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Evaluation of the Department of Public Information[1]

Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services

Summary

As the public face of the United Nations, the Department of Public Information communicated the ideals and work of the Organization to diverse global audiences. It did so through a broad and varied range of activities, including determining messaging on key issues, coordinating campaigns and events, producing multimedia and multilingual news on various platforms and running the United Nations flagship social media accounts and web presence.

The Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) examined the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of key outputs of the Department, given the changing media and communications environment, in communicating and building support for the work and ideals of the United Nations. In its evaluation, OIOS employed mixed methods, including interviews and surveys with Department staff and key stakeholders, visits to field offices of the Department, document and data review, social media analytics and direct observation.

One of the key challenges faced by the Department was the rapidly changing communications environment. The Department made notable strides in responding to those changes, by increasing its web and social media presence and influence and making internal structural changes to bolster its multimedia and social media capacities. Those changes, however, were not always guided by a systematic or coherent strategy.

* The dates for the substantive session are tentative.
** E/AC.51/2019/1.
[1] As at 1 January 2019, the Department of Public Information has been renamed the Department of Global Communications.

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The Department largely fulfilled its extensive mandates. However, it lacked the strategic direction to prioritize its activities, due in part to frequent leadership changes, and faced structural constraints that led to inefficiencies, silos and duplication of efforts. The work of the Department varied in its effectiveness and in its ability to tailor messages on a broad range of issues to varied audiences, in different languages.

The Department operated 59 field offices, which allowed it to have a global presence at the local level and helped it to amplify messages through partnerships and campaigns. However, their influence and reach were uneven and affected by capacity constraints and varied leadership approaches and arrangements.

Partnerships at both the headquarters and field levels proved critical in increasing the reach of the messages and products of the Department, in particular considering increasingly constrained resources. The Department was resourceful in developing partnerships but constrained by a fragmented approach and restrictive bureaucratic procedures. The Department provided effective support to United Nations system partners, but its lack of a coordination mandate meant that it could not overcome the varied approaches and priorities of those entities.

OIOS makes four main recommendations:

- Invest in high-level, sustained and forward-looking strategic thinking and prioritization;
- Reduce structural inefficiencies at the headquarters and field levels;
- Create more modern and engaging content to reach greater audience numbers;
- Strengthen partnerships through a holistic, integrated approach.

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I. Introduction and objective

1. The Inspection and Evaluation Division of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) identified the Department of Public Information for evaluation on the basis of a risk assessment undertaken by OIOS to identify Secretariat programme evaluation priorities. The Committee for Programme and Coordination selected the programme evaluation of the Department for consideration at its fifty-ninth session, in June 2019 (see A/72/16). The General Assembly endorsed the selection, in its resolution 72/9.

2. The general terms of reference for OIOS consist of General Assembly resolutions 48/218 B, 54/244 and 59/272, as well as Secretary-General's bulletin ST/SGB/273, by which OIOS is authorized to initiate, carry out and report on any action that it considers necessary to fulfil its responsibilities. The general frame of reference for the Inspection and Evaluation Division is provided in regulation 7.1 of the Regulations and Rules Governing Programme Planning, the Programme Aspects of the Budget, the Monitoring of Implementation and the Methods of Evaluation (ST/SGB/2016/6).

3. The overall objective of the evaluation was to determine, as systematically and objectively as possible, the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of key outputs of the Department, given the changing media and communications environment, in communicating and building support for the work and ideals of the United Nations. The evaluation topic emerged from a programme-level risk assessment, as described in the evaluation inception paper.[2] The evaluation was conducted in conformity with the norms and standards for evaluation in the United Nations system.[3]

4. Comments were sought from the Department (see annex) on the draft report and were taken into account in the preparation of the final report.

II. Background

A. History and mandate of the Department

5. The Department of Public Information was established in 1946 as one of the eight original departments of the United Nations, under General Assembly resolution 13 (I). It is dedicated to communicating to the world the ideals and work of the United Nations; to interacting and partnering with diverse audiences; and to building support for the purposes and principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations (see A/70/6 (Sect. 28)). Under General Assembly resolution 67/292 the Department is mandated to operate in the six official languages of the United Nations.

6. Among its key activities are: working with United Nations system entities on determining and coordinating messaging and strategic communications on priority issues, both at Headquarters and at the country level, through the global network of United Nations information centres; producing multimedia and multilingual news and feature content for United Nations public-facing websites and external media; monitoring news coverage relevant to the work of the Organization; developing and updating the United Nations website (www.un.org); developing and implementing campaigns, outreach programmes and events; and producing publications.

[2] OIOS Inspection and Evaluation Division, document IED-17-006, Inception Paper: Evaluation of the Department of Public Information (5 June 2017).

[3] United Nations Evaluation Group, *Norms and Standards for Evaluation* (New York, 2016).

B. Structure and governance of the Department

7. The Department is headed by the Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications and is composed of the following three divisions, each headed by a director:

(a) Strategic Communications Division: The largest subprogramme by budget, the Division develops and implements strategies for communicating United Nations messages on priority and crisis issues; manages the Department's network of field offices; and acts as secretariat for the United Nations Communications Group;

(b) News and Media Division: The second largest subprogramme by budget, the Division creates and disseminates multimedia products on the work of the United Nations through its multilingual news teams, via videos, webcasts, social media accounts, photos and web services, including www.un.org. It provides coverage of intergovernmental meetings, manages the audiovisual library, provides support services for journalists and monitors media coverage of United Nations issues and meetings;

(c) Outreach Division: The Division engages with members of academia, civil society and the entertainment industry and educators students and others. It produces several key outreach publications and manages the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, the United Nations intranet (iSeek) and Visitors' Services. The Division also hosts the secretariat of the Committee on Information and the Office of the Envoy of the Secretary-General on Youth.

8. The Department is headquartered in New York, and it works globally through its network of 59 operational information centres,[4] which are supported by the Strategic Communications Division. They comprise the United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe, located in Brussels, two United Nations information services, located in Geneva and Vienna, 48 United Nations information centres across Africa (15), the Americas (10) in Arab States (8), in Asia and the Pacific region (11) and Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States region (4), as well as eight offices, one in each of the following States: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Eritrea, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. The United Nations information service in Geneva, the largest field presence of the Department, has significant audio and video production components and meetings coverage functions.

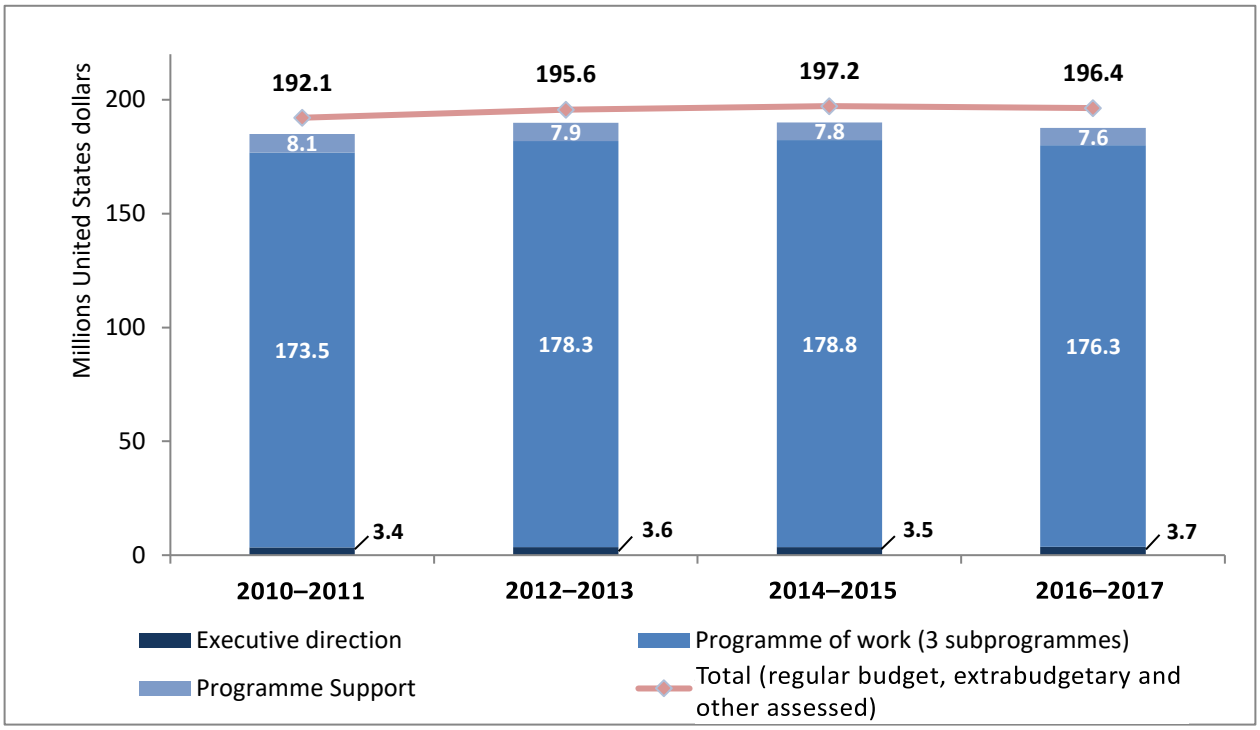
9. The primary governing body for the Department is the Committee on Information, a subsidiary body of the General Assembly, currently comprised of 115 Member States. The Committee, which meets annually, examines the public information activities of the United Nations and oversees the work of the Department.

