Designing for inclusive engagement

Digital communications for richer community connection

Adithi Pandit, Joe Mariani, Courtney Keene, Shuichi Kuroishi, and Mahesh Kelkar

WHILE IT MAY be hard for many of us to imagine a time without the internet, the history of digital government is surprisingly brief. In the United States, for example, interested staff at many federal agencies created the federal government's first websites in the 1990s, resulting in a haphazard patchwork of sites and domains. No one even knew how many of these web pages existed until the first federal government–wide search application, USA.gov, launched in September 2000.[1]

In just a few more years, the advent of social media further revolutionized our consumption of digital information. Advances in artificial intelligence and natural language processing soon followed. The past two decades have seen a revolution in the ways in which governments can communicate with and gather feedback from the communities they serve.

Despite some trailblazers, however, government agencies' adoption of new communication techniques has been uneven. Deloitte's own research suggests that only 26% of global government leaders have deployed natural language processing tools such as chatbots.[2] Uncertain benefits, development and deployment costs, and cultural inertia have limited agencies' ability to employ the full spectrum of engagement tools now available.

During the pandemic, communication and engagement with communities has become an all-important task. Some communities, especially disadvantaged and at-risk ones, were disproportionately impacted by the economic distress of the pandemic. Increased online misinformation, information warfare, and lack of trusted information sources made the government's

ability to cut through the noise and deliver accurate, important messages to the people crucial to success.

As we enter the pandemic's third year, most governments acknowledge the need to do more to engage with communities and become a trusted source of information. Governments are embracing new digital tools and platforms to develop more targeted and inclusive engagement with communities. At the same time, they are trying to plug the digital divide and improve digital access to ensure that the shift toward digital engagement methods doesn't leave out certain communities (read more on this in the trends report, *Digital access for all*).

The challenge government leaders now face is choosing the right set of new tools and practices that can improve engagement with communities without leaving behind disadvantaged groups already struggling to keep up with an increasingly digital world. To solve that challenge, government organizations are exploring not only tools, but new ideas and even new approaches to building trust with communities.

Trend drivers

- **New platforms for communication and engagement**, such as social media, have been adopted rapidly around the world. In 2021, nearly 60% of the world's population were social media users—4.5 billion out of 7.8 billion people.[3]

- New technologies have created **entirely new forms of engagement**. Tools such as chatbots and virtual personal assistants have become widespread. Approaches such as "microtargeting" have become more affordable and feasible. However, this has also led to overwhelming volumes of mis/disinformation.

- The pandemic has exposed the critical need to **communicate with, gather input from, and build trust with communities**.

Trend in action

Technologies such as chatbots or social media are not new, but the pandemic exposed a glaring need for effective engagement. Leaders had to make quick and meaningful connections with a diverse array of communities, especially, disadvantaged communities experiencing the biggest impact of the pandemic. In such an environment, it was no longer enough to simply post press releases; government agencies had to *understand* their communities' information needs and the channels they prefer.

The intersection of available tools and sudden need due to the pandemic led government organizations to test a wide variety of new methods. These strategies can be categorized by how governments used them: to *inform, gather input from,* or *build trust* with communities.

CONNECTING WITH COMMUNITIES

The most basic type of government communication is to *inform*: give the public useful information on topics of concern, whether it is school performance or COVID-19 testing sites. Such data can help residents understand their problems and think about possible solutions. But this information can also be difficult to understand, effectively excluding those without the background needed to interpret it. To tackle this issue, some cities have experimented with *community data dialogues*, one-day events to share information with residents in easy, digestible formats. Data Days Cleveland, launched in Ohio in 2017, is one such example; the one-day event encourages citizen participation in open data forums.[4]

But engagement also includes *requesting input— or help—from community members*. During the pandemic, many governments used volunteer programs to support their efforts. At the start of COVID-19, for instance, the United Kingdom's National Health Service made a national call for volunteers to deliver food and medicine, drive

Innovative citizen engagement techniques during COVID-19

Americas

Brazil
Citizens use Brazil's e-Cidadania online portal to present ideas to the senate for fighting COVID-19.

British Columbia, Canada
British Columbia's digital assistant (chatbot) addresses COVID-19 queries from citizens and health workers.

Kansas City, United States
Kansas City's virtual lunch-and-learns have helped boost civic engagement.

