thought this was an annoying and intrusive communication, without specifying why. They thought the main goal was to give impetus to those who are hesitating to get vaccinated.

Source: Ministry of Health, Latvia

Table 7: Road safety examples

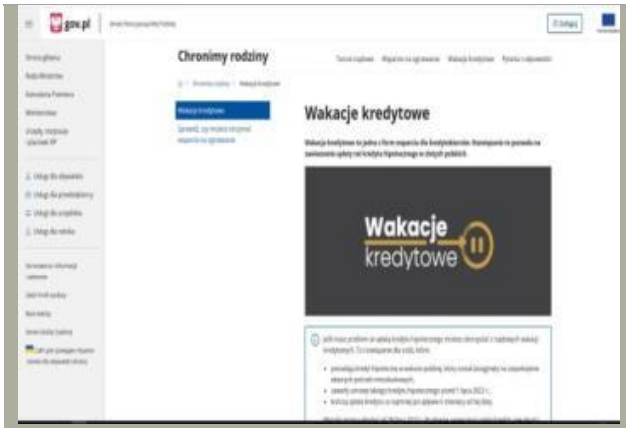
The participant explained that they like how the communication focuses on how people know about the dangers of being under the influence of alcohol and drugs when driving, and yet people keep dying in accidents.

Source: Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Italy

The participant thought that using a child like this in the communication offends them more than they think the shock will influence them. We know from several studies however, that the use of fear can be effective in influencing attitude and behaviour.[9]

Source: Wallonia road safety, "ASWR"

Table 8: Finance examples



Online message from the Ministry of Finance in Poland.

The message is in relation to the interest rate and inflation increase, with possible solutions for citizens. The participant liked that the information was clear and easy

Instagram post by the Ministry of Finance in Latvia.

The participant did not like the visual presentation of the message – they think it looks old, false, and illogical (due to the

[9] Tannenbaum, M. B., Hepler, J., Zimmerman, R. S., Saul, L., Jacobs, S., Wilson, K., & Albarracín, D. (2015). Appealing to fear: A meta-analysis of fear appeal effectiveness and theories. *Psychological Bulletin, 141*(6), 1178–1204. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0039729

to understand and gave practical advice. *Source: Ministry of Finance, Poland*	numbers and sizes of the bars not being proportional). *Source: Ministry of Finance, Latvia*

Table 9: Examples of communications citizens disliked and why

Communication piece	Reason the participant gave for disliking it
	The participant did not like how the poster uses a combination of the feminism poster "We can do it" along with undertones of the socialist realism and reminiscence of USSR to communicate about vaccinations. They explained how they associate that period with lies, duplicity, misinformation, and corruption. The poster then evokes such emotions in them and does not make them feel encouraged to get vaccinated. *Source: Ministry of Health, Latvia*
	The message in this communication is to bring awareness to the dangers of cyberattacks and how to protect against them. The participant thought this way of presenting the topic is too childish given the seriousness of the subject. *Source: FPS Economy (federal government agency), Belgium*

Table 10: Examples of communications citizens liked and why

Communication piece	Reason the participant gave for liking it

The participant thought the slogan is well chosen and manages to remain joyful despite the serious nature of the subject. The participant explained that they quickly understand what is meant by the message – to bring a “Bob”, someone who does not drink, to the party. This is also because this poster is from a very long series of campaign posts about “Bob” as the person who does not drink and drives which are very well known to Belgian population.

Source: Ministry of Transport and Ministry of Justice, Belgium

The participant thought this was a well thought out project, as there are too many cars and traffic in Romania. They also think it would lead to reduced pollution and make people understand that taking public transport is faster.

Source: [tbc], Romania

The participant liked that the Ministry of Health in Slovakia is trying to address the problem of alcohol abuse through a challenge. Since it is challenging people to stop drinking, they thought it would be more readily accepted and incentivise people to stop.

