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

Designing for inclusive engagement
Digital communications for richer community connection
Adithi Pandit, Joe Mariani, Courtney Keene, Shuichi Kuroishi, and Mahesh Kelkar
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.

- **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.

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

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