EMEA

Rwanda, Africa
Rwanda's Mbaza chatbot provides citizens with critical COVID-19 information.

Barcelona, Spain
Barcelona's Hackovid hackathon collected ideas from programmers and developers responding to pandemic-related social needs.

Chile
Chile's ChileAtiende portal offers migrants information on COVID-19 and helps them file service requests.

Croatia
Croatia's Andrija digital assistant guides citizens through online health self-assessments.

Finland
Finland's series of "Lockdown Dialogues" has helped clarify COVID-19's impact on citizens' lives.

Ireland
Ireland's COVIDMedBot has provided free personalized risk assessments and guidelines during the pandemic.

Israel
Israel launched CoronApp to offer public information on COVID-19 and its spread.

Asia-Pacific

Adelaide, Australia
Adelaide's online idea-sharing Recover + Reimagine portal has helped capture community ideas on postpandemic economic and social revival.

India
India's MyGov Corona Helpdesk chatbot provides official answers to citizens' COVID-19 queries.

people home from appointments, and make phone calls to ease patients' sense of isolation; within hours, more than 500,000 volunteers had signed up.[5]

Since the 1990s, the German Senior Citizens Office initiative has matched various opportunities with volunteers' skills.[6] Today, Germany has 450 such offices and more than 30,000 volunteers who help encourage political participation, build intergenerational connections, and represent the interests of the elderly. For instance, volunteer groups helped older people fight loneliness during the pandemic by developing activities such as court concerts and balcony talks.[7]

Digital technologies allow government communicators to reach wider audiences, but *building trust* requires a deep understanding of human needs, so that communications can be tailored to each person's specific needs. When the nonprofit organization Public Good Projects (PGP) attempted to reduce unintended pregnancies among Black and Hispanic teenagers in Syracuse, New York, it didn't begin by creating a website or social media presence. Instead, it recruited local young women to discuss the challenges they encounter in finding information about reproductive health. After conducting focus-group discussions with more than 30 of them, PGP learned that participants preferred to consult a confidential, trusted "friend" for their questions. In collaboration with these participants, PGP codeveloped a chatbot from scratch, with participants weighing in on the chatbot's gender, appearance, and features as well as its name: Layla.[8]

LEARNING FROM COMMUNITIES

Government organizations need data to understand community issues and preferences. The wide reach of digital technologies can help here as well. During the pandemic, *digital participation platforms* were used to gather inputs usually obtained from face-to-face encounters such as town halls.

In 2018, Rueil-Malmaison, a community in the western suburbs of Paris, launched a participatory platform to give residents a greater voice in decision-making.[9] During the pandemic, the city government used this platform to provide information and coordinate volunteer efforts, while local businesses offered information on online delivery options and citizens shared ideas on child activities and organized online events.[10]

Digital platforms also allow government to tap into the talents and expertise of citizens by *crowdsourcing ideas*, which has helped agencies in numerous ways—from identifying vulnerabilities in military computer networks to helping the Library of Congress decide which of its resources should be digitized.[11] At a broader level, the US federal government has launched CitizenScience.gov, a portal intended to improve public participation in the acceleration of innovation across varied areas.[12]

Although such platforms provide greater levels of engagement, they also come with their own set of challenges. One, this is not as simple as providing top-down information. Such platforms target eliciting a "dialogue" and that requires an equal commitment and engagement from the government workforce. There is also the challenge of protecting such platforms from malicious entities spamming or derailing consensus-building efforts.[13]

Moreover, direct engagement is especially important for members of marginalized and at-risk communities. In Spain, the city of Bilbao worked jointly with the community to protect vulnerable residents, especially the elderly. Municipal social services could be contacted if the citizens identified residents facing loneliness, difficulties in meeting basic needs, or lack of family or social support. Additionally, spaces like municipal sport halls were equipped with beds to care for the homeless, migrants, or lone minors, if required. The City Council also dialed more than 27,000 residents over 65 years to check their state

of health, mood, and enquire if they need any service from the local government.[14]

BUILDING TRUST WITH COMMUNITIES

Trust is the most basic factor in government-community relationships. If people don't trust an agency, they won't be receptive to its messages or share their views with it honestly. While individual people make decisions about trusting/mistrusting, those decisions can be strongly influenced by factors in their communities. For example, a growing *general* distrust of government institutions makes it hard to reach the right audiences, and in a highly partisan environment, the medium or messenger often becomes more important than the message.