Source: Ministry of Health, Slovakia

Annex 7 – Frequency with which key findings were discussed per focus group

Table 11: Main findings table per section

	Country A		Country B		Country C		Country D		Country E		Country F		Country G		Country H		Country I	
Focus Group	**A**	**B**	**A**	**B**	**A**	**B**	**A**	**B**	**A**	**B**	**A**	**B**	**A**	**B**	**A**	**B**	**A**	**B**
Homework																		
Difficulty finding/answering homework	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓	✓ ✓ ✓✓	✓	✓	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	✓✓	✓✓ ✓✓	N/A	✓	✓✓ ✓	✓
Quality* of communication based on topic	✓	✓✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓	✓	✓✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓	✓✓ ✓	✓	✓✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓
Expectations																		
Institution as source of information	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓	✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓		✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓ ✓✓	N/A	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓	✓✓
Belonging and togetherness		✓		✓			✓		✓									
Importance of transparency	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓v	✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓	✓✓ ✓
Positive framing	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓ ✓	N/A	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓
Being treated with consideration	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓	N/A	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
Protecting citizens and changing behaviours	✓	✓✓			✓	✓✓	✓✓			✓	✓		✓✓			✓		✓
Institutional communications should be different than companies	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓ ✓	N/A	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓	✓✓ ✓✓
Inclusive approach	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓	N/A	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
Techniques																		
Concerns about privacy (personalisation)	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓	✓			✓		✓✓ ✓			✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓	✓	✓
The end justifies the means (emotionally triggering communications)		✓	✓	✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓
Concerns regarding credibility and legitimacy influencers	✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓	✓	✓	✓✓	✓✓ ✓✓	✓✓ ✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓

Mock-ups																		
Spontaneous understanding of value framing technique	✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓	✓	✓ ✓	✓ ✓		✓ ✓	✓	✓ ✓ ✓✓	✓ ✓ ✓✓	N/A	N/A	✓	✓ ✓	✓	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	✓ ✓✓

Note: The ticks above show to what extent each finding came up in the discussion in each country. Hence, no tick means a discussion on the topic came up, but the finding did not appear contrary to the N/A, four ticks signifies a high level of relevance for the finding most if not all participants agreed (N/A appears where such discussion never took place for one reason or another). *Quality in this case is referring to whether the participants liked a communication based on the topic

Annex 8 – Coding structure

While carrying out the analysis the research team used a set of codes to distinguish and classify different types of information found in the transcripts. Each transcript was scrutinised and coded from start to finish using “Atlas ti”. In total 52 different codes were created and applied across 19 documents resulting in 851 quotes. One part of the code was used generally across the analysis, and another was designed to follow the different parts of the discussion guide/report. Codes per stimuli were also used to easily retrieve information from one activity or another. Atlas ti allows for filtering quotes using the different codes. The method was applied to be able to digest an extensive amount of content in a small amount of time. It ensures the research team to be able to easily retrieve information where needed.

Figure 12: Example of code layering

Creating a coding frame allows for the labelling and organising of the different themes identified, and the relationship between them. The research team used a flat coding frame that allowed for flexibility overtime as new insights were met. The strategy ensured that findings/coding would not be bound by the original thinking behind the codes. As such new codes were created as the analysis progressed. Moreover, the researchers agreed on the definitions of the codes to be used for the different content, to ensure consistency across coders (inter-coder reliability). The research team stayed in close contact during the analysis in order to stay in touch with the new codes added and their definition. The full list of codes can be found in the table below:

Table 12: Full list of codes

General code	Definition
Quote	If there is a quote, we find particularly useful and might add directly to the report - "Report worthy"
General Context	Contextual information in terms of the country, institution, or communication campaign
Like	Mentions of communication aspects that they like
Dislike	Mentions of communication aspects that they dislike
Concern	Ethical concern about communications - if a participant expresses that they are worried
Trust	They have trust in institutions or their communications
Distrust	They show trust issues in institutions or their communications

Relatability of the topic

Recall	During the HW discussion, did they recall communications/ assets or have to search for them
Homework feedback	Any feedback on the difficulty of homework exercise
Homework context	The role of context - countries where there is a culture of public sector campaigns vs countries where communication is more through mass media/ websites with limited campaigning / high trust in government vs countries with low trust

Scope citizens top of mind ideas about communication

Definition institutional	Their understanding of what institutional means
Media and channels	Top of mind idea of the media and/or channels with which the communication is being spread/broadcast on

Expectations of comms

Why communicating	Reasons for which citizens consider public institutions should communicate
Difference from commercial	Their thoughts on whether the way institutions communicate should differ from businesses and brands (how)
Content	Difficulties in dissociating content from format
Preference content	Different types of communications "how to", "awareness", identity pride fostering". Also, any preferences in regard to length, imagery, understanding, etc.

