



State Comptroller Of Israel | Special Report: The State of Israel's
Coping with the Covid-19 Pandemic | 2021

National Level Issues

Public Information Campaign during the Covid-19 Pandemic



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Background

In a reality in which the State of Israel had to tackle the severe crisis caused by an ongoing global pandemic, at a time when information on how it broke out and the ways to combat it was lacking and was being learned by the professionals on the fly, the official public information campaign formed a central tier in the array of government actions to deal with the pandemic.

The public information campaign must maintain an ongoing uninterrupted process of communicating information to the public, motivating it to life-saving action and behavior, through three significant aspects: communication of vital information; persuasion and motivation to act; and strengthening public resilience. To implement the information campaign's functions effectively, the information bodies must verify that the instructions for behavior in emergencies have reached the entire population (with all its component groups), and have been understood and internalized, with the public prepared to abide by them. The level of public trust in the decision-makers influences information campaign effectiveness and compliance with instructions, among other things.

Three key bodies were central in running the information campaign and communicating the information to the public in Israel during the Covid-19 pandemic: the National Information Directorate in the Prime Minister's Office, which is charged with coordinating all government information bodies in Israel and directing them in emergencies; the Ministry of Health, which is charged with leading the information campaign; and the Home Front Command, which served as an ancillary body in the information campaign efforts.



Key figures

**NIS 311
million**

government spending on information campaign activities during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020

**53
million**

entries to the Health Ministry's website from March to October 2020 (compared to 5 million entries to the Home Front Command website)

19%

of the total public expressed a high level of trust in the bodies in managing the pandemic, before the third lockdown, compared to 45% at the start of the pandemic

24%

of the Government Covid-19 Cabinet, were attended by representative of the National Information Directorate or the Media Adviser (from January to October 2020)

36%

of the public said the restrictions were not rational and not understood, and 34% said that the restrictions had not been explained clearly

73%

of calls to the Health Ministry's call center in September 2020 were not answered by a phone receptionist (including disconnected calls)

**32%–
68%**


of calls to the Home Front Command's call center regarding Covid-19 issues went unanswered (from March to October 2020)

41%

of the Arab sector felt that the Health Ministry was, exaggerating the degree of risk it attributes to the Covid-19 pandemic



Audit Actions

 From May 2020 to January 2021, the State Comptroller's Office conducted an audit on "The Public Information Campaign during the Covid-19 Pandemic." The audit examined the following topics: information campaign effectiveness and public trust; national preparedness for an information campaign in a state of civil emergency; delivery of vital information and instructions to the public via websites and call centers; information campaigns for specific populations; rebuttal of false information and dealing with stances that run counter to the government's position. The audit focused on the period from January to October 2020: including the preparations preceding the covid-19 pandemic during the alert period before the virus's arrival in Israel, from January 2020; during the first wave of the pandemic and the first lockdown in March 2020; until the end of October 2020 (after the end of the second lockdown). The audit was carried out at the Prime Minister's Office – in the National Information Directorate and the National Security Council; the Ministry of Health; and the Home Front Command. Supplementary examinations were carried out at the Government ICT Authority, the Government Advertising Agency, and the Israel Police.

In addition, the State Comptroller's Office examined the public's stances on the information campaign during the Covid-19 pandemic period by three means: a survey conducted in December 2020; a study including an analysis of discourse on the social networks carried out from March 2020 to the end of October 2020; and an assessment of the influence of remarks made by experts that conflict with the official government position, on the public's trust and stances, in the framework of the study analyzing the discourse on social networks.

Key findings



Effectiveness of the information campaign and public trust

- Explaining the lockdown restrictions to the public: The audit conducted by the State Comptroller's Office found that the information bodies were only moderately successful in explaining the restrictions to the public. In general, the public had only limited trust in the bodies in charge of managing the pandemic. From the first lockdown (April 2020) to the end of the second lockdown and before the third lockdown (December 2020), there was a marked decline in the degree of trust. An analysis of the discourse on the social networks showed that people were only moderately convinced of the necessity for most of the restrictions. Trust in the decision-makers was low concerning most of the core issues examined (for example, regarding the issue of quarantine procedure or the issue of Covid-19 testing).



