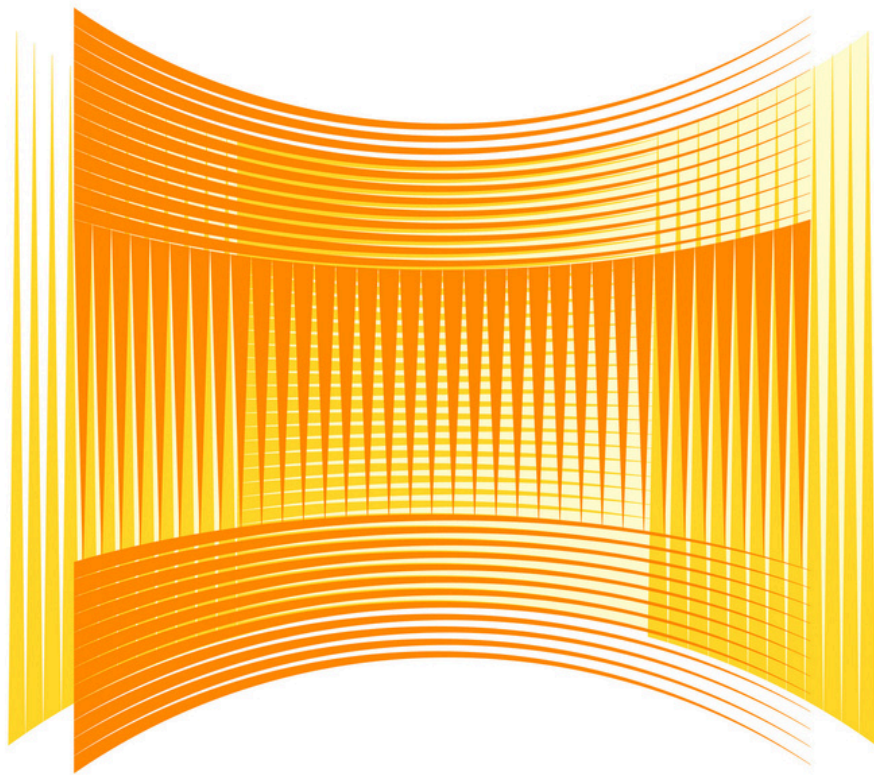




Durable Trust



**A Strategic Communications
Framework for Electoral
Management Bodies**

APRIL 2026

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**International Foundation
for Electoral Systems**

2000 M Street NW, Washington, DC, 20036, United States

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Durable Trust

A Strategic Communications Framework for Electoral Management Bodies

AUTHOR

Rushdi Nackerdien

IFES Senior Global Advisor: for Training and Capacity Development

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International Foundation
for Electoral Systems

About this Technical Guidance Report

This policy framework synthesizes international best practices and field-tested approaches to electoral communications from EMBs, development partners, and democracy support organizations worldwide. Developed through extensive consultations between 2024 and 2026, it consolidates insights from IFES, international implementers, and leading national EMBs that have pioneered innovative approaches across diverse contexts—from established democracies navigating digital disinformation to fragile states rebuilding electoral legitimacy. The framework integrates lessons from successful strategies implemented in Brazil, Australia, South Africa, the Philippines, and other jurisdictions.

Rather than prescribing a single model, the framework offers a diagnostic and developmental approach built around seven core dimensions of strategic communications, supported by a four-stage maturity pathway. This structure enables EMBs to assess their current capacity, identify priorities for development, and plan realistic improvements aligned with available resources and local contexts. The document balances policy-level principles with actionable guidance, making it accessible to EMB commissioners and executive leadership, communications directors, technical assistance providers, and development partners.

EMBs are encouraged to adapt the framework to their specific mandates, political environments, and institutional constraints. Not every dimension will be equally relevant or feasible in every context. The comparative examples and practitioner insights are intended to stimulate strategic thinking rather than serve as templates for replication, treating this as a living reference that evolves as electoral communications practices continue to develop in response to technological change, shifting information environments, and democratic challenges.

The author would like to sincerely thank Carla Chianese for reviewing early concepts in this framework. Field research leaned heavily on experiences in Bangladesh and Papua New Guinea and discussions with staff of various electoral management bodies and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES). Peer review was conducted by Fernanda Buri, Sarah Ann Timreck, Nicole Leaver and Erica Shein. Editing was done by Jaime L. Jarvis.

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Executive Summary

Electoral management bodies (EMBs) around the world operate in environments of heightened scrutiny, declining trust in public institutions, rapid information flows and increasing volumes of misinformation and disinformation. In this context, strategic communications can no longer be treated as an auxiliary or reactive function. It is a core institutional responsibility that directly affects electoral integrity, public confidence and the legitimacy of electoral outcomes.

This document presents a capability-anchored strategic communications framework for EMBs. It defines the normative role, institutional responsibilities and governance expectations on communications for EMBs, while providing a structured and practical framework for implementation across diverse political, technological and trust environments.

The framework is organized around seven interrelated capabilities for EMBs' strategic communications:

- Institutional positioning
- Stakeholder engagement
- Public dialogue and participation
- Narrative and message strategy
- Information integrity management
- Digital communication strategy
- Crisis and risk communication

Together, these dimensions establish a coherent foundation for how EMBs communicate, internally and externally and before, during and after electoral events.

Recognizing the operational realities EMBs face, the strategic communications framework incorporates a maturity and growth pathway to support staged institutional development, practical tools for assessment and implementation and guidance on the ethical and responsible use of emerging technologies – including artificial intelligence – within clear governance and accountability boundaries.

Rather than prescribing a single model, the framework is designed to be adaptive, allowing EMBs to apply consistent principles while responding to local contexts, legal mandates and resource constraints. It is intended for adoption or reference by EMB leadership, senior management and communications units and as a common point of alignment for technical assistance providers and development partners. By positioning strategic communications as not only a matter of messaging, but also a matter of policy and institutional governance, the framework supports EMBs in strengthening trust, managing risk and sustaining credibility across electoral cycles.

Introduction

Elections are among the most visible and contested public processes in any democratic system. Election management bodies (EMBs) are entrusted with administering these processes impartially, transparently and professionally. On top of the normal operational complexities of large-scale logistical rollout under major time constraints, in many contexts EMBs in many contexts face declining public trust, intensified political polarization, persistent challenges related to mis- and disinformation and public misunderstanding of electoral processes.^{1,2} Given the complexity, the combination of threats to elections is increasingly classified as “hybrid threats.”³ In this environment, how EMBs communicate is inseparable from how they manage and administer elections.

Strategic Communications as an Institutional Responsibility

Hallahan and colleagues define strategic communication as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission.”⁴ This implies a multidisciplinary approach that, in an electoral context, combines the right messaging, timing, audience, channels and purpose.

Strategic communication is no longer limited to public relations, voter information campaigns or crisis responses. It encompasses leadership signaling, stakeholder engagement, internal coordination, information integrity, service orientation and the EMB’s capacity to inform and be responsive to stakeholders. As such, it must be guided by clear policies, institutional mandates and ethical standards, rather than ad hoc practice or individualized approaches.

Trust and Strategic Communications

In an election context, trust is the sustained confidence that voters, candidates, political actors and election officials share in the fairness, integrity and reliability of the process and its outcomes. Research shows that trust is built not only through clear and accurate messaging, but also through consistent institutional performance and the lived experience of all stakeholders across the electoral cycle – including how transparently procedures are implemented and how problems are resolved.⁵ Trust is also shaped by perceptions of risk and accountability; when failures occur,

¹ James, T. S., Matlosa, K., & Shale, V. (2023). Safeguarding election management bodies in the age of democratic recession, *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 30:3, 323-336, DOI: [10.1080/10220461.2023.2278594](https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2023.2278594)

² UNDP (2024a). Information Integrity for Electoral Institutions and Processes: Reference Manual for UNDP Practitioners. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-03/24119_undp_information_integrity_v07_rc_002.pdf

³ “Hybrid threats” are framed as actions planned and executed with the intent to harm or destabilize states, organizations and institutions. It has particular resonance in the conduct of elections. For more information, see Folke Bernadotte Academy (n.d.), *Hybrid threats and free elections*, <https://fba.se/en/what-we-do/areas-of-expertise/democratic-resilience/hybrid-threats-and-free-elections>; and Bay, S. (2024, March), *Hybrid CoE Research Report 12: Countering hybrid threats to elections: From updating legislation to establishing collaboration networks*, <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-research-report-12-countering-hybrid-threats-to-elections-from-updating-legislation-to-establishing-collaboration-networks>.

