

# STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION: MAKING SENSE OF ISSUES MANAGEMENT

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(Refereed)

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## Abstract

Strategic communication deals with how an organisation functions as a social actor to advance its mission (Hallahan et al. 2007). Issues management is about how organisations (governments) identify, analyse and deal with issues that are important to them — not just in a party political sense. This paper will explore the links between strategic communication and issues management to theorise that the principles of strategic communication in business apply equally to politics and government. The paper argues that the change agendas of politics are analogous to structural change in corporations. The paper uses an exploratory analysis of issues raised by citizens in the Federal Government's series of community cabinets since 2008 to argue that there should be greater emphasis on consultation if politicians are to accurately gauge the mood of the electorate.

## Introduction

Political scientists are interested in the interactions between the political class and electors, and the mechanisms by which public policy is developed and implemented. In recent years some scholars have revisited the role of community consultation in political and policy decision-making (see for example, Bishop 2002; Bishop & Davis 2002; Kane & Bishop 2002; Reddell 2002; Adams & Hess 2001). The Australian and some State Governments have applied the concept of community consultation to regular 'community cabinet' meetings with citizens.

Bishop (2002) notes that the community cabinet initiative introduced by former Queensland Premier Peter Beattie enabled Beattie to be seen as '... listening to the people' (p. 13). Similarly, the former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd introduced regular community cabinets to keep the government linked to 'what you in the community have to say. We want to remain engaged with the wider Australian community, and the ideas and the views that you put to us help continue to shape our views about what the Australian Government should be about now and in the future' (Rudd 2008). The 24 community cabinet meetings during the two-and-a-half years of the Rudd Government followed a consistent format that involved a speech from the Prime Minister, an opportunity for citizens to ask questions of Ministers from the floor, and one-on-one meetings between individual attendees and Ministers about specific issues. As many Cabinet members as possible attend. Since community cabinet meetings were introduced in 2008, more than 10,000 citizens have participated in 24 community cabinets in all States and the Northern Territory. More than 1000 people have had one-on-one meetings with individual Ministers.

The community cabinet process reflects the notion of two-way symmetrical communication (see, for example, Grunig 2001). Gower (2006) notes that much of the public relations literature has focussed on what practitioners do, rather than on the business drivers for practice, and argues public relations scholars have not kept pace with the evolution in the management literature's 'thinking about strategy' (p. 185).

This paper is in four parts. First, it surveys literature related to strategic communication, issues management, communication during organisational change, and Baghai et al.'s (2000) 'three horizons' approach to management. Second, it addresses community consultation in the context of community cabinets. Third, it reports the results of an exploratory research project on issues raised

at community cabinet meetings. Finally, it uses the review of literature and the results of the exploratory research, to theorise that the principles embodied in Baghai et al.'s (2000) 'three horizons' approach to management can be adapted to assist strategic communicators (in this case, specifically 'political') to more successfully address mid-to-long term issues.

## Strategic communication

Strategic communication deals with how an organisation functions as a social actor to advance its mission and involves informational, persuasive, discursive, and relational communication (Hallahan et al. 2007).

In its long-term, multidisciplinary, intentional, and purposeful focus, strategic communication prepares organisations for an uncertain future and builds a bridge between organisations and their stakeholders in a response to business needs and concerns (Argenti, Howell & Beck 2005; Cornelissen 2005; Grunig, 2006; Sandhu, 2009; Zerfass & Huck, 2007). Strategic communication has three primary drivers: regulatory factors, organisational complexity, and the need to increase credibility (Argenti et al. 2005). For example, new regulations mean revisiting communication strategies and practices to deal with them; the 'bursting of the bubble' that followed corporate crises in the 1990s meant a formidable challenge to restore business credibility (Argenti et al. 2005, p. 86).

Grunig (2009) argues that communication practitioners working in the 'symbolic, interpretive' paradigm of marketing communication 'generally' believe publics can be persuaded by messages that change their cognitive representations. This approach devotes excessive attention to the tactical role of communication in negotiating meaning by emphasising messages, publicity, media relations and media effects (Grunig 2009). A contrasting 'strategic management, behavioural' paradigm builds relationships with stakeholders (Grunig 2009). This paradigm facilitates two-way communication and dialogue and includes a framework of research and listening, as a result of which '... messages reflect the information needs of publics as well as the advocacy needs of organisations' (Grunig 2009, p. 9).