- Compliance with the precautionary instructions indicated the effectiveness of the information campaign: The audit conducted by the State Comptroller's Office found that less than half the public was strict about avoiding meetings with friends or family and adhering to social distancing guidelines.
- Understanding of the restrictions, conviction of their necessity, and trust in the bodies in charge of managing the pandemic: An analysis of the discourse on the social networks showed that the degree of public understanding of the restrictions ranged between 6.5 and 8.8¹; in other words, generally a high degree of understanding. Conviction of the necessity for most of the restrictions – the lockdown and movement restrictions, Covid-19 testing, the quarantine procedure, the Purple Badge and the reopening of businesses and the education system – was moderate (within the range of 5.4–6.5), and concerning two restrictions – mask wearing and gatherings – conviction was substantial (7.9 and 8, respectively). In other words, the public was convinced of the necessity for the latter two restrictions, and only partly convinced of the necessity for most of them. Trust in the decision-makers was low for most of the core issues examined (1.9–2.9) and moderate regarding the two restrictions for which conviction was strong (mask wearing and gatherings, 4.2 and 4.3, respectively). These findings are consistent with the findings of the survey conducted by the State Comptroller's Office in December 2020 and with Home Front Command surveys conducted from March to October 2020, which indicate, as already mentioned, a low degree of trust in the bodies responsible for managing the pandemic. General trust observed in the discourse on social networks from March to October 2020 scored on average 3 (on a scale of 0–10). However, public trust in public figures in the face of cases in which they failed to set an appropriate personal example of compliance with instructions restricting life's routine was even lower – 0.8. Low public trust in public figures could considerably reduce compliance with the instructions, and therefore poses a challenge for the information bodies, which are supposed to convince the public of the instructions' necessity. Moderate conviction and low trust increase the risk of public non-compliance with the instructions issued by government bodies



Organization and division of responsibility among the information bodies

- Purview and boundaries of responsibility: According to the decision from February 2020 in the matter of leading the information campaign, the responsibility of the Ministry of Health for public information was expanded as compared to the planned framework of action, requiring the ministry to lead and carry out the information activities; the responsibility of the National Information Directorate was reduced, and it was defined as being an ancillary body to the Ministry of Health, and not as defined in the Government Decision from 2007 regarding its establishment (according to which it was meant to direct the information officials/bodies, including the Health Ministry, and head the National Information Forum in a state of emergency, serving as the ultimate overseer of all the information conveyed to the public); and the responsibility of the Home Front Command was not officially defined until October

1 A high score (7–10) indicates a high degree of understanding, conviction or trust; a medium score (4 – 7, not inclusive) indicates a moderate degree; a low score (0 – 4, not inclusive) indicates a low degree.



2020, after a decision was made regarding the Covid-19 Cabinet at the end of September 2020. This formalization of the division of roles among the information bodies, not in accordance with advance planning, created a need for further organization requiring time and resources. Likewise, the lack of clarity in the division of responsibility resulted in coordination problems among the various information bodies.