⁴ Hallahan, K., Holtzhausen, D., van Ruler, B., Verčič, D., & Sriramesh, K. (2007). Defining Strategic Communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 1(1), 3–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15531180701285244>

⁵ Nyhan, B., Bergeron-Boutin, O., Clayton, K., & Kousser, T. (N.d.). *Communicating with Voters to Build Trust in the U.S. Election System: Best Practices and New Areas for Research*. White paper. MIT Election Data + Science Lab. <https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/projects/mapping-election-science/white-papers/voter-trust>; IFES. (N.d.-a). *Election Officials and Trust in Elections*. <https://www.ifes.org/our-expertise/information-integrity/election-officials-and-trust->

stakeholders assess who bears the burden and whether the institution responds fairly and visibly. In low-trust environments, people rely on community leaders and trusted networks, so strategic communications must go beyond direct messaging and actively engage these trusted intermediaries.

Communication Principles

The framework outlined in this paper leverages the following principles, building on recent research:⁶

- **Impartiality and equity:** The EMB communicates in a manner that is politically neutral and ensures equal access to information for all electoral stakeholders, without preference or discrimination.
- **Transparency:** The EMB proactively discloses information on electoral processes, decisions and constraints to enable public understanding and scrutiny.
- **Timeliness and comprehensiveness:** The EMB provides information, early enough and in sufficient detail, to allow voters, political actors and partners to prepare, comply and respond appropriately.
- **Accuracy and coherence:** The EMB ensures that all public information is factually correct, legally grounded, internally consistent and aligned across departments and channels.
- **Clarity and simplicity:** The EMB presents information in clear, plain language and structured formats that can be easily understood by nonspecialist audiences.
- **Frequency:** The EMB communicates regularly and predictably across the electoral cycle to reduce uncertainty, speculation and information gaps.
- **Interactivity:** The EMB enables two-way communication by creating channels for questions, feedback and clarification, particularly during critical electoral periods.
- **Accessibility and inclusivity:** The EMB designs its messaging to reach diverse populations, including persons with disabilities, linguistic minorities, first-time voters and historically excluded groups.

This framework responds to a growing recognition that EMB communications shape public perceptions of integrity and competence, influence stakeholder behavior and expectations, affect the EMB's ability to manage crises and disputes and build trust in the integrity of the electoral process.

Strategic Communications in Practice

As electoral environments have become more complex, visible and contested, the expectations placed on EMBs have increased significantly. EMBs are required to inform and assist voters across diverse channels, respond to real-time media scrutiny, address misleading information and maintain public confidence in electoral integrity, often simultaneously and under intense time pressure. These demands are widely recognized but are frequently addressed

[elections](https://www.idea.int/news/pillars-trust-elections); Wolf, P., & Laanela, T. P. (2022, December 21). *Pillars of Trust in Elections*. International IDEA. <https://www.idea.int/news/pillars-trust-elections>; Stewart, C. (2022). Trust in Elections. *Daedalus* 151 (4): 234–253. doi: https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01953.

⁶ CEPPS. (2024). *Strengthening Election Management Body Communications with Political Parties in Elections: Practical Guidelines and Principles*. Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS). <https://www.ifes.org/publications/strengthening-election-management-body-communications-political-parties-elections>

through discrete functions and guidance documents that have been developed in response to specific risks, mandates and operational needs.

Across many EMBs, this separation is not accidental. Reputation management, media relations, information integrity and voter outreach are often governed by separate mandates and operational units because these functions operate on different time horizons, carry different sensitivity levels and are subject to distinct accountability and approval requirements. In high-scrutiny electoral environments, such separations serve as institutional safeguards, helping EMBs demonstrate neutrality, protect staff and reduce exposure to allegations of bias or improper influence.

At the same time, fragmentation without alignment can weaken the organization, particularly during moments of heightened pressure. When voter education insights do not inform media engagement, when information integrity responses are disconnected from baseline public understanding or when units apply inconsistent language to the same electoral process, EMBs risk confusion, delayed responses and avoidable reputational strain. For this reason, an integrated strategic layer – positioned above, not in place of, existing functions – is increasingly essential. Rather than centralizing decision-making or collapsing distinct mandates, this layer establishes shared principles, common language, consistent outcomes and agreed escalation thresholds that allow specialized functions to operate confidently and coherently across the electoral cycle.⁷ Table 1 summarizes how this approach can look in practice.

Table 1. Integrating the Strategic Layer across Institutional Functions

Channel	What stays independent	What aligns through the strategic layer
Reputation/ Trust	Long-term narrative direction and institutional identity	Agreed organizational goals and defined tolerance levels for reputational risk
Media relations	Spokesperson roles and media handling	Consistent language and escalation triggers
Information integrity	Monitoring of information ecosystems and threat analysis	Decision criteria for when to clarify publicly versus continued monitoring
Voter education	Design, targeting and delivery of activities	Structured means for channeling field insights/feedback into media relations and information integrity responses

This strategic communications framework sets out the core capabilities required to operationalize this strategic layer, providing a practical lens through which EMBs can assess, strengthen and align their communication functions while respecting existing mandates and safeguards.

Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this document is to provide EMBs with a clear policy and governance framework for strategic communications, supported by practical guidance for implementation. It seeks to answer three core questions:

- What should strategic communications mean for an EMB, as a matter of institutional policy?
- What governance principles and responsibilities should guide EMB communications functions?

⁷ IFES has developed a set of internal tools and practices to help EMBs operationalize the strategic layer.

- How can EMBs operationalize these principles in diverse, high-pressure contexts?

The strategic communications framework applies across EMB types and contexts – including permanent and temporary bodies, consolidated democracies and transitional systems and low- and high-resource environments. It is designed to complement legal mandates and electoral regulations, not replace them.

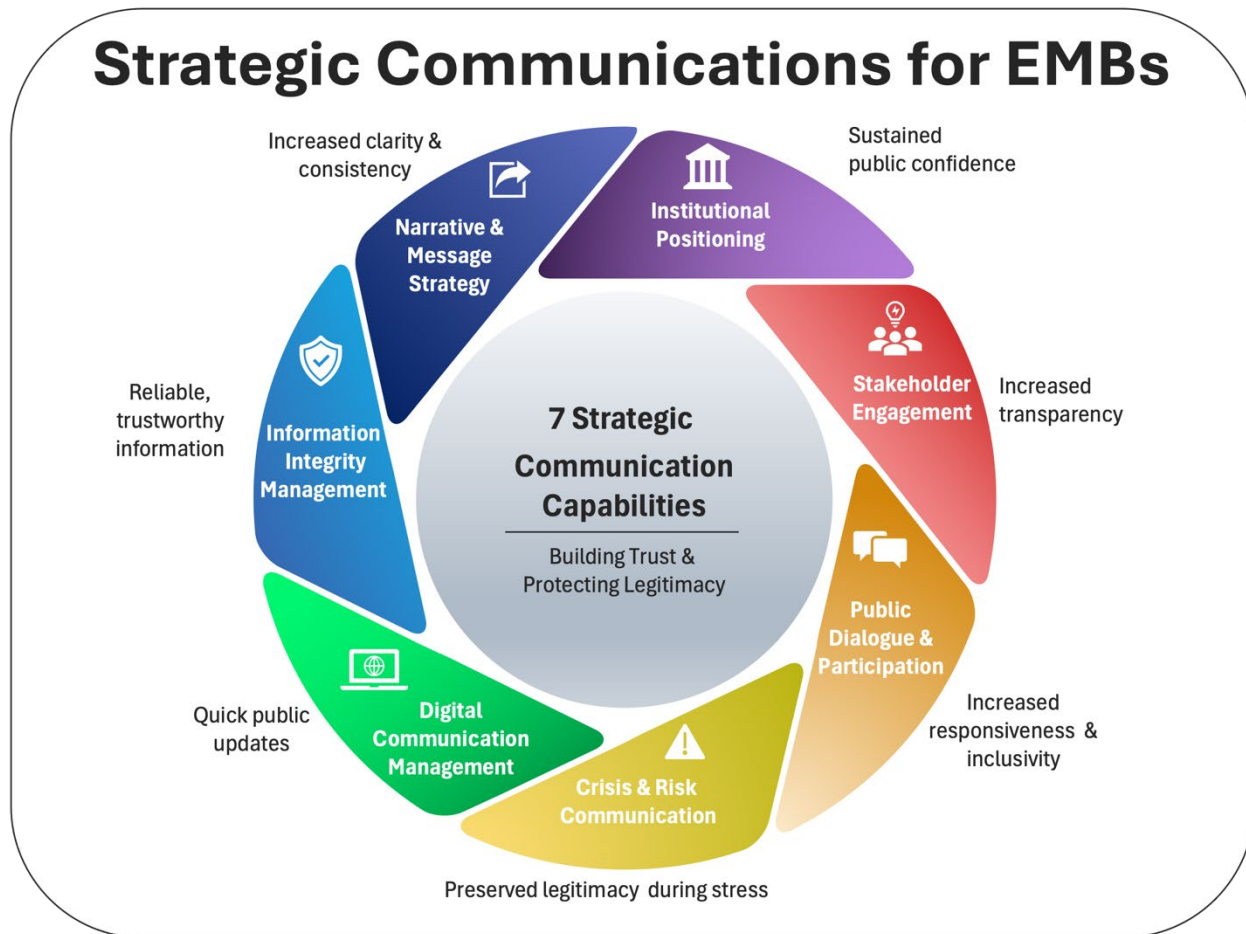
The framework draws on desk research, lessons from IFES’ extensive experience providing technical assistance to EMBs, country examples and relevant insights from the humanitarian and development sector (e.g., health and human rights). This paper also highlights capabilities that could benefit from the careful use of artificial intelligence (AI), while recognizing documented vulnerabilities, challenges and risks.⁸