## Issues and communication

Planning and managing organisational responses to social, economic and political issues is 'an ancient business and communication practice' (Heath & Palenchar 2009), but just how that might be done is a focus of contemporary approaches to strategic management. Ghemawat (2010), for example, has suggested that one of five adjustments to corporate strategy directions post the 2008–2010 global economic crisis should be a focus on organisational identity and reputation, especially given the all-time low in the general reputation of business caused by that crisis. That focus means senior executives should spend more time managing relationships with governments as a result of their expanded role as investors, customers, regulators and tax collectors (Ghemawat 2010). Organisations need to manage carefully key issues, and relationships with the 'actors' who care about them, in the social, political and environmental areas, or a 'non-market environment', that affects their ability to reach objectives (Bach & Allen 2010).

The processes of issues identification, analysis and management are usually confined to business contexts (see, for example, Heath & Palenchar 2009; Jaques 2009a, 2009b). Issue management is most often the task of an organisation's senior strategic communication counsel in a boundary spanning role that identifies and analyses external and internal issues to understand the opportunities and threats they pose (Argenti & Forman 2002; Heath & Palenchar 2009; van Riel & Frombrun 2008, Jaques 2009a; Tench, Verhoeven & Zerfass 2009). As a sophisticated discipline used to develop strategies for a wide range of public issues (Jaques 2009a), it has application to political communication.

## Reputation, values and relationships

The importance of strategic communication in dealing with reputation and relationship issues has implications for political and government communication. Cornelissen (2005), for example, noted that as a strategic management function, communication is ‘charged with counselling senior management, and guiding and managing reputations and relationships with important stakeholder groups ...’ (p. 100). Politicians are deeply concerned with relationships and reputations because perceptions of their strengths and weaknesses in these areas determine electoral success.

### Reputation and values

Reputation is a ‘perceptual construct’ often associated with organisation behaviour, and is formed by multiple stakeholder groups who evaluate multiple characteristics of an organisation (Cornelissen 2005). Such constructs and evaluations are grounded in behaviour and demonstrations of values.

Political leaders face challenges in communicating their values, their policies, and in convincing citizens to support them. These challenges resonate with those of post-crisis communication: repairing damaged reputations, dealing with anger, negative word-of-mouth, and account acceptance (Coombs & Holladay 2009). Lessons from communication during corporate restructuring provide insights for strategic communicators involved in building a political ‘perceptual construct’ (Cornelissen 2005). There is a common theme: the need for leaders to set the values and objectives of their organisations (see for example, Beer & Eisenstat 2004; Kotter 1995; Laroche 2004; Lewis 2000; Nash 1995; Peters & Waterman 1984; Roper 2005). Like structural change political responses to economic and social factors is complex, difficult for both those who implement and are affected by it, and often creates resistance and resentment (Christen 2005; Dakin 1989; Kotter 1995; Lewis 2000; Recardo 1995; Taylor 1999). Successfully communicating political values may mean politicians need to pay explicit attention to how they do this.

Clarifying a value system and ‘breathing life into it’ are the greatest contributions leaders can make (Peters & Waterman 1984) because this demonstrates clarity about what they stand for. Attempts to influence values requires a range of coordinated efforts, from the personal interest and commitment of senior people, through discussion, debate, widespread dissemination, monitoring and communication channels for surfacing questions, arbitrating grey area problems or non-compliance, enforcement and rewards (Nash 1995). Political communication about important issues requires such a focus from ministers if they are to be successful.

### Relationships and change

Politics is a complex activity, often directed at achieving change, in which building and maintaining positive relationships with colleagues and citizens is vital to success. Dealing with issues in politics often involves a tactical response to a current news media frame. Framing refers to how messages are shaped to highlight some aspects of a topic (McCarthy & Hatcher 2004), and they are sometimes perspectives that shape only the facts a journalist chooses to emphasise (Vraga et al. 2010). This creates problems for political communicators because they need to act tactically without the time to think how to handle the particular issue over the mid-to-long terms.

