

# Man kills dog

**The Task Group on Government Communications (COMTASK) has completed its investigation into government communications and the recommendations rest with Deputy President Thabo Mbeki. CHRIS VICK reports.**

**S**O, THEY'VE FINALLY AGREED to shoot the dog. They've taken it out into the backyard, loaded the gun, and they're ready to pull the trigger. SACS, the information mongrel which out-lived the other runts in the apartheid litter, gets the bullet in September — Thabo Mbeki willing.

Millions of South Africans probably don't know how much misery SACS caused them through its distortion of information, its dreadful publications, its waste of resources, the role it played in trying to win hearts and minds, or its pathetic and insular attempts to transform itself.

Soon, we will hopefully see in SACS' place a government information system more appropriate to an emerging democracy — one which, as Comtask describes it, is able to create a meaningful dialogue between government and the people.

The nature of that new animal will, if the Comtask report is implemented, essentially be as follows:

- A new Cabinet Committee on Information Economy will be set up early next year to politically manage government communications.
- A Government Central Information Service (GCIS), coordinated from the Presidency, will be set up to coordinate communication in three areas: media liaison, liaison with provinces, and communication services (handled by a new Communications Service Agency (CSA), responsible for centralised training, bulk buying, centralised advertising, etc).
- All this will be guided by a new advisory body operating on a two-year mandate under the rather SACS-type title of "Communications 2000", who will provide professional knowledge on a pro bono basis.

The Task Group's 83 recommendations are intended to take South African government communications from its current state (no clear message, no clear policy, no clear lines of communication) towards a service which is streamlined, efficient, transparent and has credibility. So how will it differ from what we have now? Hallmarks of the new system, according to Comtask, will be:

- Two-way communication between government and the people. As the Task Group says:

"Government must engage better with civil society, creating a dialogue between government and the public."

- Greater emphasis on the needs of the illiterate, the disabled and those historically deprived of information.
- Coordinated messages from government.
- Skilled, trained government communicators.
- Management by objectives, resulting in more effective use of resources.

Quite how long we wait for these changes is anyone's guess — although if the Deputy President's Office sticks to Comtask's proposed timetable, the Cabinet Committee and Communications 2000 should be set up by February, the GCIS should be in place by June and the CSA should be operational by July. SACS should be dead by September.

## Going ballistic

Comtask was "born" on a missile testing range in Arniston during December 1995 at a specially-convened summit of government communicators and media representatives. At the time, politicians were starting to struggle with the impact of "freedom of expression": The media honeymoon was very obviously over, and the journalists who had helped to magnify the potential of the liberation movement were starting, with equal success, to magnify its limitations.

Comtask was mooted to come up with some solutions, and a 10-member team put in place to do some investigating.

Sections of the media felt threatened by the initiative. I remember a lunch with key management figures at Times Media Limited a few weeks after Comtask was appointed, where the table buzzed with mutterings about "this new Steyn commission" in a reference to PW Botha's anti-media initiative in the early 1980s.

The TML bosses were troubled: Mbeki wants the media to be government lackeys; he wants government slots on TV; he wants to nationalise the press. You could almost see the apartheid State President "morphing" into the post-apartheid Deputy President. These were scared men.

You wonder how they all feel now. Then, they worked for the old mining bosses; now they work for the old mineworkers' bosses, and their whole world has changed with it.

A lot more has changed in the media environment since Comtask was mooted. Print media ownership has gone through a significant change of hands, we've had passionate and healthy exchanges between government and the media, and some media institutions

have realised the importance of rebuilding journalism.

Of course, not much has changed for the consumers of government information. They still generally have to be literate, live in electrified homes, and fall inside an SABC "footprint" to know what the people they elected are doing. Government still relies far too heavily on the mass media to communicate, and when they do communicate it's generally down a one-way street. The Open Democracy Act is still being tossed around government departments for comment, and it's still extremely difficult to get information out of some government departments.

## Thinking long and hard

Was Comtask worth all the effort? There's no doubt that the report is an excellent commentary on (most of) the challenges facing government communicators right now. There's also no doubt that the recommendations, if implemented properly, will transform the way government interacts with the public.

But even if the report dies on Mbeki's desk, Comtask will have succeeded in forcing a range of South Africans to think long and hard about the kind of government information system they want, and to express themselves on vital issues such as the needs of the illiterate, the disabled, and other disadvantaged groups. South Africans have also spoken out on issues such as media ownership patterns, the desperate need for skills development among both journalists and government communicators, and the appropriate use of information technology.

In addition, the Comtask process has united government communicators around common demands. It has speeded up debates around the establishment of a media development agency and other support for community media (hopefully, not too late), the need for the Open Democracy Act to be pushed through Parliament, and greater coordination of South Africa's efforts to sell itself abroad.

Of course, we cannot forget Comtask's generous act of euthanasia: it has (Thabo Mbeki willing) killed SACS — and put us all out of our misery.

Copies of the full Comtask report are available from, wait for it: any SACS office.

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**This report is also at:** <http://www.polity.org.za/govdocs/commissions/comtask.html>