How citizens want to be communicated towards

Format	What media participants mentioned they would like to be communicated through
Spontaneous techniques	If there is any mention of, or familiarity with communication techniques before they were brought up
Tone of voice	Any comments/preferences on the tone of communications
Appreciation of competence	If participants mentioned their perceived quality of communications (professionalism of the messenger)
Timeliness	Appreciation of the timing of the communication
Cost	Any comments on the cost of doing the communication
Research	Any comments on research as part of communication

What

Spontaneous ethical concerns	Any ethical concerns about the techniques that come to mind as the participants first hear about it
Personalisation technique	Thoughts and feelings about this technique
Attention grabbing technique	Thoughts and feelings about this technique

Influencers technique	Thoughts and feelings about this technique
Value framing technique	Thoughts and feelings about this technique
Understanding of value framing	Any mentions of mis/understanding of value framing
Reactions message 1	Comments and reactions regarding message 1
Reactions message 2	Comments and reactions regarding message 2
Reactions message 3	Comments and reactions regarding message 3
Reactions Image 1	Comments and reactions regarding image 1
Reactions image 2	Comments and reactions regarding image 2
Reactions Image 3	Comments and reactions regarding image 3
Experience of discomfort	If the technique makes them feel discomfort
Acceptance of techniques	Reasons a technique might be accepted to be used, and under what circumstances, if any
Opposition to techniques	If they do not want the technique used, and why
Ethics in/consistency	Instances when participants are inconsistent with their thoughts and feelings regarding the use of a technique

Choices and dilemmas

Audience	Use of targeting in the co-creation exercise, defining audience
Message	Discussion about what the co-creation message should be
Techniques	Use of techniques in the co-creation
Attract attention	Use of attention grabbing in the co-creation, tone of voice, imgery, creative things
Ensuring reach	Discussion about how to reach a wider audience
Contradictions	Any contradictions about using the techniques in the earlier section and the co-creation

Stimuli	If the quote in question is related to specific stimuli from the discussion guide
Homework	All codes emanating from homework section of the discussion guide
Expectations	All codes emanating from expectations section of the discussion guide
Technique exercise	All codes emanating from techniques section of the discussion guide
Mock-up	All codes emanating from the mock-up (value framing) section of the discussion guide
Co-creation	All codes emanating from co-creation section of the discussion guide
Wrap up - dos and don'ts	All codes emanating from wrap-up section of the discussion guide

Getting in touch with the EU

In person

All over the European Union there are hundreds of Europe Direct centres. You can find the address of the centre nearest you online (european-union.europa.eu/contact-eu/meet-us_en).

On the phone or in writing

Europe Direct is a service that answers your questions about the European Union. You can contact this service:

— by freephone: 00 800 6 7 8 9 10 11 (certain operators may charge for these calls),

— at the following standard number: +32 22999696,

— via the following form: european-union.europa.eu/contact-eu/write-us_en.

Finding information about the EU

Online

Information about the European Union in all the official languages of the EU is available on the Europa website (european-union.europa.eu).

EU publications

You can view or order EU publications at op.europa.eu/en/publications. Multiple copies of free publications can be obtained by contacting Europe Direct or your local documentation centre (european-union.europa.eu/contact-eu/meet-us_en).

EU law and related documents

For access to legal information from the EU, including all EU law since 1951 in all the official language versions, go to EUR-Lex (eur-lex.europa.eu).

EU open data

Science for policy

The Joint Research Centre (JRC) provides independent, evidence-based knowledge and science, supporting EU policies to positively impact society

EU Science Hub
joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu

Publications Office
of the European Union