The complexity sciences suggest that building and maintaining relationships is fundamental to effective change (Ströh 2007). That means recognising small incremental and insignificant changes create disturbances which, through their own increasing dynamics, start major change (Gregory 2000). A tactical communication approach ignores this ‘mutual causality’ in which the ripple effects of the incessant news cycle magnify in an uncontrollable way to escalate rapidly into hot issues and crises with their own uncontrollable lives (Gregory 2000).

Ministers hold positions in the business of government that are analogous to the role of chief executives in the corporate world. Communication by chief executives has an important impact on

organisational restructuring (Alexander 2006; Barrett 2002; Economo & Zorn 1999; Gregory 2000; Kotter 1995; Lewis 2000; Mahoney 2006; Recardo 1995). For example, Alexander (2006) argues that organisational leaders need to be competent communicators and to understand communication practice at a high level to manage the myriad interests and publics that impact on business goals. Political leaders without similar high level communication skills risk failure to convince electors of the worth of their policies.

Open and honest communication is a key element of business success (Wilson 1994) so why not for politics? Attributes on which such communication is built includes relationships founded on respect, trust, and human dignity, not on profit or personal gain; long-range vision; commitment to community not just profit; strong values that in some way emphasise the importance of people; and a cooperative approach to problem solving (Wilson 1994). These are all attributes on which success in political and government communication programs can be built and they reflect the discourse about the need for parliamentary reform proposed by the independents now controlling the balance of power in the Australian House of representatives.

## The role of electors

It is axiomatic that electors are directly affected by policy changes. The effects of this have been demonstrated in the recent global financial crisis through, for example, the bankruptcies of significant financial institutions and restructuring to help organisations survive, and the direct impacts of the crisis on individuals. Kotter (1995), discussing corporate restructuring, argues that change needs to be ‘rooted in social norms and shared values’ and describes two important factors in achieving it: a conscious attempt to show that the new approach has helped improve performance; a need to take sufficient time to ensure that the next generation of top management ‘personifies the new approach’ (Kotter 1995, p. 67). These arguments have a parallel in political communication as successful policy change requires politicians to demonstrate similar norms and shared values.

Politicians act as the community’s ‘positive deviants’ or change agents, (Pascale & Sternin 2005) when they argue for reform. Thus, lessons from psychological research on employee reactions to change, and in the management and communication disciplines on how communication can generate support for change (Barrett 2002; Beer & Eisenstat 2004; Dakin 1989; DiFonzio & Bordia 2002; Gillis 2004; Grunig 2001; Hamel 2000; Jordan 2004; Keegan & Lahey 2001; Kotter 1999; Laroche 2004; Lewis 2000; Pascale & Sternin 2005; Ströh 2006, 2007; Wood et al. 2004), can apply to political communication.

The 2010 Federal election, especially the leaders’ involvement in televised town hall-style meetings and on ABC television’s *Q and A* program, and the swing to the Greens, demonstrated that voters are searching for ‘honest conversations’ (Beer & Eisenstat 2004) and want ‘better solutions’ to policy issues than they have been previously offered.

## Three horizons

The concept that corporations could be managed across ‘three horizons’ simultaneously in order to distinguish between the embryonic, emergent and mature phases of a business’ life cycle (Baghai et al. 2000) provides theoretical paradigm for the application of strategic communication to dealing with issues.

The three business horizons (Baghai et al. 2000) are:

**Horizon 1:** extending and defending core business. This horizon encompasses the businesses that are at the heart of an organisation and with which customers and analysts most readily identify. Horizon 1 is ‘critical to near-term performance’ (p. 5) as cash and skills generated in it provide resources for growth. One of the primary management challenges is to shore up competitive positions aided by, among other things, marketing.

**Horizon 2:** building emerging businesses. In this horizon, management is concerned with the emerging stars of the company, because they transform companies. Baghai et al. (2000) argue that Horizon 2 is about building new streams of revenue which may be extensions of current business or moves in new directions.

**Horizon 3:** seeding options for future businesses. Baghai et al. (2000) describe Horizon 3 businesses as ‘options on future opportunities.’ Horizon 3, then, is the longer term future in which real activities, such as research projects, test market pilots, alliances and so on, mark the first steps toward actual businesses which, if they prove successful, will be expected to reach the profitability of those in the Horizon 1 stage of growth.

The focus of each horizon and associated outputs are illustrated in Table 1 which Baghai et al. (2000) use to demonstrate how planning for each should be separated to avoid a natural tendency for Horizon 1 immediacy to overshadow the needs for the other two.