C. Resources of the Department

10. The regular budget appropriation for the Department for the biennium 2014–2015 amounted to $190,079,900. For the 2016–2017 biennium, the budget appropriation decreased slightly to $187,570,100 (see A/72/6 (Sect. 28)). Figure I illustrates the Department budget by component for the period from 2010 to 2017.

[4] There are 63 in total, but 4 (Bucharest, Luanda, Maseru and Tripoli) are non-operational as at 2017.

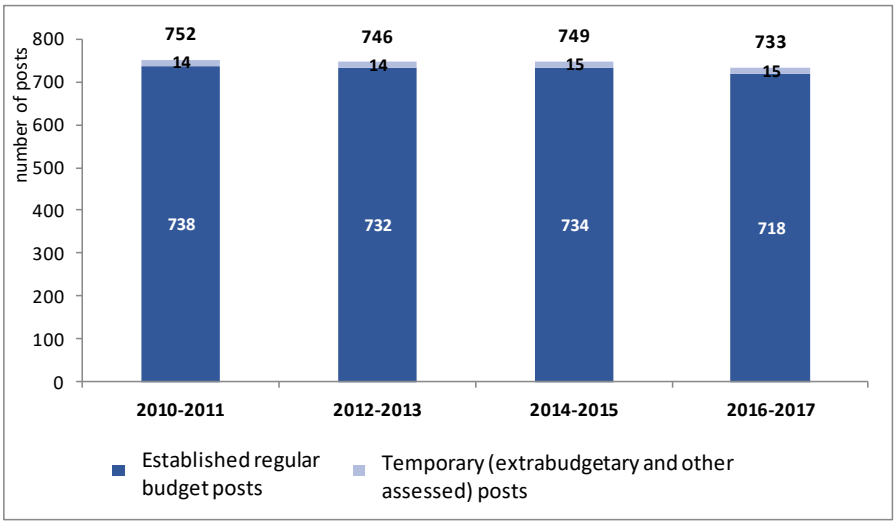
Figure I
Budget of the Department, by component, 2010–2017



Source: A/72/6 (Sect. 28), A/70/6 (Sect. 28), A/68/6 (Sect. 28) and A/66/6 (Sect. 28).

11. In the 2014–2015 biennium, the Department had 734 regular budget posts and it had 718 posts in the 2016–2017 biennium. Figure II illustrates posts by source of funding for the period 2010 to 2017. The number of posts in the 2016–2017 biennium decreased by 19 (2.5 per cent) from the biennium 2010–2011. Almost all posts (98 per cent) were funded by regular budget resources.

Figure II
Department posts, by source of funding, 2010–2017



Source: A/66/6 (Sect. 28), A/68/6 (Sect. 28), A/70/6 (Sect. 28) and A/72/6 (Sect. 28).

III. Methodology

12. The evaluation was aimed at examining the Department of Public Information work in the context of its adaptation to the changing media and communications environment and covered all three substantive divisions. However, due to a focus on key communications outputs, the work of the News and Media Division was examined more closely.

13. A combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods was employed in the evaluation, and the time frame was focused primarily on the period from 2012 to 2017, on the basis of the available data. All evaluation results were based on a triangulation of multiple data sources. The data collection methods included the following:

(a) Semi-structured interviews with 125 Department staff members and stakeholders, at both headquarters and field locations;[5]

(b) Web-based total population surveys of Department staff and Member State representatives to the Committee on Information and a sample of headquarters partners;[6]

(c) Document and literature review of public opinion information, Department communications guidance, previous reviews of the Department, and research on the current communications context;

(d) Field missions to selected Department field offices to interview staff and stakeholders and gain an understanding of the challenges faced at those offices. The offices visited were the United Nations information services in Vienna and Geneva, the United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe, in Brussels, the United Nations Regional Information Centre liaison office in Bonn and the United Nations information centres in Ankara, Beirut, Dakar and Mexico City;

(e) Secondary data analysis of staff and resource data and of audience numbers for key communications outputs;

(f) Case studies of the campaign on the Sustainable Development Goals and communications related to the cholera crisis in Haiti;

(g) Direct observation of regular internal meetings and those of the United Nations Communications Group and the Committee on Information, as well as Department events and key activities in headquarters and field locations, including activities during high-level segment of the seventy-second session of the General Assembly;

(h) Social media analysis of the reach and engagement of Department-run social media accounts and content analytics of public opinion on the United Nations, the campaign on the Sustainable Development Goals and communications relating to the cholera crisis, using the Crimson Hexagon tool.

[5] The composition of the interviewees was as follows: 70 staff members (17 headquarters and 53 field) and 55 partners (6 headquarters and 49 field). A total of 14 interviews covered more than one respondent.

[6] The staff survey was sent to all active Department staff (734 people) as at September 2017. A total of 323 responded, a response rate of 44 per cent. The partner survey was focused on headquarters or global partners, including United Nations, media and civil society partners, and was sent to 536 people. A total of 128 responded, a response rate of 24 per cent, and respondents were evenly split between United Nations and external partners. The Committee on Information survey was sent to all members as at 2017 (116). Six responded, a response rate of 5 per cent.

14. A key limitation of the evaluation was the difficulty in measuring the impact of public information activities. As noted in result A (see para. 20 below), public opinion of the United Nations is heavily dependent upon external and political factors, and that was not necessarily attributable to the work of the Department. Another limitation was the low response rate for the Committee on Information survey, which was therefore not used as a sole source for any result or subsidiary result. The extent to which the Department tailored its messages by gender was unable to be assessed, due to the difficulty of disaggregating audiences.

15. OIOS consulted the Department during the conduct of the evaluation and expresses its gratitude for its excellent cooperation and assistance. OIOS also thanks Global Pulse for providing use of the Crimson Hexagon tool for Twitter analytics.

IV. Evaluation results

A. The Department of Public Information made notable strides in responding to the rapidly changing communications environment, although it was not always guided by a coherent, systematic strategy[7]

The Department and the United Nations serve a global audience, and increasing numbers of people, especially young people and those in higher-income countries, receive their news and information from digital sources and/or multimedia platforms

16. News and information channels and consumption patterns have changed dramatically since the Department was founded in 1946. Assessing the Department's adaptations to those changes required an analysis of the impact of such changes on the broad demographic and geographic groups that form the global audience of the United Nations.

17. The most significant shifts in the global communications landscape have been the rise of online and digital sources and the growth in Internet usage and smartphone ownership. Those shifts have been heavily concentrated in high- and middle-income countries, although the rapid pace of growth in smartphone usage is rapidly bridging the digital divide, in particular among young people. Between 2014 and 2017, smartphone ownership doubled, to 4 billion.[8] While such ownership continues to lag in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (25 and 30 per cent, respectively) due to high poverty levels, the fact that those regions have significant youth populations (50 per cent or more) indicates that such trends may accelerate in the future.[9]

18. Increasing percentages of people, in particular those under the age of 45, receive news from online sources, including social media (figure III).[10] Although that trend was more apparent in higher income countries, the Department field staff responses corroborated it, indicating that the most common sources through which people in the

[7] "Strategy" as used in the present report refers to an approach that is Department-wide, forward-looking, based on evidence and trends and includes adequate prioritization.