- Strategic and operational preparation: The National Information Directorate, which is charged with the direction and coordination of all information and public diplomacy officials/bodies in an emergency, did not issue a binding strategic document to all government information bodies.
- Manning of key positions in the Public Diplomacy Directorate: Since 2015, Head of the Public Diplomacy Directorate and Director of the Political-Security Section positions were not filled. Since July 2019, the National Information Directorate head position was not manned.
- Participation of the National Information Directorate in Government and Covid-19 Cabinet discussions: Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic from the end of January 2020 to the end of October 2020, 75 Government and Covid-19 Cabinet meetings were held. A representative of the National Information Directorate attended only eight of these meetings, and the Public Diplomacy and Media attended ten meetings. They assisted the Prime Minister's Office during the Covid-19 pandemic. Altogether, the National Information Directorate representative or Public Diplomacy and Media Adviser participated in 24% of all meetings. The core issues of public diplomacy were deliberated in at least 27 discussions. Still, the National Information Directorate representative or Public Diplomacy and Media Adviser did not attend them or relate to the said issues.
- Conveyance of uniform and coordinated messages to the public: Although the National Information Directorate was set up, among other things, for the purpose of presenting uniform and consistent public diplomacy policy, on two central occasions during the Covid-19 pandemic, shortly before the exit dates from the lockdowns imposed on the public, before completion of the formulation of a uniform framework for returning to routine, which would be binding on all government ministries/agencies, some of the government agencies released independent communications that were not coordinated with the National Information Directorate, conveying differing messages that could confuse the public regarding the instructions expected to be imposed on it following lifting of the lockdown.
- Parallel communication frameworks: Throughout most of 2020, the Health Ministry and Home Front Command acted separately, setting up two communication frameworks, launching advertising campaigns, conducting and analyzing public surveys, and operating separate public information centers, with the investment of separate budgets.
- Ministry of Health's communication and spokesman ship plan: The plan was not updated since 2007 despite the changes that had taken place in the area of communication, new media and public diplomacy means over the past decade. Thus, social networks were not mentioned at all among the means of message



dissemination. However, the Ministry of Health dealt with these topics with the inception of the pandemic. It was further found that the Ministry's plan from 2007 did not deal with the need to adapt the messages to a range of target audiences in Israeli society, which differ from one another religiously, culturally and socially, and that the ministry's information campaign actions during the Covid-19 pandemic, adapted to suit the Arab and ultra-orthodox Jewish sectors, began gradually and belatedly, compared to the information campaign directed towards the general Jewish population.

- Ministry of Health's preparedness for handling the information campaign: With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, when the Health Ministry was assigned the responsibility of leading the information campaign and providing guidance to the public, the organizational infrastructure and professional expertise available to the ministry in the area of public diplomacy did not suit the scope and complexity of the task, particularly concerning the handling of the information campaign for different sectors.



Delivering information to the public

- Websites: At the initiative of the Prime Minister's Office, the Home Front Command set up a website to provide information to the public during the Covid-19 pandemic, at a cost of NIS 4.1 million. Concurrently, the Health Ministry invested in its own website a total of NIS 11.5 million. There is an overlap between the two websites with regard to 10 out of 17 areas about the Covid-19 pandemic. The information appearing on the Home Front Command website is based mainly on information posted on the websites of other government ministries/agencies.
- Call centers: The separate operation of parallel call centers and websites by the Health Ministry and Home Front Command reflected inefficiency, since each had to deal separately with difficulties in providing complete and efficient service to the public (peak waiting time for the Health Ministry's call center – 48 minutes on a weekly average; negative peak of number of calls answered by the Home Front Command call center – 13% on a weekly average).
- Home Front Command call center: From the start of the Covid-19 pandemic until September 2020, the Home Front Command lacked a managerial tool for tracking the segmentation of calls made to the call center by topics, meant to find out, among other things, what preoccupies the public, if any issues require clarification for the entire public, and the effectiveness of the call center. The absence of such a managerial tool could compromise the quality of service given to the public.



Information campaign for distinctive populations

- Information campaign for the Arab sector: The Ministry of Health gradually translated the information and messages into Arabic, compared to the information conveyed in Hebrew. From March to April 2020, partial information was issued regarding Covid-19 hotspots in the Arab local authorities. The Health Ministry's Arabic Telegram channel went into operation for the first time shortly before mid-March 2020, and the Covid-19 pandemic call center was operated for the first time in Arabic at the



start of April 2020. Even though 44% of Arab sector is aged 20 and older do not speak Hebrew well.