**Table 1: Planning in three horizons**

	Horizon 1	Horizon 2	Horizon 3
<b>Focus</b>	Executing to defend, extend, and increase profitability of existing businesses	Resourcing initiatives to build new businesses	Uncovering options for future opportunities and placing bets on selected options
<b>Outputs</b>	Annual operating plan: tactical plans, resourcing decisions, budgets	Business building strategies: investment budget, detailed business plans for new ventures	Decisions to explore: initial project plan, project milestones

Source: Baghai et al. (2000), p. 130.

## Community consultation

The literature on ‘community consultation’ is diverse and deals not only with what it is, the theoretical background, and the history of its use by politicians, but how it works in various modes (see, for example, Adams & Hess 2001; Bishop & Davis 2002; Kane & Bishop 2002). Consultation is a standard feature of policy development with a ‘clear political dimension’ (Bishop 2002) that in every policy cycle involves stakeholder identification and consultation (Kane & Bishop 2002). This ‘smorgasbord of consultative arrangements’ (Hess & Adams 2001) in policymaking and implementation underpins the notion of community cabinets. Prime Minister Rudd (June 2008) noted the danger of politicians being ‘locked up’ in Canberra without the chance to hear what is happening on the ground in local communities. He viewed Community Cabinet meetings as a valuable opportunity for people to put forward ideas on local and national issues. The vast majority of specific matters raised at previous Community Cabinet meetings had been addressed by the Government. During the 2010 election, Prime Minister Gillard said she would continue community cabinet meetings; the Leader of the Opposition, Mr Abbott, said the funds allocated to them would be spent on other priorities.

## The exploratory research

The exploratory research reported in this paper used a content analysis of summaries of proceedings at community cabinet meetings to answer:

**RQ 1:** What issues were most frequently raised by citizens participating in community cabinet meetings?

**RQ 2:** What was the context in which the issues identified by RQ 1 were raised?

**RQ 3:** Did the most frequently raised issues in community cabinet meetings reflect the issues that dominated the 2010 Federal election?

## Methodology

This exploratory research used a content analysis of summaries of proceedings at community cabinet meetings to test whether issues that concern individual citizens reflected the political discourses and subsequent media coverage of them between the 2007 and 2010 Federal elections.

National politics between the two elections, but especially in the 12 months leading to the August 2010 Federal election, focussed on issues broadly described as: asylum seekers, government waste related to the responses to the Global Economic Crisis and the education 'revolution', climate change and the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme, the resources rent super-profits tax, and the home insulation program.

A set of keywords and key phrases was developed to reflect these issues. The keywords and key phrases were: *asylum seekers, boat people, building the education revolution, carbon pollution reduction scheme, climate change, disability, education, energy, health, housing, indigenous, tax, waste.*

The 24 community cabinet meetings held by the Federal Government between January 2008 and May 2010 were used as the sample for the research.

Data about venues, dates, attendance, individual sessions with ministers, and summaries of issues raised in question time were extracted from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet's website for community cabinets. The demographic profiles and party-status of the Federal electoral divisions in which the community cabinets were held was extracted from the Australian Electoral Commission's website. Both sets of data were entered in to a standard FileMaker Pro 8.5 database program as a record for each community cabinet meeting was created.

The database was searched to produce statistics about the total number of citizens who participated, and the total number of individual sessions held with ministers. The database field containing summary descriptions of the issues dealt with at each meeting was interrogated using the keywords and key phrases to identify the frequency with which each was raised.

The numerical results from this interrogation were used to compile a list of the most frequently raised issues. A content analysis of the results of each keyword/key phrase search identified the context in which issue was raised.

## Results

More than 10,100 citizens attended the 24 community cabinet meetings and 996 had post-question time meetings with ministers on specific matters. Attendance and other data related to the last community cabinet meeting, at Como, Western Australia, had not been published at the time of writing.

### Research Question 1

No single issue dominated questions raised by participants. While Prime Minister Rudd dealt with matters he saw as important to the Government's agenda, like climate change, the education revolution, the global economic crisis, importantly, issues raised by community members were focused on practical matters and often on local implications of policy, including cost.

Table 2 shows a frequency count of the most commonly raised issues.