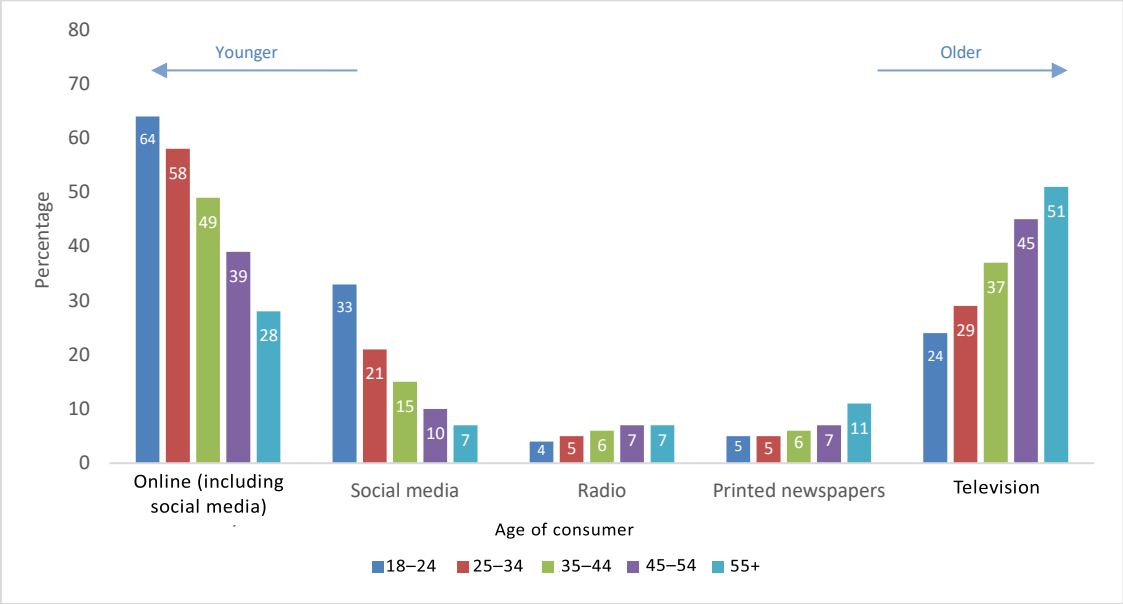
[8] GSMA, "Accelerating affordable smartphone ownership in emerging markets" (July 2017).

[9] This was further supported by a poll conducted in 2017 by Pew Research Center. See Pew Research Center, "Publics globally want unbiased news coverage, but are divided on whether their news media deliver" (January, 2018). Available from (www.pewglobal.org/2018/01/11/publics-globally-want-unbiased-news-coverage-but-are-divided-on-whether-their-news-media-deliver).

[10] Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017*.

countries in which they operated received news and information were television (35.3 per cent), the Internet (32.5 per cent) and radio (15.3 per cent).[11] Major traditional media outlets have responded to such trends by increasing their online and multimedia presence, blurring the lines between traditional and new media. Use of social media as a source of news led to a new challenge emerging in 2016 and 2017, with the rise and politicization of unverified news sources and a subsequent polarization and loss of trust in traditional news outlets in some higher-income countries, such as Hungary, the Republic of Korea and the United States of America.[12]

Figure III
Main news sources in 36 countries, by age of consumer, 2017



Source: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017.

19. In that environment, the Department faced a two-fold challenge in adapting to those changes, the need to keep pace with new forms of communication, while maintaining print and broadcast sources to reach the widest possible global audience, and the difficulty faced by the media industry as a whole in ascertaining the reach of traditional channels. The Department was able to determine the number of broadcasters that downloaded its audio and video content, but not how many people viewed or heard the subsequently broadcasted content.

20. One measurement challenge was the low attribution levels of public opinion about the United Nations to the Department's work. Analysis of numerous polls showed that public opinion towards the United Nations was heavily influenced by external factors, such as national-level political trends. Sentiment analysis on Twitter showed similar patterns; global negative perceptions of the Organization were relatively low in the lead up to the Paris Agreement in 2016 but increased during the United States presidential election in the same year.

[11] OIOS survey of Department of Public Information staff members, October 2017.
[12] *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017*.

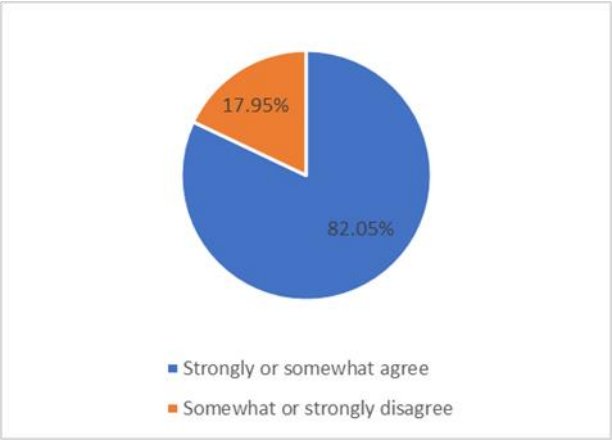
Within existing resources and rising demands, the Department responded to the changing environment by increasing its web and social media presence and influence and restructuring its news, multimedia and social media teams, although those changes were not always systematic or strategic

21. The Department made notable adaptations to respond to the changing ways in which its audiences communicate and receive information, by developing, expanding and strengthening its social media presence both at headquarters and in the field, improving its web resources, in particular on www.un.org, and moving towards a multimedia and mobile approach to news and content creation.

22. By early 2018, the Department maintained 92 headquarters-based social media accounts across several platforms, notably Twitter and Facebook, including the flagship United Nations accounts. The proliferation was due to the mainstreaming of social media throughout the work of the Department, with separate accounts maintained by United Nations Photo, the United Nations News Centre in eight languages, and United Nations Web TV, among others. In addition, almost all of the Department field offices established social media accounts, generally on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, often maintained by a small staff complement. Field office staff reported excellent social media support from headquarters, such as the holding of regular WebEx training sessions and sharing of key communications materials through Trello. Overall, most Department staff (60 per cent) reported receiving training relevant to their jobs, while also commonly reporting that they would like to receive more.

23. Staff and partners positively acknowledged those changes and the Department's efforts to adapt to a changing communications environment, with twice as many interviewees citing positive examples as those citing negative ones. Most respondents cited the Department's social media successes as the key exemplar of that change. Staff survey respondents agreed with that assessment (figure IV), and 76 per cent also agreed that the Department had struck a successful balance between traditional and new media. A total of 61 per cent of field staff rated the appropriateness of the content that they received from Department headquarters positively, considering the primary ways in which people in the countries in which they operated consumed news and information.

Figure IV
Staff responses to the OIOS survey prompt: "The Department of Public Information has responded well to the changing ways in which people communicate and consume information."

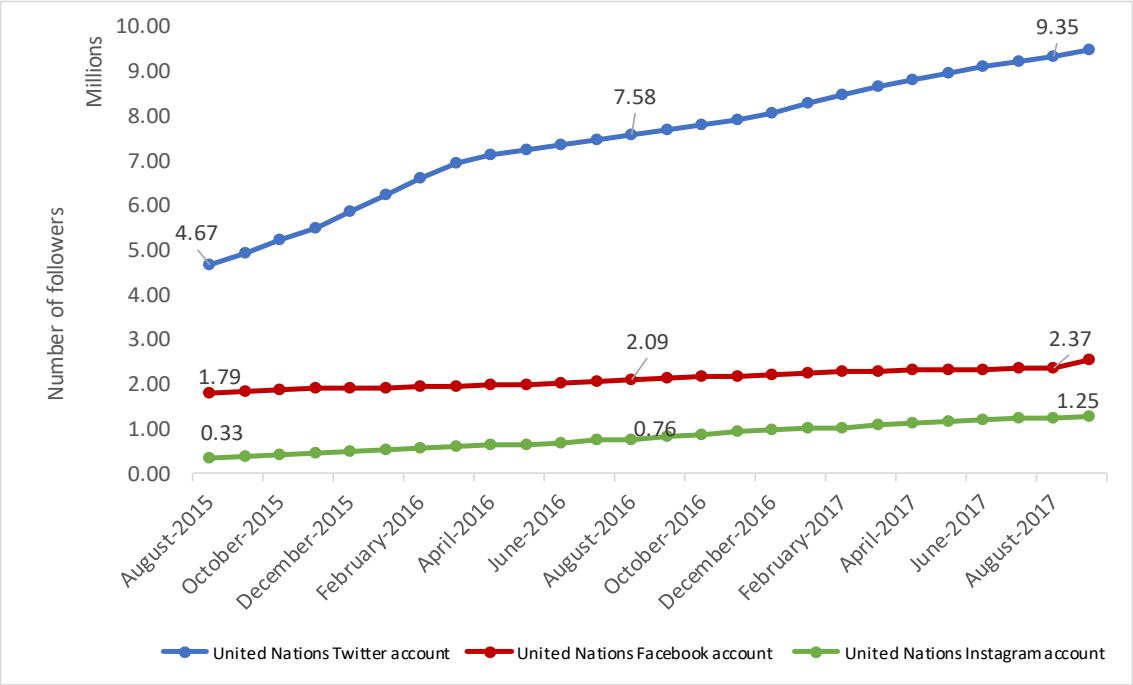


Source: OIOS survey of Department of Public Information staff members, question 6, n = 312.

