

The predictability of government communicators

By [Janine Lazarus](#)

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It's been two weeks since the Mayweather-Pacquiao boxing match in Las Vegas, and most of us who woke up bleary-eyed in the early hours to watch the Fight of the Century on television have probably forgotten why we felt so passionate about a result that was going to be so predictable anyway.



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Unfortunately, just as predictable was the fact that our Sports and Recreation Minister Fikile Mbalula didn't count to three before rising in frothing indignation to a question posed to him on Twitter by the editor of *Beeld* newspaper about who paid to get him there.

Not one known to thinking things through before putting his official foot in it, our Minister launched into full verbal combat - more convincing, some would say, than the physical combat on display at the MGM Arena - and told Adriaan Basson in no uncertain terms that under the new democratic dispensation, a black man could actually afford to go to America "without using your tax."

Clearly still chomping at the bit, TmT (The Mbalula Team - for those of you not in the know) accused Basson of "cheap journalism," and of "cheap ignorant questions" that bordered on "a stereotypical assumption that all blacks are corrupt." Ok. Point made.

But more to the point perhaps, was that instead of rising to the bait, someone should have told the Minister to sink a double Johnny Black, breathe deeply and think through things first. Call it exercising Tweeplomacy.

Effective communication

Let's face it: Ranting and raving, however injured one might feel, tends to switch people off. All the more so if you hold a position in government.

It was to this end that I joined seasoned radio talk show host Ashraf Garda, Wits School of Governance senior lecturer, Dr Koffi Kouakou, and PRISA's past president, Solly Moeng, on a SAfm panel to debate how effective the South African government is at communicating. Dare I say that the jury was out in less than the first few minutes of the show: It's easier to find the proverbial needle in a haystack than it is to find a good government communicator.

Our Twitter King Sports Minister aside, it is sadly difficult to call to mind one outstandingly good communicator in government who understands their audience, who comes across with credibility, and who communicates difficult messages in a palatable manner. All a tough ask, I know. Instead, we get communication from our leaders that is more often than not adversarial, incoherent at best, and fragmented in its approach. Add the jargon of government into the mix and it can be akin to listening to paint dry.

Communicating policy to the masses or assuring them that measures are in place, means diddly squat to most people. It's the same as listening to accountants rattling off figures that are utterly incomprehensible to anyone who didn't get an A for Arithmetic. These officials get a D for Disconnect.

Then throw in the inevitable lack of eye contact, the obvious defensiveness, the uncomfortable swivelling around in a television studio chair and belaboured, long-winded responses to questions and you get the picture.

I long for the day when government does a far better job at communicating its message by cultivating its relationships with the media and responding in a clear, definitive manner. But then maybe the cow will jump over the moon.

ABOUT JANINE LAZARUS

Janine Lazarus is a South African journalist and interviewer of top names in the news, public figures and celebrities. Follow @JanineLazarus on Twitter.

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