Governments have been working through "networks of trust" to deliver and amplify government communication and engagement efforts.

To begin with, trust is impossible without trustworthy information. In the early days of the pandemic, when there was little reliable information, Taiwan faced a massive wave of online rumors and disinformation that could have derailed its efforts to respond to the virus.[15] To try and get trustworthy information out quickly and make it as sticky as misinformation, it formed special creative teams in government ministries to make memes to challenge disinformation in a "humor over rumor" campaign.[16]

Combating untrustworthy information is a start, but agencies must also take steps to build trust. And few things yield better results than working with real people in the community. India's National Rural Health Mission, for example, created an all-female volunteer network, the Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA), to respond to a variety of women's health issues ranging from prenatal care to immunizations. This 900,000 member–strong network acts as a bridge between public health institutions and various disadvantaged communities; during the pandemic, it provided rural populations with critical education about COVID-19's spread and the need for vaccination.[17]

For Alma McCormick of Messengers for Health, an outreach program on the Crow reservation in Montana, the key to building trust is meeting people where they are, not only geographically but also digitally, via social media and videos, and *emotionally*—by listening and offering words of comfort. The organization's trained "messengers" work in their own communities, where they're known and trusted. Whether it's producing social media posts about COVID-19 prevention in the Crow language or paying for a community member's travel to cancer treatment, it all begins with a basic human connection. "If your heart is in it, you can approach people in a manner where they can let their guard down … then [you'll] see the behavior change you are looking for," says McCormick.[18] A similar community model has been used in New Zealand by working with Maori and Pacific community leaders to engage the Maori community on vaccination and COVID-19 safety.[19]

Moving forward

- Digital platforms are essential, but you need to **understand the nuances of both online and offline engagement**. Both should complement each other effectively.

- **Understand your audience's demographic and behavioral attributes**. This can help you segment population groups and customize communication and engagement methods.

- **Find ways to allow constituents to communicate with government and one another**. Government communications should not be a one-way street. Interactions between real people in government and within the community can help build dialogue and improve public participation in decision-making.

- **Use locally trusted individuals** to provide information concerning critical government programs.

- **Make sure you hear from as many constituents as possible**. Factors such as

difficulties with connectivity or trust can mean that important voices on an issue may not be the loudest or most frequent. Taking care to include these voices can help make more well-rounded decisions.

MY TAKE

Dawn Yip, coordinating director, Singapore Partnerships Office, Ministry of Culture, Community, and Youth, Singapore

Nicholas Thomas, assistant director, Singapore Partnerships Office, Ministry of Culture, Community, and Youth, Singapore

Bringing citizens together to discuss their concerns and course of action

COVID-19 increased the need for innovative citizen engagement techniques. During the peak of the pandemic in June 2020, Singapore's government launched Emerging Stronger Conversations (ESC) for citizens to reflect on their pandemic experience, share their aspirations and ideas for Singapore emerging from the pandemic, and translate their concerns into action.

The ESC provided a safe and inclusive space for citizens to come together virtually in small groups, via an interactive digital platform to participate in facilitated conversations. Anyone could register and join these conversations virtually.

Between June and December 2020, 4,400 participants joined 88 ESC sessions and another 12,500 citizens participated in online surveys. We worked hard to draw in diverse participants in terms of gender, ethnicity, age, profession, and language preference. A special effort was made to reach out to people with disabilities.

Trained facilitators led the discussions, which were configured in both large and small groups. This ensured that citizens had the space and time to share their views and aspirations. The key component in these sessions was *listening*. Participants were asked three broad, open-ended questions:

1. Share your experience of the pandemic, including the issues and challenges you faced

2. Your aspiration(s) for Singapore emerging stronger from COVID-19

3. One action you can take to realize this aspiration

The input gathered through these sessions and surveys was organized into 15 themes, including social support, jobs and the economy, technology, governance, health, and civic engagement. In February 2021, Singapore's government created a website to take stock of the conversations.