- Information campaign for the ultra-orthodox Jewish sector: The Health Ministry started providing information to the ultra-orthodox Jewish sector through customized means of dissemination, such as pashkevils (wall posters), doing so gradually compared to the general Jewish population, even though part of the ultra-orthodox Jewish sector is not exposed to the means of communication commonly accessible to the general population. The communications disseminated to the ultra-orthodox Jewish sector in February and at the start of March 2020 were relatively limited in content and scope.
- Disparities in the public information campaigns for the Arab and ultra-orthodox Jewish sectors: The period of time that passed until information dissemination started to be customized to these sectors, created a gap in the assimilation of the behavior instructions between the general Jewish population and the Arab and ultra-orthodox Jewish sectors.
- Spending on information campaigns: The bulk of the Health Ministry's spending (82%) was allocated to advertising campaigns for the general Jewish population; 10% – for the Arab sector (a rate 2.1 times lower than its proportion of the population); and 5% for the ultra-orthodox Jewish sector (a rate 2.4 times lower than its proportion of the population)².
- Customized information campaign actions: The intensification of information dissemination aimed at the Arab and ultra-orthodox Jewish sectors starting from the second half of March 2020, included for the first time during the Covid-19 pandemic, the use of dedicated advertising campaigns relating to religious holidays and customs, and expanded the application of dedicated dissemination means. However, no actions in the framework of the information campaign considered the unique characteristics and difficulties of both sectors. Thus, for example, the information campaign failed to address the issue of wedding events that are considered "infection promoters."



Dealing with false information and positions that run counter to government policy

- The response of the National Information Directorate and Ministry of Health did not include a systematic and across-the-board action to deal with the dissemination of false information, such as monitoring the inaccurate information, airing and exposing it as incorrect, and disseminating credible information that refutes the inaccurate information. This resulted in the dissemination of false information that was left encountered by the bodies that managed the pandemic.
- The Ministry of Health started to train Covid-19 spokespersons for media appearances following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, already at

² Additionally, in March-October 2020, the Health Ministry contracted external advisers to reinforce information campaign efforts targeting distinctive populations, at a cost of NIS 4.7 million.



the start of the pandemic it had to deal with experts' stances that ran counter to the government's position, causing at times confusion among the public and hurting information campaign efforts.



Although the organizational infrastructure and professional expertise available to the Health Ministry for the information campaign did not suit the scope and complexity of the task, it nevertheless did act quickly to establish another organizational and functional setup, considerably expanding the existing organizational framework.

The State Comptroller office commends the targeted initiatives of the Ministry of Health and Home Front Command for strengthening social resilience, with a focus on children in the Arab and ultra-orthodox Jewish sectors.

Key recommendations

- 💡 The conclusions regarding the decline of public trust in the bodies managing the pandemic and regarding the instructions which the public understands but is only partly convinced of their necessity should be included in the framework of drawing lessons. Besides the surveys conducted among the population by the information bodies, a study should be made of the public's stances and conduct, taking into account all the restrictions imposed on it at different points in time during the pandemic, whether through surveys or other research tools, such as an analysis of the discourse on social network.
- 💡 It is recommended that the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), in which framework the National Information Directorate was set up, make sure that the plan defining the purview and boundaries of the various bodies responsible for national information policy will be binding, clear-cut and adapted for full and immediate implementation in a state of emergency, including in an ongoing civil crisis. Additionally, the PMO should take the necessary actions to ensure that the National Information Directorate will be fit to meet all the tasks assigned to it both in times of routine and emergency. It should fully staff the Directorate, particularly its top positions, and ensure their activity aligns with the Government's decisions. Likewise, the National Information Directorate should act to coordinate between all the information bodies of the government ministries on an ongoing basis during the pandemic, and act during routine times to issue a tender for establishing an emergency national information setup, as a basis for beefing up the existing setup when the need arises.
- 💡 It is recommended that National Information Directorate formulate a national information strategy for civil emergency events, which lays down the principles and methods of information communication, and to circulate it in a binding document; to direct the