⁸ CISA. (2024, January 18). Risk In Focus: Generative A.I. and the 2024 Election Cycle. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA). https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/2024-05/Consolidated_Risk_in_Focus_Gen_AI_ElectionsV2_508c.pdf. See also Buriel, F. (2026), *Brave New Ballot: Generative AI in Election Campaigns and Other Political Communication*, International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), <https://www.ifes.org/document/brave-new-ballot>

The Seven Strategic Communications Capabilities

This framework is built around seven strategic communications capabilities (Figure 1), each representing a core area of focus. The capabilities are mutually reinforcing and intended to be applied holistically, not in isolation.

Figure 1. The Strategic Communications Seven Capabilities and Their Impacts



1. Institutional Positioning

This capability focuses on bolstering the EMB’s public profile and perceived integrity through consistent, transparent outreach. It involves proactive disclosure of information, regular media engagement and visible leadership by election officials. In practice, that means frequent press briefings, accessible reports and demonstrable independence in all communications (refer to “Key Strategies,” below, for details).

High visibility on the EMB’s own terms helps set the narrative about its role and performance, rather than ceding that space to critics or misinformation.⁹ When an EMB openly highlights its processes, safeguards and improvements, it

⁹ Bicu, I. (2024, January 31). *Challenges for electoral officials in the information environment around elections*. International IDEA. <https://www.idea.int/theme/information-communication-and-technology-electoral-processes/election-officials-challenges-information-environment-around-elections>

builds a reservoir of credibility that can buffer against political attacks or public suspicion during sensitive periods. Conversely, invisibility or silence from an EMB breeds uncertainty and allows rumors to fill the void.¹⁰

Communications experts note that transparency is essential to building trust.¹¹ Institutions should share openly how decisions are made and acknowledge uncertainties or errors. If information is not provided quickly, stakeholders may assume the worst or turn to unreliable sources. In short, consistent visibility and honesty by an EMB establishes it as a trustworthy actor well before any crisis hits.¹²

Country Examples: Visibility in Practice

Bangladesh: The Election Commission faced criticism for operating opaquely and failing to engage the public, undermining its credibility. Observers have noted that the commission must convince voters it is not beholden to any party and is transparently serving all sides.¹³

Philippines: The Commission on Elections (COMELEC) dramatically increased its media presence, holding regular press conferences and talk show appearances that helped maintain public confidence amid contention. Equally, COMELEC has insisted that political candidates register their social media pages with the EMB.¹⁴

Australia: The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) exemplifies transparency by providing routine updates on electoral processes and publishing abundant voter education materials.¹⁵

Brazil: The Superior Electoral Court (TSE) ensures its top officials are highly visible, with frequent public statements and high-profile legal defenses of the election system's integrity.¹⁶

Key Strategies

- **Executive-led messaging:** Ensure the head of the EMB is front and center in communications, consistently emphasizing the EMB's commitment to impartiality, service and improvement.
- **Transparent operations:** Publicize important electoral preparations, decisions and data to demystify the process for the public.
- **Routine press engagement:** Hold scheduled media briefings, even during "quiet" periods between elections, to normalize transparency.
- **Accessible information:** Maintain a user-friendly website and publish information in multiple languages and formats to reach all segments of the population.

¹⁰ WHO. (2017, August). *Operational Guidance on Accountability to Affected Populations*. World Health Organization (WHO). <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/documents/publications/operational-guidance-on-accountability-to-affected-populations.pdf>

¹¹ WHO. (N.d.-a). *Be transparent*. Communicating for health: Credible and trusted. World Health Organization (WHO). <https://www.who.int/about/communications/credible-and-trusted/being-transparent>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Hasan, M. (2023, March 10). Can Bangladesh's Election Commission Act to Boost Its Credibility? *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/can-bangladeshs-election-commission-act-to-boost-its-credibility/>

¹⁴ Nicolas and De Vega Law Offices. (N.d.) *COMELEC Social Media Rules: 2025 Philippine Election Guide*. <https://ndvlaw.com/comelec-social-media-rules/>

¹⁵ AEC. (N.d.-a). *AEC Electoral integrity journey*. Australian Electoral Commission (AEC). https://www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/integrity-timeline/timeline.html

¹⁶ Superior Electoral Court. (N.d.). *Elections 2022 - Brazil's Electoral Justice Permanent Program on Countering Disinformation - Strategic Plan*. <https://international.tse.jus.br/en/misinformation-and-fake-news/brazil-electoral-justice-permanent-program-on-countering-disinformation>

- **Showcasing improvements:** Use communications to highlight reforms or improvements that boost confidence, signaling that the EMB is a learning organization dedicated to better service.

2. Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder-centric communication means tailoring engagement to the needs of different groups with a stake in the electoral process – voters, political parties, civil society organizations, media, security forces and international partners. Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, the EMB develops specific communication channels, formats and content for each constituency.¹⁷

Each stakeholder group interacts with elections differently and has unique information needs.¹⁸ Voters need practical how-to information, political parties seek transparency and advance notice of rule changes, media need timely updates and civil society wants access to data and consultation opportunities. Clear, segmented outreach ensures that everyone understands the process and sees the EMB as responsive to their concerns.¹⁹

In humanitarian practice, this approach is mirrored by the Accountability to Affected People (AAP) principle of “putting people first” and involving them in decisions that affect them.²⁰ Meaningful inclusion and listening foster a sense of partnership and reduce suspicion of wrongdoing, engendering more trust in the EMB and the process. The AAP guidelines note that affected communities should participate in decisions that affect them and that response efforts must be based on communication, participation and feedback – a standard EMBs should uphold with their stakeholders to build trust.

Country Examples: Stakeholder Engagement Models

South Africa: The Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) holds structured briefings for each major stakeholder category throughout the election cycle, including statutory party liaison committees at national and provincial levels in which political party representatives meet regularly with IEC officials to discuss preparations and address grievances.²¹

Brazil: TSE institutionalizes stakeholder engagement via permanent consultative councils – including committees with academics, technology experts and civil society representatives – to advise on topics such as election technology and disinformation.²²

¹⁷ CEPPS. (2024).