**Table 2: Issues raised by community members**

Issue	Number of times raised
Climate change	6
Disability	6
Education	9
Energy	6
Health	9
Housing	6
Indigenous	8

**Research Question 2**

Table 3 shows the contexts in which the most commonly addressed issues at community cabinets were raised.

**Table 3: Community cabinet issues in context**

Issue	Context
<b>Climate change</b>	Plans for action since Copenhagen (Epping), scientific and technological breakthroughs needed to properly address climate change (Newcastle), cost to the <b>local</b> community (Hobart); the community cabinet summaries listed three questions were listed as simply about 'climate change.'
<b>Disability</b>	Services (Mackay), child support (Hallett Cove), education and employment opportunities (Beenleigh), public infrastructure and accessibility (Elizabeth), national standards for access at public venues (Bathurst), government support (Epping).
<b>Education</b>	Seven questions related to schools education. Quality (Mackay), tertiary education opportunities in Western Sydney keeping pace with population growth (Penrith), importance of education in East Arnhem Land's many homeland communities (Yirrkala), funding (Hallett Cove, Newcastle), early childhood and parenting support (Launceston), opportunities for people with a disability (Beenleigh), for indigenous Australians (Adelaide), indigenous childhood education (Ballarat).
<b>Energy</b>	National energy security (Hallett Cove, Launceston), standardising solar energy rebates (Emerald, Vic), energy efficiency (Geraldton), resources for a new economy based on renewable energy (Bathurst), nuclear energy as a possible option for Australia (Townsville).
<b>Health</b>	Support for seniors and mental health sufferers (Penrith), lack of indigenous mental health workers (Yirrkala), health impacts of pesticide use (Launceston), Health services, including GP training and super clinics and aged care services (Corio), Associated health issues of fluoride (Corio), condition of the NSW state public health service (Campbelltown), indemnity insurance for all health practitioners (Elizabeth), tertiary training for health professionals (Townsville), implementation of the health reform program (Burnie).
<b>Housing</b>	Housing affordability (Ballarat, Canning Vale, Mackay, Penrith), Housing affordability for owner/occupiers, new home buyers and community housing seekers (Narangba), Shortage of housing for teachers and other service providers (Yirrkala).

Issue	Context
<b>Indigenous</b>	Plight of indigenous Australians (Canning Vale), lack of indigenous mental health workers (Yirrkala), preservation of religious sites and practices (Hallett Cove), Government support to improve Indigenous enrolments in universities, particularly in midwifery programs (Beenleigh), funding for local indigenous programs (Bathurst), Government support for jobs for Indigenous communities in Queensland (Townsville), education and support programs for indigenous Australians (Adelaide), indigenous childhood education (Ballarat).

### Research Question 3

The analysis shows that the issues which consumed politicians during the 2010 election campaign were not dominant issues for those electors who attended these meetings. Apart from climate change, in which the contexts of questions were generally broad, the issues that most concerned politicians in the day-to-day political dog-fight, and consumed the national media, were not raised.

Issues that dominated the 2010 election included asylum seekers, ‘big new taxes’, especially the carbon pollution reduction scheme (CPRS), and government waste related to the Building the Education Revolution and attempts to slow the impact of the global financial crisis (GFC). When tax, asylum seekers, the CPRS and the GFC (each only twice in 24 community cabinet meetings) the context related specifically to the region in which the community cabinet meetings were held. For example, the sole reference to the proposed Resource Rent Super Profits Tax came from a mining executive at a community cabinet in the Tasmanian mining centre of Burnie. Nevertheless, the Burnie *Advocate* reported on the day after the meeting that the mining tax ‘looms’ as an election issue and was ‘... undoubtedly the major theme ...’ of the meeting (Dunham 2010).

Of more apparent importance to citizens were *disability* (for example, services, infrastructure and employment opportunities), *education* in specific contexts (for example, disability, indigenous, schools), *indigenous* issues (for example, health, access to education, funding for local support programs), and *housing* affordability. Of six questions about climate change, a major political issue, only one related to what the government would do after the Copenhagen conference.