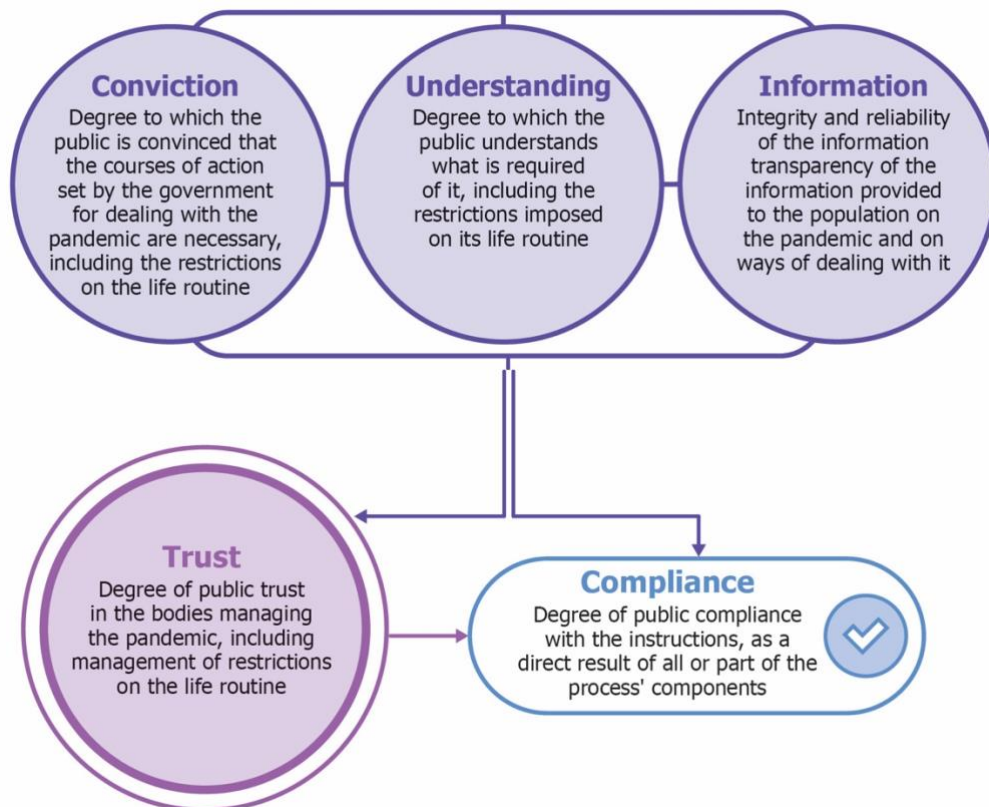


information policy bodies in the government ministries to formulate action plans, also for a civil state of emergency, aimed at bolstering the readiness for information dissemination within the areas of responsibility of their respective ministries, and to update these periodically; to reinforce its directives to all government ministries, particularly in a time of emergency, for coordinating information policy activities and the work of all information bodies, to maintain a uniform line of information policy

- 💡 It is recommended that the National Information Directorate, with the assistance of the Health Ministry, form a plan to consolidate the efforts and resources for establishing integrated government sources of information for the public in a time of civil emergency. Action should be taken to unify the Home Front Command website with the integrated government website, and summarize within this unified site all government-sponsored information needed by the public in a time of civil crisis. It is also recommended to consider the operation of a unified government call center, which will possess the capabilities – in terms of resources and professional expertise – to provide optimal service to the public.
- 💡 The Home Front Command should assemble detailed data on the call center it operates for public use in matters concerning the Covid-19 pandemic, in a way that will allow it to assess service quality and spot vulnerable points.
- 💡 It is recommended that the National Information Directorate act in advance to formulate information campaign plans for distinctive populations, and ascertain that a public study will be carried out including the mapping and characterization of the various target audiences in Israel, their unique needs and the effective information dissemination methods for each target audience. It is further recommended that the government information bodies, led by the National Information Directorate, act to verify that the information campaign targeting distinctive audiences in ongoing emergency events will be conducted from the very first stages of the crisis, along with the necessary adaptations; coupled with a diversification of the information dissemination means, to the extent possible; and taking into account the problems associated with the unique characteristics of these audiences.
- 💡 The National Information Directorate should lead systematic government action to deal with inaccurate information and formulate in this matter a suitable plan of action, in conjunction with other government bodies and non-government bodies. There is room to establish, in advance, a pool of spokespersons who are expert in their field and trained for media appearances; to monitor cases where experts' stances run counter to the government's position; and vis-à-vis the various media outlets to increase the chances that they will be integrated into the various plans.