The ESCs are only the first step toward creating strong and sustained partnerships that can translate citizen engagement into action. To date, we've formed 30 Singapore Together Alliances for Action (AfAs), cross-sector collaborations assembling an ecosystem of citizens and representatives of the public and private sectors to address specific challenges. The AfAs are making steady progress on the key themes that emerged from the ESCs, such as a mentoring alliance that provides mentoring opportunities to help our youths navigate educational, career, and life transitions.

Endnotes

1. Andrea Sigritz, "In the beginning … of web in federal government," Digital.gov, March 12, 2014.

2. Edward Van Buren et al., *Scaling AI in government*, Deloitte Insights, December 13, 2021.

3. Simon Kemp, "TikTok gains 8 new users every second (and other mind-blowing stats)," *Hootsuite*, January 28, 2022.

4. Sunlight Foundation, "Community data dialogues: Examples from the field," accessed February 10, 2022; Becca Warner, "Thinking outside the box on data users—Engaging nontechnical audiences in open data work," Sunlight Foundation blog, September 25, 2019.

5. Simon Murphy, "More than 500,000 people sign up to be NHS volunteers," *Guardian*, March 25, 2020.

6. AARP International, *The aging readiness & competitiveness report*, accessed February 10, 2022.

7. BaS Seniorenbueros.org, "Aktiv in Corona-Zeiten: Landesnetzwerk RLP Veröffentlicht Logbuch," accessed February 10, 2022.

8. RJ Krawiec et al., *The future of public health campaigns*, Deloitte Insights, August 18, 2021.

9. City of Rueil-Malmaison, "J'aime Rueil, Je Participe."

10. Evy Beekers, "Rueil-Malmaison creates a lasting online community to lead covid recovery," CitizenLab, August 26, 2020.

11. HackerOne, "Hack the Pentagon;" Digital.gov, "Federal crowdsourcing webinar series, episode 5: By the People," August 13, 2019.

12. Citizenscience.gov, "Helping federal agencies accelerate innovation through public participation."

13. New York State Attorney General, "Attorney General James issues report detailing millions of fake comments, revealing secret campaign to influence FCC's 2017 repeal of net neutrality rules," accessed January 31, 2022.

14. OECD, "Policy responses to coronavirus," July 23, 2020.

15. Andrew Leonard, "How Taiwan's unlikely digital minister hacked the pandemic," *Wired*, July 23, 2020.

16. *Al Jazeera*, "Fake news alert: Taiwan fights disinformation as COVID surges," May 28, 2021; Steven Butler and Iris Hsu, "Q&A: Taiwan's digital minister on combatting disinformation without censorship," Committee to Protect Journalists, May 23, 2019.

17. Sravasti Dasgupta, "Community engagement by Asha workers behind India's successful COVID response—WHO panel," *Print*, January 19, 2021; WomenLift Health, "A salute to the unseen warriors of India," July 29, 2021.

18. Interview with Alma McCormick, executive director of Messengers for Health, December 7, 2021.

19. Ministry of Health NZ, "COVID-19: Who we're working with," accessed January 31, 2022.

Acknowledgments

About the authors

Adithi Pandit | **apandit@deloitte.co.nz**

Adithi Pandit is the social sector and social impact practice leader in New Zealand, and sits on the Deloitte New Zealand Board; she is also an Asia-Pacific Consulting executive. She has advised and delivered large-scale transformation work in the public sector, across child care and protection, social housing, welfare, and local government. Her passion is bringing together individuals and organizations to address "wicked problems" at multiple levels: changing systems to transform outcomes, redesigning services to be simpler and community-led, and shifting mindsets to focus on sustainable innovation and impact.

Joe Mariani | **jmariani@deloite.com**

Joe Mariani is the emerging technologies research leader at Deloitte's Center for Government Insights. His research focuses on innovation and technology adoption for both national security organizations and commercial businesses. His previous work includes experience as a consultant to the defense and intelligence industries, high school science teacher, and Marine Corps intelligence officer.

Courtney Keene | **ckeene@deloitte.com**

Courtney Keene, a manager with Deloitte Consulting LLP, has 14 years of domestic and international experience in strategic transformation, organizational capacity strengthening, and project management, with a focus on promoting inclusive economic growth. She has worked with global organizations including USAID, the US Department of State, and the World Bank supporting strategic change initiatives and program implementation. Keene has worked in Jordan, Senegal, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, and Tunisia to promote sustainable local investment in youth entrepreneurship, agribusiness, water and sanitation, energy, and health systems.