### Limitations

This exploratory study has a number of limitations. Prime among them is the use of community cabinet summaries for data collection as these are not verbatim transcripts but interpretations of the meeting topics by note-takers. The reference in Table 3 to ‘climate change’ as an issue that is not put in context but simply listed, is an example of this limitation. Transcripts for the first eight community cabinet meetings have not been published. Nevertheless, content analysis of the full transcripts for two meetings for which these were published did not change the effect of the data reported in Table 3. A second limitation is the relatively brief period in which questions could be asked of the Prime Minister and other Ministers. This was an effect of the detailed answers ministers gave, with often the Prime Minister and two or three others contributing. Tighter control of question time may have provided an opportunity for more questions on issues and even supplementary questions on ministerial answers.

### Aligning political issues, horizons and strategic communication

Perhaps more than any other profession, politicians need to build, maintain and enhance their credibility with their ‘stakeholders’ — voters. Credibility involves a complex construct that includes perceptions of values, reputations, the impact of change, and of leadership. This is for politics the ‘perceptual construct’ Cornelissen (2005) described for business. As is the case in business, building

and maintaining credibility for politicians needs open, honest and planned communication that rises above day-to-day tactical commentary that is often buffeted by media framing of issues.

This exploratory study suggests that politicians' tendency to utilise tactical communication causes them to avoid effective long term communication about issues that directly affect people and thus voters' perceptions of their credibility.

In a business environment, linking communication and business strategy includes identifying important mid-to-long term issues and developing programs to address them (see for example, Grunig & Repper 1992; Cornelissen 2005; Heath & Palenchar 2009; Jaques 2009a, 2009b; Jones & Bartlett 2009). Political communicators need to make similar links if dialogue between politicians and electors is to improve. That includes the constant strategic use of communication (Ströh 2006) rather than the normative tactical approach which ignores the complexity of relationships between politicians and voters because it assumes messages will generate linear and connected effects (Gregory 2000). This assumption is the major reason so many communication campaigns fail to produce anticipated results (Gregory 2000).

Given political communication operates in the non-market environment, adapting the 'horizons' approach to strategic communication may assist political communicators to develop programs to build credibility, and to build support for policy. This adaptation would classify issues in, and align communication activities to, the appropriate time horizons.

The model would mean,

- **Horizon 2** being used strategically to enhance reputations, and to manage relationships with voters in the context of mid-term change. Attempts to resolve issues around climate change are an extant example. It would be in this horizon that politicians also work towards re-election.
- **Horizon 3** providing a focus for long-term public issues identification, such as forward defence postures, and policies related to changing population characteristics, and the associated strategic communication program planning.

As **Horizon 1** has a focus on immediate concerns, the horizons approach to political communication would mean this is the arena for the day-to-day tactical chess game of politics: get the minister's name and photograph on page three and 40 seconds on the nightly television news.

Table 4 shows how the model would be constructed.

**Table 4: Horizons for political and government communication**

	<b>Horizon 1</b> <i>Current</i>	<b>Horizon 2</b> <i>Mid-term to 3 years</i>	<b>Horizon 3</b> <i>Long term 3 years →</i>
<b>Focus</b>	Current political agendas	Re-election agendas	Long-term policy agendas
<b>Outputs</b>	Day-to-day media tactics Crisis communication Public information campaigns	Issue identification Policy development Community consultation Elections campaigns\	Strategic issue identification Policy options Strategic communication

Source: Adapted by the author from Baghai et al. (2000), p. 130.

## Conclusion

This paper has reported an exploratory analysis of Australian Federal community cabinet meetings that suggests issues that directly concern citizens are not the big issues that dominate national political debate and media coverage of that debate. The paper argues that politicians and government communicators would have greater success in generating support for policy, if they

utilised a strategic rather tactical approach to communication to engage in meaningful community consultation. That would involve identifying mid and long-term issues that concern citizens, rather than a focus on the day-to-day political game playing that fascinates politicians and mass media commentators. That in turn would mean a switch from the 'talking at' people approach to one that implements what Grunig et al. (2001) describe as two-way symmetrical communication: in the context of this paper, listening to concerns, discussing alternatives, changing a policy course, or taking action, as a result.

The paper argues that in order to do this, lessons from business communication during organisation change, strategic approaches to issues management, and the application of the principles of strategic communication should be applied to a model that accounts for time horizons beyond immediate tactical concerns. That would help political and government communicators to understand the issues that most directly concern citizens and to address them in an appropriate way.

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