24. A total of 64 per cent of partner survey respondents were of the view that the Department had the right mix of communications products to reach the widest audience. Partners rated social media as the most effective of the Department's channels and the one in which it had performed the best overall, followed by the online United Nations News Centre.

25. The growth in followers was another indicator of the success of the Department-run social media accounts (figure V); the flagship Twitter account notably had over 9.8 million followers as at December 2017, compared with 2.7 million and nearly 7 million for the World Bank and UNICEF flagship accounts, respectively. That growth was proportionate to the overall growth of global Twitter users[13] during the same period, indicating that the Department had kept pace in an increasingly crowded landscape.

Figure V
Growth in social media engagement of the Department, 2015–2017

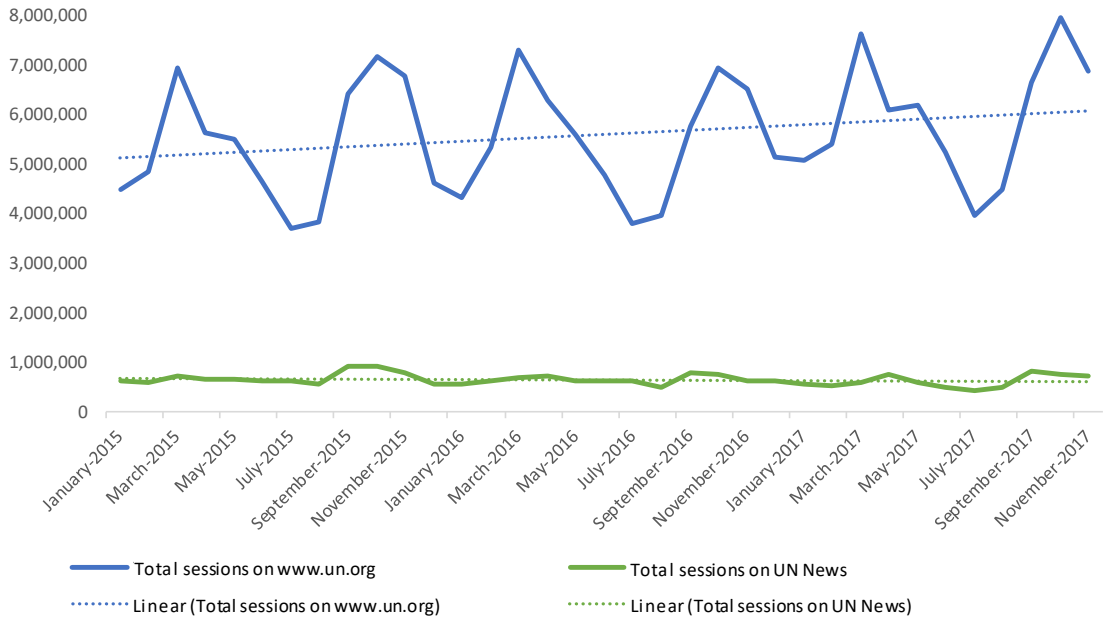


Source: Analytics provided by the Department of Public Information, extracted from Simply Measured.
Note: The Department maintains accounts on various social media platforms; the three represented in the table have the most followers.

26. The main public-facing website was www.un.org, which in 2017 had an average of over 5 million sessions and 13 million page views per month, figures which grew every year (figure VI). Staff and partners also rated www.un.org highly, particularly with regard to its efforts to showcase system-wide information in all six official languages of the Organization. Of the staff surveyed, 96 per cent said that www.un.org was relevant in enabling the Department to promote global awareness and understanding of the work of the United Nations.

[13] Correlation coefficient of r = 0.98.

Figure VI
Upward trend in visits to www.un.org and United Nations News, 2015–2017



Source: Analysis based on statistics provided by the Department of Public Information.
Note: Sessions include visits in all official languages of the United Nations.

27. Despite the rapid growth in the Department's digital sources and engagement, it nevertheless maintained its traditional print and broadcast sources, such as radio and audio and several publications, to reach audiences in regions where news was still primarily accessed through such channels. Unfortunately, there was no way to accurately measure listenership or readership of such products in all countries in which the Department operated.

28. The Department's digital engagement emerged organically in response to growing needs and, until 2017, was not driven from a strategic, Department-wide perspective. That led to the initial separation of English language accounts and other official language flagship accounts across two different divisions, resulting in a lack of cohesiveness in content and messaging. Furthermore, the Department only developed and established its departmental social media policies in 2017, despite the fact that its social media activities had existed since much earlier; the flagship Twitter account was established in 2008.

29. Until 2017, the English language accounts were run by a small team in the Strategic Communications Division, whereas the other official language accounts were run by the News and Media Division. In mid-2017, a combined 21-person Social Media Unit was created in the News and Media Division, covering all official languages, as well as Kiswahili and Portuguese, which facilitated cohesive messaging across the language accounts and increased audience reach. However, some staff reported that the creation of the unit was done without adequate planning or consultation.

30. Recognizing the increasingly integrated and multimedia nature of news, the Department also restructured its radio and news teams into multimedia teams, formalizing the de facto multimedia nature of the United Nations News outputs. The creation of the Social Media Unit resulted in three separate sets of multilingual teams in the Department, namely, news, social media and web services, with initially few

formalized or systematic coordination mechanisms between them or with field offices which operated in one or more of those languages. That led to perceptions by some of duplication of efforts, silos and an imbalance between content creators and distributors, as described further in result B (see para. 44 below).

31. Field-based staff also described the ad hoc nature of social media account establishment, as well as the lack of coordination with headquarters-based accounts in a shared language. In addition, the location of flagship social media teams in New York presented challenges in responding to the 24-hour cycle of news and social media.

32. Whereas the number of accounts shows the mainstreaming of a digital media approach throughout the Department, the proliferation of accounts was identified as a risk for fragmented messaging and branding and dilution of messages. Acknowledging that, the Department began a rationalization exercise of existing accounts. Notwithstanding those issues, as its social media engagement grew, the Department displayed foresight at the working level, through regular analyses of top posts, adapting content to maximize engagement, providing guidance and materials to United Nations information centres and other United Nations social media focal points and working with other departments to create compelling and coordinated content for key campaigns and messages.

B. The Department largely fulfilled its mandates but faced significant constraints in doing so, including a lack of sustained strategic direction as a result of frequent leadership changes, structural inefficiencies and the requirement to communicate a broad range of messages that sometimes required tailoring to diverse audiences

The Department executed a broad range of work to fulfil its extensive mandates, although there was evidence of inadequate prioritization of its activities

33. The Department covered a spectrum of global issues, from Security Council deliberations to humanitarian crises to climate change, resulting in vast amounts of information communicated across a variety of predominantly digital channels in various languages and formats, such as online text-based stories with multimedia elements, videos, live-broadcasted web TV, social media posts and audio pieces.

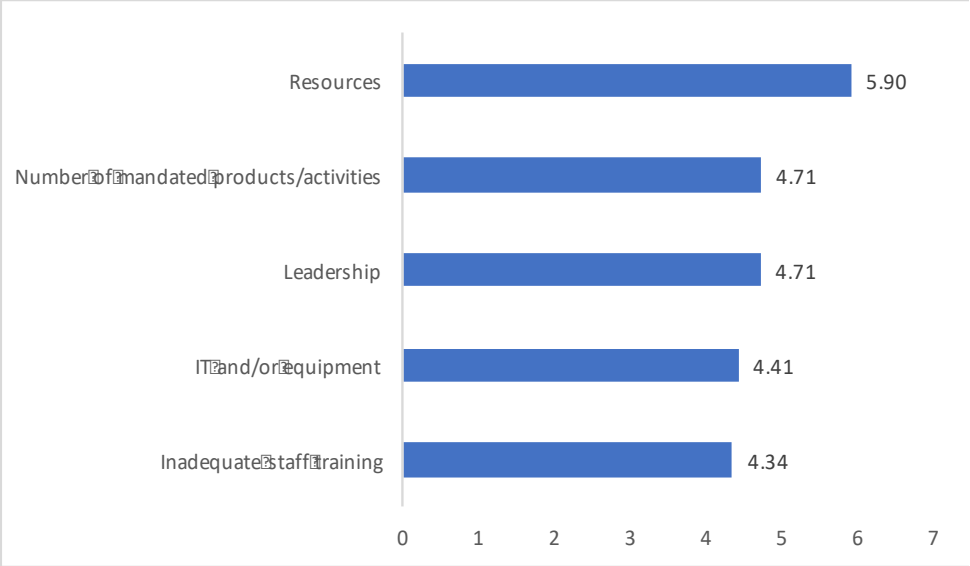
34. As noted in result A, the Department made progress in responding to the changing communications environment, however, the accumulation of mandates with which it has been tasked since its creation in 1946 constrained its ability to respond strategically to the increasingly dynamic field in which it operated.