¹⁸ UNDP. (2023). *SELECT Project Report: Information Integrity during electoral processes 2021–2024*. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgkq326/files/2023-07/undp-information-integrity-to-sustain-peace-during-electoral-processes.pdf>

¹⁹ ALNAP. (2024, March 1). *No transparency, no trust: Community perceptions of humanitarian aid*. <https://alnap.org/help-library/resources/no-transparency-no-trust-community-perceptions-of-humanitarian-aid/>

²⁰ UNHCR. (2025, updated September 26). *Accountability to affected people (AAP)*. *UNHCR Emergency Handbook*. United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). <https://emergency.unhcr.org/protection/protection-principles/accountability-affected-people-aap>

²¹ IEC. (N.d.). *Party Liaison Committees*. Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC). <https://www.elections.org.za/pw/Parties-And-Candidates/Party-Liaison-Committees>

²² Soares, E. (2022, October 26). Brazil: Superior Electoral Tribunal Enacts Resolution to Combat Fake News During 2022 General Elections. *Law Library of Congress*. <https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2022-10-25/brazil-superior-electoral-tribunal-enacts-resolution-to-combat-fake-news-during-2022-general-elections/>

Australia: The AEC set up numerous disinformation partnerships, including with private social media companies such as Meta, X (Twitter), Google, TikTok and Snap.²³

Sri Lanka: The Election Commission worked with representatives of disabled peoples' organizations to ensure regular, ongoing coordination and communication.²⁴

Indonesia: In a unique safeguarding step, the General Elections Commission (*Komisi Pemilihan Umum*, or KPU) adopted strict rules prohibiting election commissioners from meeting privately with candidates or party officials outside official forums to avoid any perception of backdoor deals – demonstrating how structured engagement can build trust in high-mistrust contexts.²⁵

Engaging Political Parties: A Trust-Building Priority

Among all stakeholders, political parties are arguably the most sensitive and influential group for EMB communications. Parties are both critical partners in the process and potential adversaries if they perceive unfairness. A recent IFES guide on strengthening EMB-party communications²⁶ highlights several relevant principles:

- **Impartiality and equity:** Ensure all parties receive equal information and access.
- **Transparency:** Share data publicly (e.g., audit findings) to demonstrate even-handed enforcement.
- **Institutionalized channels:** Establish formal advisory councils, routine consultative meetings and joint working groups on technical matters.

Other Key Stakeholders

- **Media:** Hold media training workshops and provide media kits explaining electoral procedures. Maintain open lines through spokespersons to ensure the EMB's perspective is reflected in news stories.
- **Civil society and observers:** Treat observer groups and nongovernmental organizations as partners in voter education and oversight. Involve civil society in campaigns to extend reach and gain credibility.
- **Security forces:** In places prone to election-related violence, regular communication with police and the military about their roles ensures coordinated crisis responses and public reassurance.
- **Marginalized communities:** Conduct focus groups or establish advisory groups with members of marginalized communities – such as women, persons with disabilities and young people – and partner with trusted community figures who can serve as “election ambassadors.”

²³ AEC. (2022, August 3). AEC celebrates successful disinformation partnerships. Australian Electoral Commission (AEC). <https://www.aec.gov.au/media/2022/08-03.htm>

²⁴ Zero Project. (N.d.). *Countrywide working group making elections more accessible*. <https://zeroproject.org/view/project/844d9011-4f16-4661-99c0-f59c4b120efa>

²⁵ DKPP Regulation (Peraturan DKPP) No. 2 of 2017 on the Code of Ethics and Behavioural Guidelines for Election Organizers. <https://dkpp.go.id/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/peraturandkppnomor2tentangkodeetik.pdf>

²⁶ CEPPS. (2024).

3. Public Dialogue and Participation

In the past, communication has tended to flow from EMBs outward,²⁷ but two-way communication flow with the public and stakeholders is essential. It encompasses feedback channels such as voter hotlines, online inquiry forms, social media interactions, community listening sessions and surveys. Essentially, it is how an EMB listens and responds, making communication a dialogue rather than a broadcast.

An EMB that listens is better equipped to serve the electorate and manage risks. Feedback loops can alert EMBs to emerging problems before they escalate into trust-eroding crises. Responding to public questions or complaints in real time enhances the EMB's image as a responsive, service-oriented institution. This mirrors a core tenet of accountability: "establish and maintain effective feedback systems ... and respond in a timely, effective manner."²⁸ An institution that hears people's voices and closes the loop by acting on feedback will earn sustained trust.

Country Examples: Feedback in Action

Philippines: COMELEC hosts Facebook Live Q&A sessions in which citizens can ask commissioners questions in real time, manages an "Ask COMELEC" messenger service and tracks the volume and nature of calls to adapt public messaging.²⁹

Australia: The AEC tracks questions received from voters and the media, using that data to refine messaging. Its website features an extensive FAQ section, which it updates continually based on what voters are asking, and its X (Twitter) account replies promptly to users' questions.

India: The Election Commission operates voter facilitation centers and runs social media grievance portals³⁰ during elections, where complaints are logged publicly and addressed with responses or actions.

Guinea: Before the 2021 coup, a coalition of 30 civil society organizations (SYNCERE) developed a citizen manifesto, "*cahier citoyen*,"³¹ presented as a roadmap to address and prevent election-related crises. The roadmap became the reference document for political and social dialogue in Guinea, engaging both the EMB and the government.³²

Key Mechanisms

- **Voter hotlines and helpdesks:** Provide toll-free election hotlines with trained agents, well-publicized and adequately staffed during peak times.
- **Interactive social media:** Reply to comments, answer questions in direct messages, correct misinformation and host live Q&A sessions.
- **Public consultations:** Organize town hall meetings, community forums or focus groups, especially when introducing significant changes.

²⁷ UNDP. (N.d.-a). *Stakeholder Engagement and Response Mechanisms*. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). <https://ses-toolkit.info.undp.org/stakeholder-engagement-and-response-mechanisms>

²⁸ WHO (2017, August).

²⁹ Ask COMELEC. (N.d.). Facebook Page. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/askcomelec/>

³⁰ Electoral Commission of India. (N.d.). *National Grievance Service Portal*. <https://www.eci.gov.in/national-grievance-service-portal>

³¹ CEPPS. (2021). *SYNCERE, Cahier Citoyen Constats Et Propositions Sur La Problematique Du Dialogue Inclusif En Guinee*. https://guinee114.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Cahier-Citoyen_Dialogue_SYN.CE_RE-vf-transmission.pdf

³² CEPPS. (2022). *Final Report: Building Electoral and Accountability Capacity, Orderly Norms and Democratic Governance (BEACON-DG)*. Unpublished report.

- **Surveys and polling:** Conduct voter surveys on trust, information needs or campaign effectiveness to guide improvements.
- **Internal feedback:** Create channels for field staff and polling officials to report problems in real time, enabling rapid response.
- **Closing the loop:** Address questions comprehensively and in a timely manner. Act on feedback. If full answers take time, provide interim acknowledgment. If errors occur, issue prompt corrections.

4. Narrative and Message Strategy

Narrative framing is about shaping the overarching story or context in which the public understands electoral events and the EMB's work. It means the EMB deliberately crafts a long-term narrative about elections and the EMB's role – emphasizing themes such as gradual improvement, integrity, inclusivity and democratic stability – rather than letting each election be seen as an isolated event. When an EMB anchors its communications in a consistent, values-based narrative throughout the entire electoral cycle, it can respond to ad hoc incidents and crises with clear factual and technical clarifications.

Public perception of elections can be heavily influenced by dominant narratives, which might be set by political actors, media or social discourse. A strong narrative frame set by the EMB provides continuity and helps create a sense of collective progress and resilience. It reassures citizens that despite any issues, there is a steady journey toward better elections and the EMB is learning and improving over time.

This is especially critical in volatile contexts. A coherent, positive narrative can inoculate the public against efforts to delegitimize the process. Narrative framing also ties directly to trust-building; it appeals to values and emotions, not just facts. By communicating an inspiring mission or collective goal, the EMB helps the public connect with the electoral process on a deeper level.³³

Country Examples: Narrative Strategies

South Africa: The IEC explicitly frames South Africa's electoral journey as part of democratic deepening, linking current election efforts to the country's liberation history and constitutional values.³⁴ Reforms are described as steps in fulfilling the promise of 1994.