Shuichi Kuroishi | skuroishi@tohmatsu.co.jp

Shuichi Kuroishi is chief of staff for Deloitte Japan's Government & Public Services industry. Kuroishi works across the GPS practice to address large-scale societal challenges (e.g., smart cities, future of mobility, sustainable urban and rural development, urban innovation, and social inclusion) that require cross-sector collaboration, multistakeholder engagement, and innovative funding/ financing strategies. Kuroishi was also a fellow at the World Economic Forum Centre for the Fourth Industrial Revolution, where he led the smart cities project at the G20 Global Smart Cities Alliance on Technology Governance.

Mahesh Kelkar | mkelkar@deloitte.com

Mahesh Kelkar is the smart cities research leader for the Deloitte Center for Government Insights. His research focuses on understanding the impact of technology, innovation, and policy on the future of cities. He closely tracks the federal and state government sectors and focuses on conducting in-depth research on the intersection of technology with government operations, policy, and decision-making.

Contact us

Our insights can help you take advantage of change. If you're looking for fresh ideas to address your challenges, we should talk.

Practice leadership

Gretchen Brainard
Principal | Deloitte Consulting LLP
+1 571 858 0371 | gbrainard@deloitte.com

Gretchen Brainard is the Offering Portfolio leader for Government & Public Services Customer & Marketing, where she leads over 2,900 practitioners. Brainard has served public sector clients for the past 23 years, creating and implementing technology transformation strategies.

The Deloitte Center for Government Insights

William Eggers
Executive director | Deloitte Center for Government Insights | Deloitte Services LP
+1 571 882 6585 | weggers@deloitte.com

William Eggers is the executive director of Deloitte Services LP's Center for Government Insights, where he is responsible for the firm's public sector thought leadership. His latest book is *Delivering on Digital: The Innovators and Technologies that are Transforming Government*.

About the Deloitte Center for Government Insights

The Deloitte Center for Government Insights shares inspiring stories of government innovation, looking at what's behind the adoption of new technologies and management practices. We produce cutting-edge research that guides public officials without burying them in jargon and minutiae, crystalizing essential insights in an easy-to-absorb format. Through research, forums, and immersive workshops, our goal is to provide public officials, policy professionals, and members of the media with fresh insights that advance an understanding of what is possible in government transformation.

Deloitte Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Services

Deloitte's diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) consulting services change the world by taking a systemic approach to help organizations access and engage a more diverse workforce; build inclusive leadership capabilities; foster a culture of belonging; and embed equity and inclusion across every business function. Learn more.

Deloitte.
Insights

Sign up for Deloitte Insights updates at www.deloitte.com/insights.

Follow @DeloitteInsight

About Deloitte Insights

Deloitte Insights publishes original articles, reports and periodicals that provide insights for businesses, the public sector, and NGOs. Our goal is to draw upon research and experience from throughout our professional services organization, and that of coauthors in academia and business, to advance the conversation on a broad spectrum of topics of interest to executives and government leaders.

Deloitte Insights is an imprint of Deloitte Development LLC.

About this publication

This publication contains general information only, and none of Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited, its member firms, or its and their affiliates are, by means of this publication, rendering accounting, business, financial, investment, legal, tax, or other professional advice or services. This publication is not a substitute for such professional advice or services, nor should it be used as a basis for any decision or action that may affect your finances or your business. Before making any decision or taking any action that may affect your finances or your business, you should consult a qualified professional adviser.

None of Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited, its member firms, or its and their respective affiliates shall be responsible for any loss whatsoever sustained by any person who relies on this publication.

About Deloitte

Deloitte refers to one or more of Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited, a UK private company limited by guarantee ("DTTL"), its network of member firms, and their related entities. DTTL and each of its member firms are legally separate and independent entities. DTTL (also referred to as "Deloitte Global") does not provide services to clients. In the United States, Deloitte refers to one or more of the US member firms of DTTL, their related entities that operate using the "Deloitte" name in the United States and their respective affiliates. Certain services may not be available to attest clients under the rules and regulations of public accounting. Please see www.deloitte.com/about to learn more about our global network of member firms.