35. Second to resources, staff ranked the number of mandated products and activities as the biggest challenge the faced by the Department (see figure VII (a)). Senior staff noted that, whereas mandates drove some content creation, they also significantly limited the ability of managers to reallocate resources towards more impactful products and channels. Staff similarly noted that the Department's numerous imperatives, such as the preponderance of international days, were a hindrance to its effectiveness and suggested that, in order to promote global understanding of the work of the United Nations, the Department should focus on the products that have the most impact.[14]

[14] OIOS survey of Department of Public Information staff members, question 24.

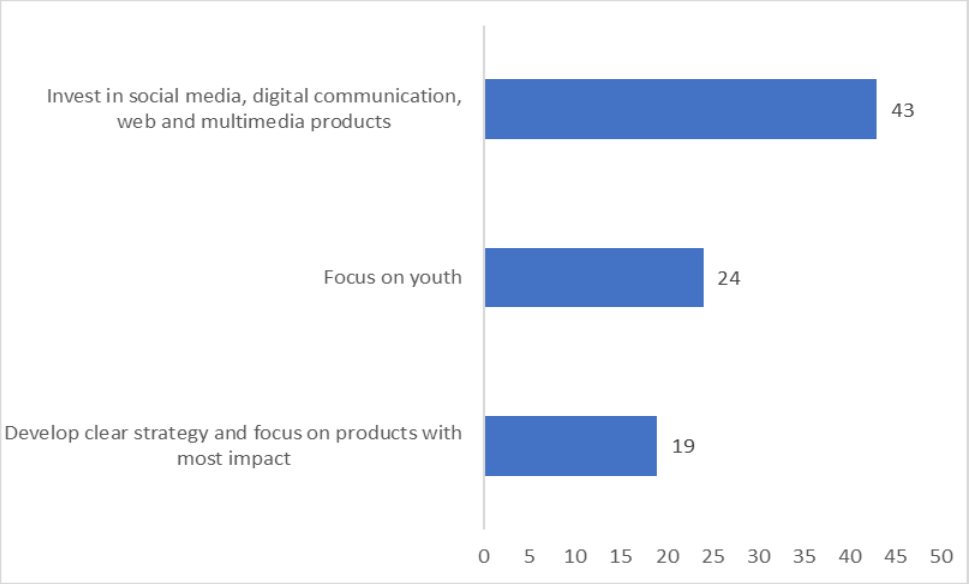
Figure VII
Staff views on challenges for and future priorities of the Department

(a) Biggest challenges faced by the Department in achieving its mandate



Source: OIOS survey of Department of Public Information staff members, question 21, weighted averages, ranking whereby 7 = biggest challenge and 1 = smallest challenge, n = 259.

(b) Department priorities for the future



Source: OIOS survey of Department of Public Information staff members, question 24, coded answers, numbers indicate the number of individual answers, n = 94.

36. Both staff and partners noted that deficiencies in setting priorities and strategic direction, exacerbated by frequent leadership changes and long-lasting vacancies at senior levels, were among the key hindrances to initiating or following through on major strategic initiatives and organizational changes. Staff ranked “leadership” as the third biggest challenge facing the Department in the past few years (see figure VII (a)).

37. Moreover, the strategic communications role envisaged as part of Executive Office of the Secretary-General, and its link to the Department, remained undefined as at the end of 2017. Given that the Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications was not a member of the Executive Committee tasked with assisting the Secretary-General in taking decisions on issues of strategic consequence requiring principal-level attention across all pillars of the work of the Organization,[15] the ability of Department managers to provide strategic direction anchored in deliberations at the highest level was challenged, as was their ability to provide proactive guidance to other members of leadership at critical early stages. That was highlighted in particular in the context of crisis communications and reputation management, notably during the cholera crisis in Haiti, although lessons learned from that experience were applied to communications around the Ebola response from 2014 to 2016 and the development of crisis communications standard operating procedures in 2017.

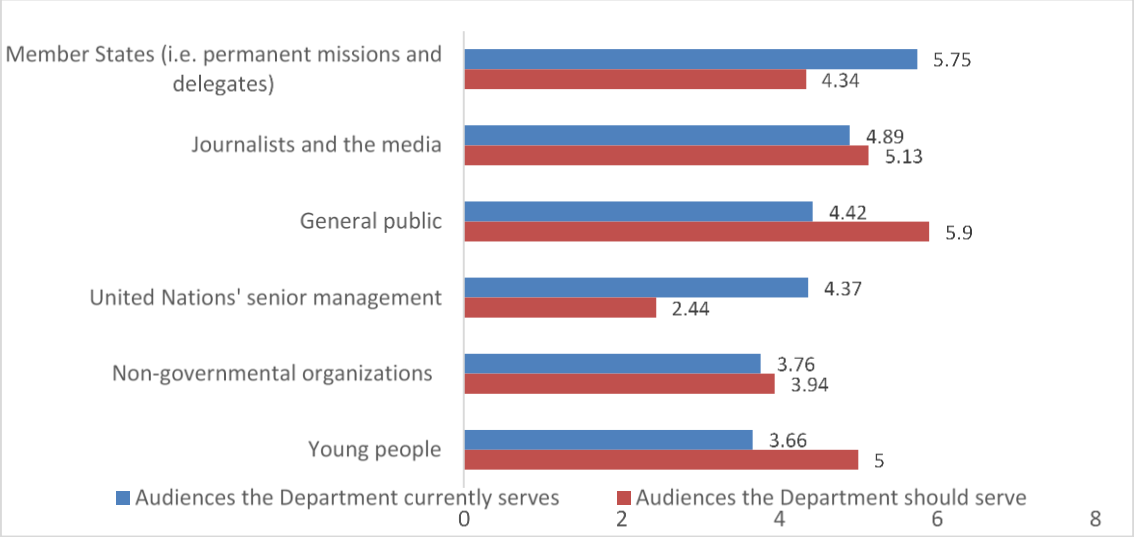
38. One effect of the gaps and turnover at the top levels of management was inadequate prioritization and Department-wide strategizing. Both partner and staff survey respondents specified that one of three key priorities for the future should be developing a clear strategy and focusing on products with most impact (figure VII (b)). A review of the Department's annual communications guidance from 2014 to 2017 similarly revealed that, while the quality of such guidance had improved over the period, they tended to consist of lengthy and text-heavy descriptions of issues and activities to be communicated and lacked practical guidance on how to communicate and prioritize those issues. Moreover, a content analysis of several key Department communications channels indicated a lack of strategic focus and consistency across various elements, with the risk of creating an impression of a disjointed and unfocused United Nations among the general public.

The Department faced the challenge of addressing varied audiences with diverse communications needs in different languages, and its outputs varied in reach, engagement and degree of tailoring

39. An inherent challenge facing the department created to promote global awareness and understanding of the work of the United Nations (see General Assembly resolution 13 (I)) was to serve multiple audiences with diverse information needs, in different languages. Meeting that challenge with limited resources required a coherent understanding of prioritizing target audiences and their needs, however, staff perceived a misalignment between the prioritization of audiences currently served compared with those the Department should be serving (see figure VIII).

[15] Memorandum dated 3 January 2017 from the Secretary-General on the establishment of the Executive Committee.

Figure VIII
Department staff perception on audience prioritization, October 2017



Source: OIOS survey of Department of Public Information staff members, questions 10 and 11, weighted averages, where 7 = highest rank and 1 = lowest rank, n = 132.

40. There was evidence of the Department tailoring products to cater to different audiences, in particular young people, journalists and Member States. Yet the jargon-heavy and detailed style of some communications outputs, although appropriate for certain stakeholders, was less effective for the general public. Some mandated products had limited potential to engage general audiences, mostly due to their style being too wordy or technical or not explicitly stating the United Nations role in a particular issue. A content analysis indicated that much of the visual communications consisted of images of people addressing conferences or sitting behind desks, which further exacerbated the image of a large and out-of-date bureaucracy. Both staff and partners recognized the need for more appealing and engaging content and visuals, in particular on digital and social media, as well as using language that general audiences could relate to, while showing the relevance of the Organization to the public.[16] The Department's digital products had some successes in that regard, as evidenced by the growth in engagement in those products noted in result A (see paras. 25 and 26 above).