Brazil: The TSE frames its work as part of a narrative of modernizing and safeguarding democracy.³⁵ Leading up to contentious elections, the TSE ran communications emphasizing how far the system had come since the days of paper ballots, painting electronic voting as a national achievement to be proud of.

Australia: In the AEC's Reputation Management Strategy,³⁶ one of six core principles focuses on subject-matter expertise, establishing the EMB as the foremost expert on federal electoral matters in the country. This authoritative framing helps uphold and strengthen its reputation as a trusted institution.

³³ UNICEF Sudan. (2024, August 26). *Building trust, saving lives: How community trust committees are turning vaccine hesitancy around in Sudan*. <https://www.unicef.org/sudan/stories/building-trust-saving-lives>

³⁴ See the IEC's strategic plans at <https://www.elections.org.za/pw/Downloads/Documents-Election-Campaign-Materials>.

³⁵ Rubio, R., & Monteiro, V. de A. (2023). Preserving trust in democracy: The Brazilian Superior Electoral Court's quest to tackle disinformation in elections. *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 30(3), 497–520. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2023.2274860>

³⁶ AEC. (N.d.-b). *Reputation Management System (RMS)*. Australian Election Commission (AEC). https://www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/files/reputation-management-system.pdf. The other five pillars relate to operational excellence, electoral integrity, meetings expectations, communication and responsiveness.

Common Narrative Themes

- **Continuous improvement:** With proactive and structured lessons-learned efforts, each election helps identify and address weaknesses and respond to emerging needs.
- **Transparency and integrity:** Everything the EMB does is in service of maintaining public trust, portraying itself as guardian of electoral integrity.
- **Inclusion and participation:** Highlight efforts to include marginalized groups and increase participation, framing democracy as becoming more inclusive.
- **Peace and stability:** In post-conflict societies, frame elections as means to secure peace by channeling disputes into “ballots, not bullets.”
- **National pride:** Tie successful elections to national identity and progress, making elections something to celebrate.

Guidelines for Implementation

- For established EMBs, define core narrative themes aligned with national values and EMB mandate.
- For newly established EMBs, articulate founding principles that signal independence, fairness and public service, clearly linking the new institution to national constitutional values and democratic aspirations.
- Communicate continuity by referring to past and future elections, not just the immediate one.
- Own setbacks openly, but pivot to solutions as part of a proactive narrative.
- Use storytelling techniques with human interest stories to engage emotions.
- Monitor competing narratives and actively counter false framing.
- Diagnose before correcting: identify the fear, the trusted messenger and what credible proof would look like.
- Co-verify claims using a simple checklist (source, date, locality and official reference) to model transparency.
- De-escalate emotion first, then redirect to a verified pathway (hotline, website or help desk).
- Avoid amplifying low-reach misinformation; instead, equip trusted intermediaries with forwardable, verified content.
- Prioritize timely, usable and locally meaningful information – even when full certainty is not yet possible.

5. Information Integrity Management

This capability entails the strategies and mechanisms EMBs use to protect³⁷ the information ecosystem around elections from misinformation (unintentional falsehoods) and disinformation (deliberately deceptive information). It includes pre-bunking (proactively providing correct information ahead of rumors) and debunking (reactively correcting false information), along with collaborating with fact checkers and media platforms and using systematic “infodemic” management approaches.³⁸

³⁷ For more information, see IFES’ forthcoming paper on Freedom of Expression and Information Controls in Electoral Processes.

³⁸ Systematic infodemic management approaches involve using evidence-based strategies to address the spread of misinformation during health emergencies. These methods include training health workers to identify misinformation, engaging communities and using digital tools for effective communication and information dissemination. For more

In the digital age, misinformation can spread rapidly and undermine an election’s credibility even if the process itself is sound.³⁹ An EMB’s ability to manage information integrity is now as important as its ability to deliver ballots and count votes.⁴⁰ By actively countering false information, EMBs protect electoral legitimacy⁴¹ and reassure voters that they are getting truthful, verified updates.⁴²

Misinformation thrives on information voids. If the EMB is not providing information quickly and clearly, rumors will fill the gap. Initiatives such as UNDP’s iVERIFY platform⁴⁷ seek to get ahead of this. Combating misinformation is about not only policing falsehoods but also building the public’s trust in official information sources by working with communities to understand why certain rumors take hold and addressing underlying concerns.⁴⁸

AI-Enabled Strategies to Protect Information Integrity

AI offers practical tools for strengthening information integrity while requiring careful governance.

Valuable applications:

- Rumor triage⁴³ and “infodemic” analytics – clustering questions/claims, identifying information voids, prioritizing corrective messaging.⁴⁴
- Rapid drafting of plain-language voter information with human review.⁴⁵

Essential safeguards:

- *Human in the loop*: AI outputs are advisory; final communications remain human responsibility.
- *Transparency*: Document model provenance, versioning and known limitations.
- *Data protection*: Collect, process and retain only minimum personal data that might be strictly necessary for a specific defined purpose; separate personally identifiable information; and apply retention limits.
- *Quality assurance*: Pre-test in multiple languages, run bias checks and maintain error registers.⁴⁶

information, see WHO (N.d.-b), *Infodemic*, World Health Organization (WHO), <https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic>.

³⁹ UNDP. (2024a).

⁴⁰ Bay, S. (2025). *Protecting Electoral Integrity: The Case of Sweden*. International IDEA.

<https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/html/protecting-electoral-integrity-case-sweden>

⁴¹ UNDP. (2024b, March 20). *Defending Information Integrity: Actions for Election Stakeholders*. Global Policy Centre for Governance, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). <https://www.undp.org/policy-centre/governance/publications/defending-information-integrity-actions-election-stakeholders>

⁴² Bicu, I. (N.d.). *The Information Environment Around Elections*. International IDEA.

<https://www.idea.int/theme/information-communication-and-technology-electoral-processes/information-environment-around-elections>

⁴³ Love, L-J. (2026, January 13). *4 key ways AI-powered media monitoring is transforming PR strategy*. Agility PR Solutions. <https://www.agilitypr.com/pr-news/crisis-comms-media-monitoring/4-key-ways-ai-powered-media-monitoring-is-transforming-pr-strategy>

⁴⁴ WHO Europe. (2022, November 8). *Advancing infodemic management in RCCE: implementation guidance*. World Health Organization (WHO) Europe. <https://www.who.int/europe/publications/item/WHO-EURO-2022-5842-45607-65433>

⁴⁵ OECD. (2025, September 18). *Governing with Artificial Intelligence – AI in civic participation*. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2025/06/governing-with-artificial-intelligence_398fa287/

⁴⁶ OECD/UNESCO. (2024). *G7 Toolkit for Artificial Intelligence in the Public Sector*. Report Prepared for the 2024 Italian G7 Presidency and the G7 Digital and Tech Working Group.

https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/10/g7-toolkit-for-artificial-intelligence-in-the-public-sector_f93fb9fb/421c1244-en.pdf

⁴⁷ UNDP. (N.d.-b). iVERIFY platform: <https://www.undp.org/digital/iverify>

⁴⁸ Ripoll, S., Cole, J., Tulloch, O., Schmidt-Sane, M., & Hrynick, T. (2020). *6 ways to incorporate social context and trust in infodemic management*. Social Science in Humanitarian Action Platform.

Country Examples: Anti-disinformation Strategies

Brazil: The TSE set up a dedicated Disinformation Monitoring Center, partnered with social media companies to flag content, ran public education campaigns and launched a “Facts or Rumors” webpage.⁴⁹ It also took legal action against egregious fake news spreaders.

Philippines: COMELEC partnered⁵⁰ with media and civil society fact-checking initiatives such as the *FactsFirstPH* coalition to identify and jointly debunk viral false posts. The chair publicly addressed specific allegations with evidence.