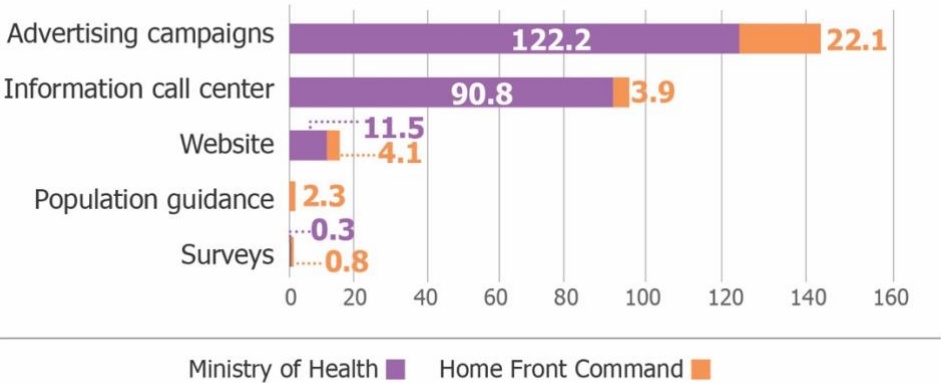
Components of the Information Dissemination Process



As per figures from the National Data and Information Center for the war on Covid-19, as processed by the State Comptroller's Office.



Spending by the Ministry of Health and Home Front Command on the Covid-19 pandemic Information Campaign (in NIS millions), 2020



As per Health Ministry figures and Home Front Command figures, as processed by the State Comptroller's Office.



Summary

National crisis events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, requires a national information setup to help the public deal with an unforeseen reality change and with the uncertainty over how to protect themselves. This report raises various findings evidencing that the response provided by the government to the need for communicating information on the Covid-19 pandemic and ways to deal with it, differed from the outline planned for the national information campaign in a civil emergency event, which was drilled around a year and a half before the outbreak of the pandemic. In addition, the critical positions in the Public Diplomacy Directorate that was established in the Prime Minister's Office, in accordance with a Government Decision from 2007, were not manned at the time of the pandemic outbreak; therefore, the information system failed to operate as planned. Moreover, the Ministry of Health, which was supposed to lead the government information communication actions, lacked a functional infrastructure and suitable professional tools, which were provided amid the pandemic and rising infection rates, with an investment of state resources, without taking into consideration the preparations made in the years preceding the pandemic and the resources already invested in this matter. The findings and recommendations in this report should serve as a basis for the process of drawing lessons to be carried out in this matter.

To ensure the readiness of government information bodies for an emergency, it is recommended to set out a binding plan for the division of responsibility among the various information bodies and the customization of the organizational and professional infrastructure of each of them to suit the responsibility assigned to it under said plan; to lay down effective information dissemination principles and methods, based on a population study that includes mapping and characterization of different target audiences; and to establish integrated government information sources for public use in a time of emergency. Another challenge facing the information bodies is dealing with inaccurate information, which is widely disseminated via the social networks. The readiness for response in this area requires monitoring cases that necessitate a reaction, and the formulation of suitable information communication means in advance, such as setting up a pool of spokespersons who are experts in their field and trained for media appearances, with access to data and information, to deliver a fitting professional response. The responsibility of verifying the readiness of the information bodies for an emergency is on the Public Diplomacy Directorate in the Prime Minister's Office.