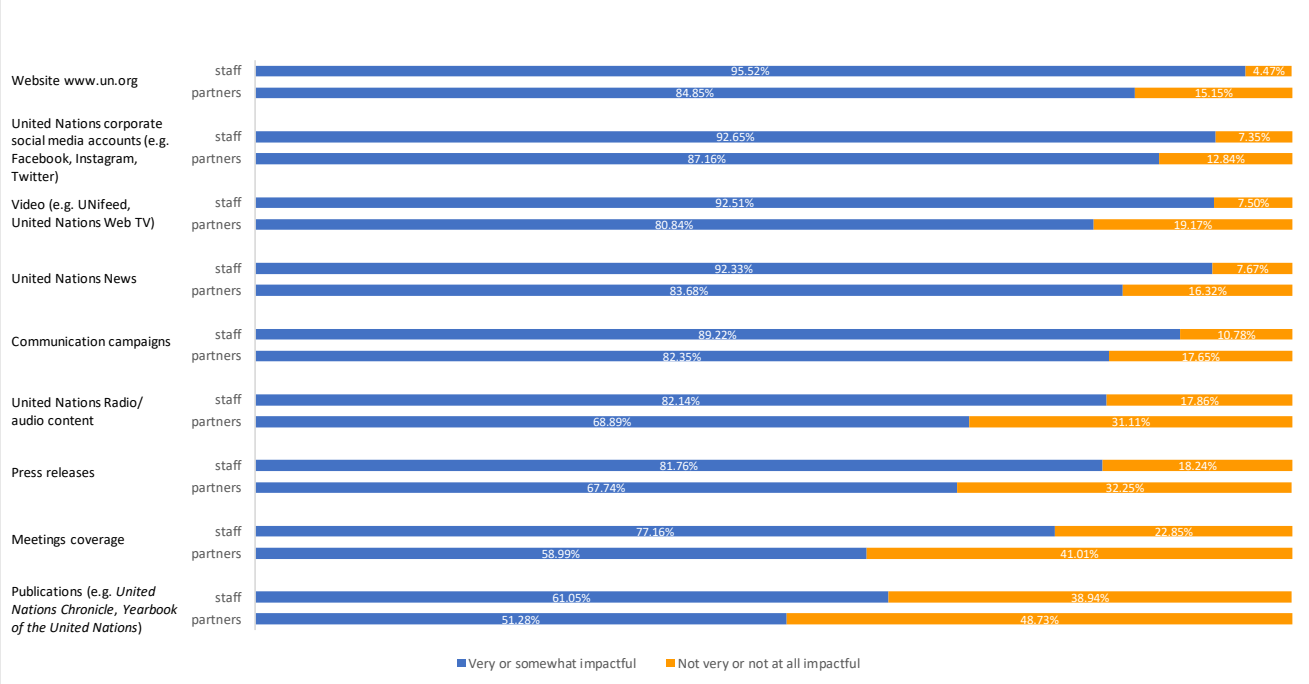
41. On a global level, field staff rated the content coming from headquarters positively, but some (13 per cent) expressed the need for content that was more tailored to local realities and available in multiple languages (12 per cent).[17] That was further confirmed in field interviews, in which staff expressed some frustration with materials allowing limited adaptation to local circumstances and/or languages. However, field partners cited successes of various United Nations information centres in "translating" jargon into language that general audiences could relate to and adding a local angle to stories coming from headquarters.

42. Regarding the effectiveness of individual Department communications products, staff and partner opinions were almost in unison, in particular on digital content[18] (see figure IX). The biggest divergence in the perception of effectiveness

[16] OIOS survey of Department of Public Information staff members, question 23, n = 194; OIOS survey of Department of Public Information partners, question 10, n = 70.
[17] OIOS survey of Department of Public Information staff members, question 15, n = 100.
[18] Correlation coefficient of 0.95 between staff members and partners.

was found on meetings coverage, press releases and radio and audio content, and both groups rated publications as the least effective among the options.

Figure IX
Effectiveness of Department communications products, perceptions of staff and partners



Source: OIOS survey of Department of Public Information staff members, question 12, n = 308; OIOS survey of Department of Public Information partners, question 7, n = 94.

43. An analysis of several key Department products showed that some had reached significantly larger audiences with comparable resources. For example, the publications, web and social media teams, with similar resources (with an annual budget between $3–4 million), achieved vastly different levels of reach, with 4,200 publication copies distributed[19,20] in contrast to 66 million web views in 2016 and over 25 million social media followers in 2017.[21] Nonetheless, some activities, despite having a relatively limited reach, were undertaken with a view to generating longer-term and deeper engagement, such as the Outreach Division's focus on youth and United Nations information centre outreach to schools to build support for the United Nations among new generations.

The Department's structure evolved somewhat to address new communications realities, but silos and inefficiencies remained and were perceived by staff as leading to duplication of efforts and poor coordination

44. As noted by several staff members, the existing departmental structure was a legacy of the past and had not evolved sufficiently to effectively and efficiently communicate the work of the United Nations in a changing information environment.

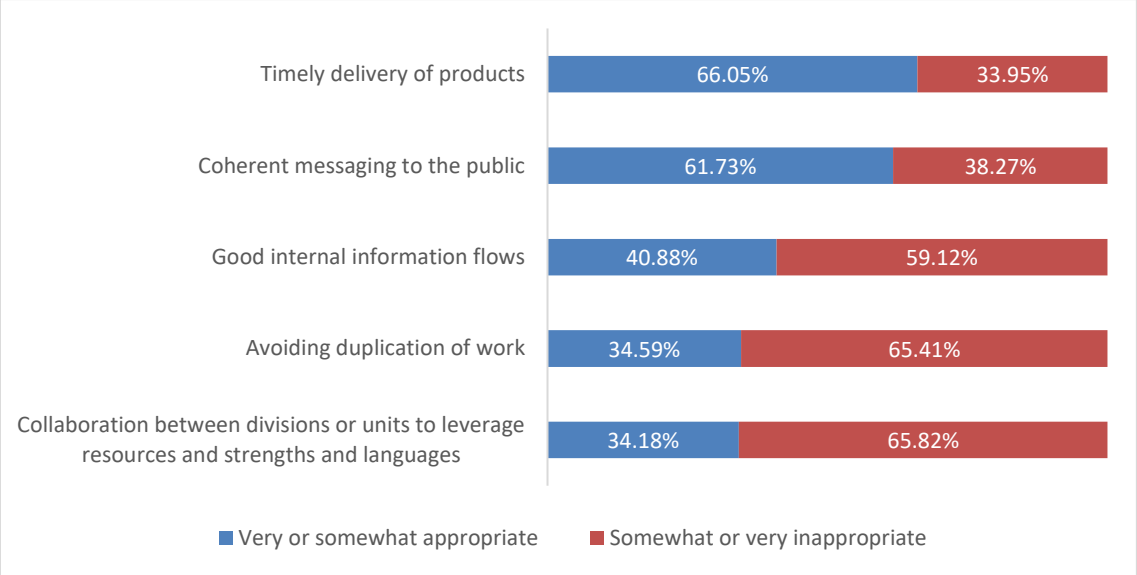
[19] The three publications counted here are the *UN Chronicle,* the *Yearbook of the United Nations* and Basic Facts about the United Nations. A fourth publication, *Africa Renewal*, was not included, because its data was not comparable.

[20] This figure does not include views of the web pages for publications.

[21] For the five largest accounts: Twitter (English), Weibo (Chinese), YouTube (Spanish), Facebook (English) and Instagram (English).