Australia: The AEC created a disinformation register on its website⁵¹ – an easy-to-read list of common false claims and factual corrections, continuously updated and referenced in social media with myth-busting infographics and information about disinformation tactics.⁵²

Strategic Approaches

- **Pre-bunking (proactive):** Anticipate common misconceptions and address them up front. Push out informational content about known flashpoint topics before elections. Use media literacy campaigns to educate voters on how to spot misinformation tactics.
- **Debunking (reactive):** Establish rapid response teams to address rumors as they emerge. Monitor trending topics during election periods. Have prepared fact sheets and template responses for likely scenarios. Respond within hours with fact-check posts or press statements.
- **Community engagement:** Understand why misinformation resonates. Use data to identify which rumors people are hearing and why they might believe them. Address root concerns through transparency measures like live-streaming vote counts.
- **Collaborative partnerships:** Work with technology platforms, media networks, fact-checking organizations and civil society. Establish memoranda of understanding with social media companies for content moderation. Co-host fact-checking hubs. Train community volunteers as media monitors and rumor trackers.

6. Digital Communication Strategy

A digital strategy refers to the use of digital tools and platforms – from websites and social media to SMS, mobile apps and other blended means, such as online broadcasting⁵³ – to communicate with and provide services to the electorate. Digital strategy also includes ensuring online content is accessible (mobile-friendly, multilingual and

<https://www.socialscienceinaction.org/resources/6-ways-to-incorporate-social-context-and-trust-in-infodemic-management/>

⁴⁹ Rubio, R., & Monteiro, V. de A. (2023).

⁵⁰ FMA. (2022, April 14). *On Meta’s Takedowns, the COMELEC Task Force and Election Information Disorder: The FMA Digital Rights Roundup | April 1-15, 2022*. Foundation for Media Alternatives (FMA). <https://fma.ph/on-metas-takedowns-the-comelec-task-force-and-election-information-disorder-the-fma-digital-rights-roundup-april-1-15-2022/>

⁵¹ AEC. (N.d.-c). *Disinformation register*. Australian Election Commission (AEC). <https://aec.gov.au/media/disinformation-register.htm>

⁵² AEC. (N.d.-d). *Voter’s guide: Communication tactics catalogue*. Australian Election Commission (AEC).

<https://www.aec.gov.au/media/disinformation-tactics.htm>

⁵³ Nwachukwu, P. C. (2023). The Influence of Political Advertising on the Voting Patterns of Rural Residents in Electoral Processes: A Study on the Role of Radio Campaigns. *Path of Science*, 9(8), 5001–5008. <https://doi.org/10.22178/pos.95-2>

disability-inclusive) and leveraging data analytics to guide outreach. Digital platforms vastly increase an EMB's reach and agility in communications.⁵⁴ With large segments of populations online, EMBs now have unprecedented direct access to voters without always going through traditional media gatekeepers. A savvy digital approach⁵⁵ means voters can receive information instantly via SMS reminders, social media posts or interactive websites and apps, along with digital streaming, to check registration or find polling places.⁵⁶

Digital tools also enable two-way engagement at scale. However, going digital means EMBs must adapt to the fast-paced information cycle and address the digital divide; not everyone has equal access. A well-planned digital strategy enhances reach, timeliness and inclusivity – if implemented with local access patterns in mind.⁵⁷

AI-Enhanced Digital Services

Service-oriented chatbots: AI-powered chatbots⁵⁸ can answer high-volume questions (registration,⁵⁹ polling places, ID requirements, electoral information⁶⁰) with escalation to human agents and robust logging for auditability.

Translation services: Rapid translation of voter information into multiple languages, with human review for accuracy and cultural appropriateness.

Content quality control: AI consistency checking across channels (website versus social media versus press releases) to reduce inadvertent contradictions.

Critical: All AI outputs require human review. EMBs must clearly communicate about what is automated and what is decided by humans, what data is used and how errors are handled and corrected.

Country Examples: Digital Strategies Across Contexts

Papua New Guinea: PNGEC blends community radio for rural populations and Facebook for urban populations, recognizing that no single channel covers all segments. Plans include mobile-friendly website updates and weekly radio programs alongside social media.

Philippines: COMELEC capitalizes on high rates of social media usage with Facebook, X (Twitter) and YouTube presence. They stream live events,⁶¹ runs hashtag campaigns for youth registration and piloted online voting for overseas voters with extensive digital guidance.⁶²

⁵⁴ Morris, G. (2021, August 25). *Social Media Strategies for Election Management Bodies*. International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES). <https://www.ifes.org/publications/social-media-strategies-election-management-bodies>

⁵⁵ IFES. (N.d.-b). *Social Media Tools for Election Management Bodies*. <https://www.ifes.org/programs-initiatives/social-media-tools-election-management-bodies>

⁵⁶ OECD. (2025, September 18).

⁵⁷ Kaiser, S. (2014, March 15). *Social Media: A Practical Guide for Electoral Management Bodies*. International IDEA. <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/social-media-practical-guide-electoral-management-bodies>

⁵⁸ Central electoral. (2024, April 17). *Nueva versión del chatbot del INE en WhatsApp permitirá verificar información sobre elecciones 2024 [Mexico EMB uses chatbot to engage on WhatsApp on disinformation]*. <https://centraelectoral.ine.mx/2024/04/17/nueva-version-del-chatbot-del-ine-en-whatsapp-permitira-verificar-informacion-sobre-elecciones-2024/>

⁵⁹ Patel, F. (2023, October 24).

⁶⁰ turn.io. (2023, October 9). *Argentina's National Electoral Chamber 'Vot-A' chatbot: a trusted resource ahead of 2023 presidential polls*. <https://www.turn.io/news/cne-vot-a-chatbot>

⁶¹ <https://www.youtube.com/COMELEC>

⁶² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nChlxrcdFYs>

Australia: AEC offers comprehensive e-services, including enrollment status checks, polling place locators, practice ballots, translations in multiple languages and accessible formats. The EMB uses data analytics to refine content based on usage patterns.

Brazil: TSE launched a WhatsApp chatbot for instant answers to common questions⁶³ and a YouTube channel for educational videos and engaged influencers on Instagram to reach younger audiences at scale in the 2022 elections. For the 2026 presidential elections, given the massive consumption of politics via social media (72% via social media compared to 18% via television or radio), the TSE is confronted with major challenges with monitoring of digital campaigns,⁶⁴ which may impact its own use of influencers.

Key Components

- **Multiplatform presence:** Identify the most-used platforms (Facebook, X [Twitter], TikTok, WhatsApp, SMS, TV and radio) and establish an official presence, as applicable, leveraging each platform's strengths and tailoring strategies to the most likely audiences (e.g., TikTok for young people, radio for rural and remote areas).
- **Consistency and branding:** Maintain a consistent voice and branding across platforms, with verification badges and the same slogans/hashtags.
- **User-centric website/app:** Design around user needs with easy navigation, multilingual support, mobile-friendly design and surge capacity planning.
- **Data-driven content:** Use analytics to understand information needs and adjust content accordingly.
- **Engagement over broadcast:** Treat channels as two-way communication; respond to comments, host live chats and run interactive content.
- **Inclusion and accessibility:** Bridge digital divides with offline outreach and integrate accessible design and translations across communications platforms.
- **Security and resilience:** Secure websites and accounts against hacking; have backup communication plans, such as redundancies, if platforms fail.

7. Crisis and Risk Communication

Crisis communication involves preparation and protocols for handling unexpected adverse events or controversies that could jeopardize an election's credibility or conduct. Crises can include violence, natural disasters, technical failures, legal disputes or misinformation spikes. A crisis communications plan typically designates official spokespeople, outlines communication channels and sets procedures to deliver fast, accurate information under pressure.⁶⁵

During a crisis, minutes and hours count in controlling the narrative and informing the public. If an EMB is slow or disorganized in its communication, the information void will be filled by panic, rumors or one-sided stories that can

⁶³ <https://www.tse.jus.br/comunicacao/noticias/2022/Abril/chatbot-tira-duvidas-do-tse-no-whatsapp-traz-novidades-para-as-eleicoes-2022>

⁶⁴ <https://factonews.co/ai-fake-news-and-elections-what-the-tse-changed-in-electoral-propaganda/>

⁶⁵ IFES. (2021, March 5). IFES Supports Strategic and Crisis Communication Training in The Gambia. International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES).

