

China, GCIS discuss communication challenges

An 11-member delegation from the State Council of Information Office (SCIO) in China met on Wednesday with the Government Communication and Information System (GCIS) to discuss communication practices.

The meeting at the Union Buildings was a result of GCIS receiving a letter from the SCIO, requesting a visit to GCIS to understand its role in providing strategic leadership in government communication and information.

Although South Africa lags behind China in terms of government communication platforms, the country is eager to learn from its Chinese counterparts, Deputy Chief Executive Officer of the GCIS, Vusi Mona said.

"We are nowhere near China in terms of government platforms and products. We can learn from you," he said.

Platforms where government could convey its programmes include the *Public Sector Manager (PSM)* magazine as well as the monthly *Vukuzenzele* newspaper and the South African Government News Agency - Sanews.gov.za. The magazine is published monthly as is the newspaper which has a print run of 1.7 million monthly.

A lot could be learnt from the Chinese state owned media, which includes the *People's Daily*, which has a subsidiary.

"We are very impressed with it," said Mona, who was accompanied to the meeting by GCIS's deputy CEO of Government and Stakeholder Management, Nebo Legoabe, as well as Acting Chief Executive Officer Phumla Williams.

Williams added that the GCIS was still grappling "with a synergy of messages, that it contradicts itself". This, she said was complex due to the workings of a three tier government. "Getting it right is a challenge. But we are tackling it," she said, adding that the budget was also highly constrained.

Other challenges the Acting CEO raised was that of developing communicators.

Internet penetration in South Africa was also still very low although government has a presence. The use of the internet by South Africans had increased to around 300 million with most people using smartphones that have access to the internet.

"We have got active citizens on the internet; they want to see it expanding," said Deputy Minister for Performance Monitoring and Evaluation, Obed Bapela, adding that more of the country's citizens needed to be trained on how to use the internet.

The South African government media platforms were not seen as competition with the country's commercial media, said Mona, adding that in South Africa, the media's capacity to reach all citizens was very limited.

"Media is commercially driven," he said, adding that in some cases not all government news made it through commercial media.

Vice Minister of the SCIO and State Internet Information Office Qian Xiaoqian said that he was happy to be engaging with the GCIS, adding that the function of his office was similar to that of the GCIS.

"Taking into consideration the bigger picture, we share similar challenges. We want to use this visit for more cooperation. We should learn from each other," he said.

For example media briefings in China were broadcast live with more time allowed for questions. On an annual basis, about 80 briefings were hosted. China boasts four million websites.

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