Keeping the strategic function on par with the content creation and dissemination and outreach functions resulted in the creation of silos and less coherent departmental priorities. Staff perceived the structure as leading to overlaps in functions and duplication of work, with many unexplored opportunities for streamlining and using a more distributed model see figure X). Recent structural changes, as described in result A (see paras. 28–30 above), moved towards breaking the social media silos but at the perceived expense of some content-producing units. There was a widespread perception among headquarters staff of inefficiencies, duplication of efforts and lost opportunities for leveraging the skills and knowledge available across the Department, for example with video production. Field staff expressed similar sentiments, as discussed in result D.[22,23]

Figure X
Appropriateness of the current structure of the Department

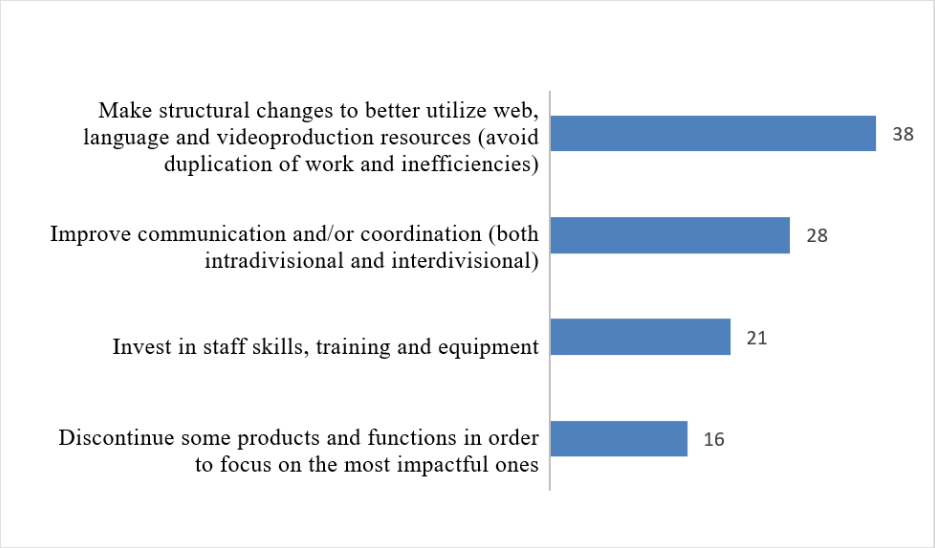


Source: OIOS survey of Department of Public Information staff members, question 17, n = 160.

[22] Interviews with staff members and OIOS survey of Department of Public Information staff members, question 24, n = 94.

[23] In the global staff survey conducted in 2017, the Department of Public Information was consistently ranked at around the United Nations average or below in survey responses, including on issues of staff empowerment, job satisfaction and career development.

Figure XI
What the Department could improve in order to be more effective



Source: OIOS survey of Department of Public Information staff members, question 18, n = 90.

45. One manifestation of the structural issues was the lack of consistency in how information was presented on various web platforms, reflecting the relatively autonomous operations of different teams without sufficient overarching communications guidance or coordination. For example, there were over 60 categories of issues displayed across the www.un.org domain, with no thematic organization. In addition, many of the issues listed across the website addressed the same or similar subjects but connected to different pages with different information. Similarly, the United Nations News Centre, with 10 categories of issues, and United Nations Radio, 8 categories, had similar yet different categories of information, as did United Nations Stories, 5 categories. Moreover, the Organization's visual identity was presented in a patchwork of assorted styles across its websites, reinforcing the impression of a disjointed and unfocused entity. Some recently developed web sites were more engaging and innovative, whereas others appeared out-of-date and fell short of meeting international accessibility requirements, such as closed captioning of all videos.

C. Despite the increasingly global nature of communications, a presence on the ground remained essential, and the Department field offices were an important asset for the Department and the United Nations system, but their influence and reach were uneven

The 59 Department field offices, collectively referred to in the present report as "United Nations information centres", allowed it to achieve a global reach at local levels and helped to amplify messages through partnership engagement and campaigns. Although the United Nations information centres reported improvements in support, there remained insufficient systematic thinking on how they should be leveraged, in particular in the changing environment

46. The Department had a global reach that was unique within the Secretariat, through its 59 functional field offices, which allowed for more direct, in-person engagement with global audiences. The varied activities noted on field missions and

through the Centres Information Management System reporting system included media dissemination of news stories, events focused on key campaigns, such as the campaign on the Sustainable Development Goals or the "Together" campaign,[24] and deeper engagement with specific audiences such as young people. The field-based partners interviewed universally rated the work of the United Nations information centres highly and found them to be a very useful resource for information and materials regarding the United Nations. In field interviews, innovative activities, such as the 2016 and 2017 "Women transforming India" campaigns and the dissemination of compelling short videos on Syrian refugees in Lebanon, were noted.

47. The work of the United Nations information centres is guided by support from the Information Centre Service within the Strategic Communications Division, through annual, monthly, weekly and ad hoc guidance documents, WebEx sessions and regular one-on-one support. Staff of the United Nations information centres reported that such engagement with headquarters had increased and improved in recent years, and they expressed appreciation for knowledge and content-sharing platforms such as Trello and WebEx. Relationships between the United Nations information centres, however, tended to be ad hoc and based on personal relationships, facilitated by occasional workshops. Whereas some staff members gave examples of sharing translated materials, for example, others reported little to no relationship with other United Nations information centres in the region or language group in which they operated.

48. Despite the benefits of a global presence that they afforded to the Department, the United Nations information centres were not sufficiently optimized to leverage that presence for greater collaboration and efficiencies. Both field and headquarters staff discussed how the reporting line to the Strategic Communications Division resulted in the United Nations information centres not being perceived or used as a Department-wide resource, despite their activities reflecting the work of all three Divisions of the Department. Staff of the United Nations information centres described interactions that they had almost exclusively with the Information Centre Service and social media staff at headquarters and far fewer with other units, such as language teams. The United Nations information centres were generally used as a dissemination platform for headquarters-developed messages, rather than harnessed as content and messaging resources themselves, despite the range of innovative messaging and products created at the field level in various languages.

49. Field staff also noted their frustrations with needing to wait for the work day to start in New York to receive headquarters-approved messaging before responding to breaking news, thereby missing opportunities to optimize the Department's built-in global presence to respond to breaking news in the 24-hour news cycle. Although the United Nations information centres contributed to media monitoring, they had few resources to systematically analyse media trends in their countries and potentially feed into headquarters-developed strategy and guidance.

50. Managing a multitude of offices with diverse contexts was further complicated by the inconsistent use of the Centres Information Management System reporting platform. Efforts have been made to improve and increase reporting and, while it is an improvement over previous reporting practices, the system did not easily allow for harmonization or comparability across offices, due in part to inconsistent reporting of activities and achievements by the United Nations information centres. For example, one office grouped 200 press conferences as one activity, whereas others reported

[24] Campaign launched in 2016 to combat xenophobia and increase support for refugees and migrants.

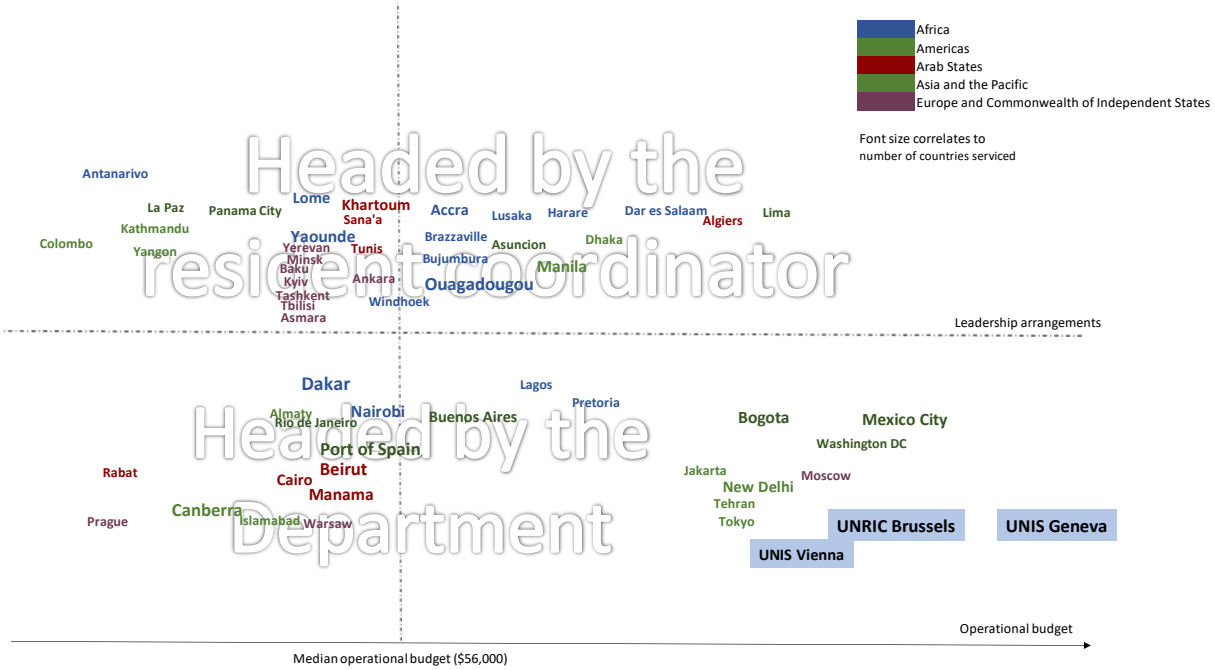
each as a separate activity. In 2017, the total number of reported activities per office ranged from 1 to 402.