<https://www.ifes.org/news/ifes-supports-strategic-and-crisis-communication-training-gambia>

permanently undermine trust. Effective crisis communication can reassure the public that the situation is being managed and prevent escalation.⁶⁶

Closed Social Media Groups

Platforms such as WhatsApp operate as closed, socially embedded environments shaped by technical encryption and lived social habits, power dynamics and political culture. Strategic responses should therefore include the following:

- Dedicated rumor intake and triage mechanisms tailored to encrypted channels
- Forwardable, low-bandwidth “verified packets” (shareable image cards in local languages) designed for rapid peer-to-peer circulation
- Structured partnerships with trusted intermediaries – including civil society organizations, observer groups and local leaders – who can share verified content in groups that the EMB cannot directly access

Research in emergency management consistently finds that clear, timely information builds trust and alleviates fear.⁶⁷ Even if the news is bad, hearing it directly from the EMB – along with what is being done about it – is far better for maintaining credibility than if people find out through leaks or on social media.

AI Support for Crisis Preparedness

Scenario-based rehearsal: AI can generate draft press lines and Q&A packs for likely crisis scenarios (violence, technical failures, delayed results), supporting faster response preparation.

Incident response planning: Prepare standard approaches for deepfakes targeting commissioners, especially women commissioners,⁶⁸ or AI-generated hoaxes about voting logistics. Include watermarking/metadata protocols for any EMB-produced synthetic content.

Critical limitation: All crisis communications must remain under human control. AI serves only as preparation and drafting support – never autonomous crisis response.

⁶⁶ UNDP, European Commission, & International IDEA. (2011). *Workshop on Effective Electoral Assistance: Participant's Guidebook*. Joint EC-UNDP Task Force on Electoral Assistance.

<https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/Effective%20Electoral%20Assistance%20-%20Workshop%20Guidebook.pdf>

⁶⁷ VCU. (2021, June 14). *Crisis Communication for Emergency and Crisis Management Officials*. Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). <https://onlinewilder.vcu.edu/blog/crisis-communication/>

⁶⁸ Bicu, I. (2023, March 7). *Breaking barriers as a woman in electoral management: “the price I paid for my leadership.”* International IDEA. <https://www.idea.int/news/breaking-barriers-woman-electoral-management>

Country Examples: Digital Strategies across Contexts

Brazil: The TSE runs joint simulations with police and other agencies to practice responding to worst-case scenarios, including immediate press conferences.⁶⁹ In 2022, rapid debunking of viral lies and televised addresses by the chief justice helped assert control over the narrative.

South Africa: The EMB and security authorities rely on pre-established crisis communication protocols linked to election security planning. During incidents of violence or disruption, timely media briefings are used to communicate confirmed information, security responses and statutory options such as reruns of affected voting.⁷⁰ In 2019, when false reports circulated about missing ballot boxes, the IEC held a same-day media briefing to clarify.

Australia: The AEC gives real-time updates during natural disasters and other emergencies. If polling stations must relocate, announcements go out immediately on X (Twitter), website updates and local media. Backup plans are prepared and communicated if systems fail.⁷¹

Essential Elements

- **Pre-designated spokespersons:** Identify who – with media training and clear roles – speaks for the EMB in a crisis (typically the chair/CEO).
- **Prepared communication channels:** Have pre-cleared holding statements, a chain of command for approvals, a roster of trained spokespersons and updated contact lists.
- **Speed and frequency:** Issue the first statement as soon as credible information is available, even if it is just a holding statement. Provide regular follow-ups.
- **Accuracy and credibility:** Balance speed with accuracy. Verify core facts before announcing them. Transparently acknowledge uncertainty. Correct errors promptly.
- **Demonstrating action and empathy:** Convey what the EMB is doing and acknowledge public concerns. Express empathy for inconvenience or fear.
- **Internal communication:** Ensure all staff and poll workers know what to do and what is being communicated publicly.
- **Coordination with other authorities:** Work with police, health authorities and government crisis systems to ensure messages do not conflict.

⁶⁹ TSE Brazil. (2022). *Brazil's Electoral Justice Permanent Program on Countering Disinformation: Strategic Plan: Elections 2022*. Superior Electoral Court (TSE) Brazil.

<https://international.tse.jus.br/en/misinformation-and-fake-news/tse-brazil-counter-disinformation-program-2022.pdf>

⁷⁰ Matatu, N. (2023, November). *Protecting Electoral Integrity: The Case of South Africa. Case Study*. International IDEA. <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/2023-11/protecting-electoral-integrity-the-case-of-south-africa.pdf>

⁷¹ AEC. (2020, November). *Inquiry on the future conduct of elections operating during times of emergency situations: Australian Electoral Commission submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, 2020*. Australian Electoral Commission (AEC). <https://www.aph.gov.au/DocumentStore.ashx?id=468399f7-c762-4914-a041-9b596b4d6626&subId=695854>

Maturing Communications Practices

Effective strategic communications require not only implementing the seven dimensions, but also good practices to mature⁷² these capabilities from basic, reactive practices to sophisticated, systemic ones. Adapting models from other sectors,⁷³ a capability maturity model for EMBs helps outline current and desired capability states. Many EMBs strengthen (or are assumed to strengthen) their capabilities in communications over multiple election cycles, or they strengthen some but not others. This section presents a maturity model to guide and assess this multidimensional nature, followed by an illustrative assessment (Figure 2).

Institutional Depth of Maturity

1. Reactive

At this level, the EMB's communications function is minimal, ad hoc and fragmented. Communication is largely in reaction to events, with little planning. Common traits include:

- No strategic plan or comprehensive communications strategy
- Limited channels (rudimentary website, occasional press statements)
- Low capacity (one person or untrained part-time staff)
- One-way and opaque communication with few feedback channels
- Outputs exist, but no repetition
- High vulnerability to rumors
- Slow crisis response

2. Emerging

The EMB prioritizes the importance of communication and has taken steps toward formalizing its strategy:

- Basic strategy in place with scheduled activities
- Some dedicated resources (two or three staff members with defined roles)
- Nascent multichannel presence (social media accounts, newsletters)
- Stakeholder engagement improving, with some meetings and consultations
- Responsive capacity on ad hoc basis with basic crisis protocols
- Basic monitoring and feedback loops, but not integrated across departments
- Growing visibility with more frequent leadership presence

⁷² Siegel, C., & Zerfass, A. (2025, September 5). Communication Maturity: The Next Big Thing? A Critical Review of Maturity Models in Strategic Communication and Their Contribution to Measurement & Evaluation and Excellence, *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, DOI: [10.1080/1553118X.2025.2549551](https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2025.2549551)

⁷³ Al-Sai, Z.A, Husin, M. H., Syed-Mohamad, S. M., Abdullah, R. Abu Zitar, R., Abualigah, L., & Gandomi, A. H. (2023). Big Data Maturity Assessment Models: A Systematic Literature Review. *Big Data and Cognitive Computing* 7, no. 1: 2. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bdcc7010002>

3. Advanced

The EMB consistently integrates communication in its operations:

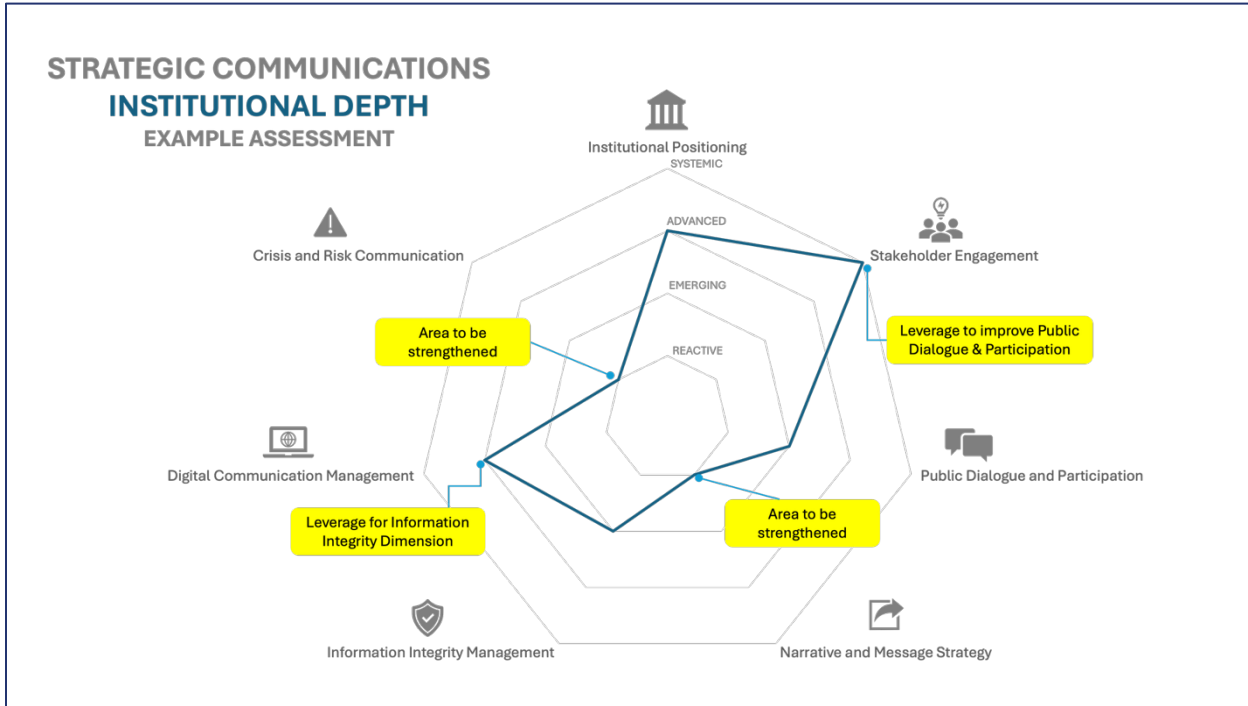
- Integrated strategy aligned with the electoral cycle and the EMB's broader strategic and operational plans
- Professional team with specialized roles and skills
- Proactive, multidimensional, year-round engagement
- Coherent narrative and contextually appropriate, values-based messaging
- Robust feedback integration informing decisions
- Advanced digital outreach with a multichannel/platform approach
- Service standards (response times, correction protocols) and post-election learning in place
- Tested crisis communications plan with trained spokespeople

4. Systemic

Communications are fully embedded in the EMB's institutional culture and systems, operating at a level of excellence and seen as a model by others:

- Communications as core governance are woven into every process
- High-trust environment with stable public confidence, even in polarized contexts
- Innovative, adaptive and continually improving
- Governance framework (roles, accountability, audit trails), routine scenario drills and trust measurement
- Institutional memory and learning systematically captured
- Whole-of-society engagement with broad partnerships
- Resilience and crisis mastery proven through experience
- Trusted advisor role, potentially mentoring other EMBs

Figure 2. Example Assessment of Institutional Depth with Areas to Leverage and Areas to Strengthen



Common Barriers to Progress

Strengthening strategic communications capability in an EMB requires deliberate change management that recognizes both establishment and consolidation barriers (Table 2) as structural realities rather than institutional failings. In many contexts, communications reform begins without formal anchoring in the EMB’s strategic plan or multiyear vision, leaving it vulnerable to leadership turnover, budget cycles and shifting political priorities. Limited human resources, constrained infrastructure for information and communications technology (ICT) and underdeveloped stakeholder engagement mechanisms further restrict progress, while fiscal pressures demand prioritization rather than expansion.

As reforms advance, a second layer of consolidation challenges emerges: the absence of an integrated digital strategy, fragmented coordination across departments, weak feedback and data analysis systems, insufficient crisis preparedness and ongoing political or legal sensitivities that narrow the scope of public messaging. Effective change management in this environment requires phased institutionalization – embedding communications within strategic planning processes, aligning responsibilities across units, investing in scalable digital foundations, formalizing feedback loops and developing crisis protocols that are legally and politically robust. Progress is not linear; it involves sequencing reforms, protecting core capabilities under constraint and steadily shifting from ad hoc activity toward coordinated, system-wide resilience across electoral cycles.

Table 2. Examples of Barriers Encountered as Capabilities in Strategic Communications Mature

Establishment Barriers	Consolidation Barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absence of mention in strategic planning and multiyear vision • Limited human resources and expertise • Inadequate stakeholder engagement structures • Technological constraints and poor ICT capacity • Resource limitations and budget constraints 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of integrated digital strategy and coordination • Insufficient preparedness for crisis communication • Weak feedback mechanisms and analysis systems • Political and legal sensitivities affecting the scope of communication • Continued resource limitations preventing scaling

Building over Multiple Cycles

Improvements in strategic communications – and resulting gains in public trust – accrue incrementally. It is unrealistic to expect a communication effort to undo decades of distrust in a single election. Instead, EMBs must view improvements as a continuous, cycle-to-cycle endeavor, with each election providing lessons to apply to the next.

For example, Brazil’s sophisticated approach has evolved through repeated innovations since the 1990s. South Africa’s stakeholder networks were built gradually from 1994, creating a deeply ingrained culture of consultation over nearly three decades. These efforts did not develop fully in one or two cycles; it took consistency over decades to become part of the democratic fabric.

For newly established EMBs emerging from peace agreements or post-conflict transitions – particularly where previous electoral authorities were associated with flawed processes or compromised integrity – strategic communications should begin as a trust-rebuilding function. This means deliberately acknowledging past shortcomings, clearly articulating new safeguards and institutional reforms and building transparent, two-way engagement structures from the outset so communications capacity develops in parallel with institutional credibility, not ahead of it.

For more established EMBs, nonelection years should be used for planning, training and content creation, with mid-cycle years or by-elections used to pilot new initiatives so that EMBs enter election periods with tested systems ready to implement at scale. After each election, EMBs should conduct communications “post-mortems” to capture lessons and feed them into plans for the next cycle.

Conclusion

Strategic communications is not an adjunct to the “real work” of election management; it is integral. From credibility to crisis response, each of the seven dimensions reinforces the core objective of an EMB – to deliver a legitimate, inclusive and trusted electoral process.

High-trust communication practices drawn from humanitarian and development experience underscore that transparency, engagement and responsiveness are universal pillars for earning public confidence. By revising their strategies across visibility, stakeholder engagement, two-way feedback, narrative framing, information integrity, digital outreach and crisis management, EMBs can evolve into more open and resilient institutions.⁷⁴

The examples from Brazil, Australia, Brazil, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, South Africa and other countries show practical pathways. We see these approaches echoed in efforts by the World Health Organization’s health crisis management and UNICEF’s community mobilization, amplifying that when institutions communicate *with* people (not just *to* people), trust blossoms and outcomes improve.⁷⁵

An EMB that invests in these dimensions is investing in the very fabric of democracy. Communication is the thread that weaves together public understanding and institutional action. If done well, the dividends are clear: more informed voters, more cooperative stakeholders, higher compliance with electoral procedures and greater resilience of the electoral process against shocks.

Over multiple electoral cycles, this can create a virtuous cycle of trust. Each well-communicated election increases the reservoir of goodwill and credibility, which in turn helps the next election run smoother, even if challenges arise.

Practical Implementation

EMBs aiming to implement this framework should ensure they have the following:

- A professional communications unit with adequate resources and training
- A clear strategy document (living and revisited often) that incorporates the seven dimensions
- Support from leadership, recognizing communication as a strategic function
- Partnerships with civil society, media outlets, technology platforms and international experts

Strategic communications must adapt to each country’s context and elections; there is no one-size-fits-all solution. But principles such as honesty, inclusion and proactiveness are universally applicable. By aligning communication practices with those principles and learning continuously from other sectors, EMBs can greatly enhance their contributions to electoral integrity and democratic governance.

⁷⁴ UNDP. (2024a).

⁷⁵ WHO. (N.d.-a).

In the words of a World Health Organization policy brief on risk communication and community engagement, “Improving trust through strategic communication and co-developing solutions with communities is critical.”⁷⁶ This holds true for overcoming crises and for elections; trust is both the prerequisite for and the outcome of effective, strategic communication.

Through the integrated approach outlined in this framework, EMBs can co-develop trust with the public – election by election, story by story and dialogue by dialogue – thereby fulfilling their mandate in both letter and spirit. ■

⁷⁶ WHO. (2022, September 14). *WHO policy brief: Building trust through risk communication*. World Health Organization (WHO). https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-Policy_Brief-RCCE-2022.1



2000 M Street NW, Washington, DC, 20036, United States

www.IFES.org