51. The size and staff levels of the United Nations information centres were often inadequate given the country size, both geographical and demographic, the number of countries covered or the country's strategic position in the prevailing geopolitical climate. For example, the United Nations information centre in Turkey, a country of 80 million people and the largest refugee-hosting country, had a full-time staff of two. Other field staff reported that content and messaging developed by headquarters had been skewed towards issues such as development, which held less relevance for middle- and higher-income countries.

The effectiveness, influence and reach of the United Nations information centres varied, were affected by capacity constraints and were often significantly influenced by the approach and level of the director or head of office

52. The United Nations information centres operated with minimal staff and budget resources. In 2017, offices were staffed by an average of four people, with some offices having only one staff member. The average operational budget in 2017 was $75,500, an average that drops to $65,000 without the United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe and the two United Nations information services, resulting in a heavy reliance on partnerships to implement activities and events.

Figure XII
Department field offices, by budget, location and leadership arrangement



Source: OIOS analysis from data provided by the Department of Public Information.

53. Small operational budgets also constrained staff travel outside of capital cities or to other countries covered by the field office, resulting in the work of the office being primarily confined to the country of operation and focused on its capital city. Although 19 United Nations information centres covered more than one country, field-based staff stressed the importance of in-country presence, in particular for outreach activities and building contacts with the local media. Staff based outside of

their country of operation reported challenges in reaching their target audiences, compounded by the lack of resources.

54. The United Nations information centres also varied in leadership arrangements, with 25 offices headed by a Department international staff member, designated as director (post levels ranging from P-4 to D-1), with the remainder headed by a national information officer, with the United Nations resident coordinator in the role of director. The presence of an international staff director, or a national information officer and resident coordinator, did not always correspond to the country size or number of countries covered by the field office. Furthermore, the variations had implications for the influence of the United Nations information centre within the United Nations country team, and the role and leverage of the centre was influenced by the director's approach and relationships with other principals on the country team. It was further complicated when the resident coordinator was not the highest-ranking official in the country team, such as where there was a Special Representative of the Secretary-General also located in-country.

55. A resident coordinator's role and level of engagement as head of a United Nations information centre varied and was in some cases personality-dependent. In one case, a resident coordinator had to redefine the role afresh, following the relative non-involvement of the predecessor. The Department developed a terms of reference for resident coordinators in the director role, but implementation varied, and some resident coordinators reported little systematic on-boarding or regular engagement with headquarters.

56. Nevertheless, in 2017, the Department began efforts to review the leadership of the United Nations information centres and their coordination arrangements, including the relationship with offices of resident coordinators, and to propose changes within the context of United Nations development system reform. In addition, by 2017, most major vacancies were filled with a new cohort of heads of United Nations information centres, resulting in better leverage and more opportunities for reform and collaboration with the United Nations country teams. Some field-based staff already noted improvements with regard to those changes.

D. Partnerships proved critical in increasing reach using existing resources and the Department was resourceful in establishing successful partnerships at the headquarters and field levels, albeit in a fragmented manner

External partnerships were essential in amplifying messages and campaigns, at both the headquarters and field levels

57. The Department's partnerships at the headquarters and field levels fell within two broad categories, namely, partnerships aimed at increasing the visibility of the work of the United Nations, such as with media partners and celebrity advocates, and partnerships aimed at creating engagement and building support for the work of the United Nations, such as with civil society and educational institutions. More recently, the Department forged more innovative partnerships with the private sector, notably the creative community and mobile operators' association, which brought additional know-how, extensive digital networks and financial support.

58. Staff in both headquarters and field offices saw partnerships as a means to mitigate resource and bureaucratic constraints, while allowing the Department to reach diverse audiences in a more timely, creative and effective fashion. Partnerships were at the forefront of the Department's efforts to amplify messages and successfully promote major campaigns, such as the campaign on the Sustainable Development

Goals or the "Together" campaign. Staff and partners frequently cited the mutual benefits of external partnerships, for the Department in reaching wider audiences and for the partner in benefitting from the association with the United Nations name.

59. For example, the United Nations information service in Geneva partnered with the project launched by the United Nations Office at Geneva in 2014, and funded by local government partners, aimed at widely publicizing the work of Organization and international partners among the general public. Similarly, the United Nations information centre in Mexico City partnered with a local media company to broadcast United Nations videos and messages on an hourly basis to the public in all airports and metro stations in three large cities in Mexico.[25]

60. The benefits of external partnerships were most clearly demonstrated through the campaign on the Sustainable Development Goals, which had a wide reach through a broad range of global stakeholders, including traditional media outlets, civil society, the marketing and advertising industry and academia. Those partnerships were essential in creating a visually appealing campaign and disseminating it across a range of platforms. The campaign featured fresh, creative and engaging content, which some noted as a contrast to traditional United Nations styles.

Support structures and procedures were constraints on expanding partnerships

61. Although staff recognized partnership development as one of the successes of the Department in the past 3 to 5 years, they nevertheless identified the need to invest more in creating and maintaining partnerships as one of eight priority areas for the future.[26] However, staff often cited financial and/or legal rules as among the key obstacles to entering into more extensive partnerships. As a result, and as witnessed by the evaluation team, the United Nations information centres tended to find creative ways to partner with various entities, as prevailing bureaucratic or legal procedures prevented them from receiving financial contributions from non-traditional partners. The Joint Inspection Unit, in a recent report (JIU/REP/2017/8) on United Nations partnerships with the private sector, also highlighted those challenges, citing cumbersome regulations, rigid procurement rules and lack of flexibility as obstacles to engagement with private sector partners.

62. Despite the universal recognition of the importance and necessity of partnership creation, a Department-wide approach to managing the diverse partnerships in an integrated manner was missing. Partnership creation remained a rather fragmented undertaking across the Department, with each division and unit engaging with partners related to its specific work and not actively seeking synergies across the Department or with the United Nations information centres.

The Department worked effectively with United Nations system partners but coordinated messaging was a challenge, due to the inherent diversity of agencies, funds and programmes and the lack of a coordination mandate

63. The Department supported the United Nations system's communications work in various ways, with levels of engagement varying by department, agency, fund or programme. At the headquarters level, the Department supported the communications capacity of Secretariat entities and coordinated with Secretariat entities having dedicated communications functions, including the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, the Department of Political Affairs and the Department for Economic and Social Affairs. Similarly, in the field, the United Nations information centres provided

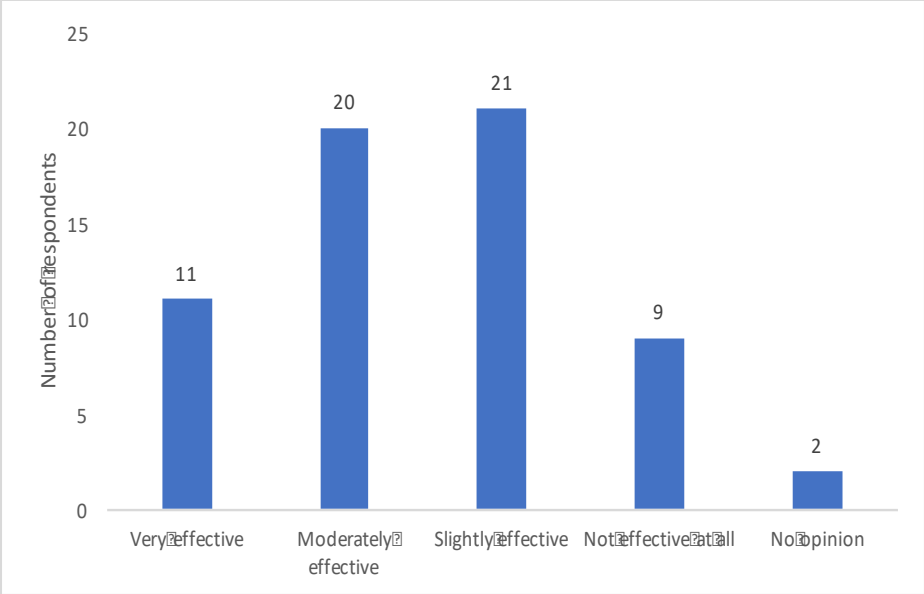
[25] During the 68-week period commencing 25 April 2016, 27,132 "spots" were displayed, at a commercial value of over $2 million, in Guadalajara, Mexico City and Monterrey, according to data provided by a Department partner.

[26] OIOS survey of Department of Public Information staff members, question 24.

support to smaller entities that had limited communications capacity or no presence in the country, such as the United Nations information service in Vienna supporting the Office for Outer Space Affairs and the United Nations information centre in Beirut supporting the local United Nations Industrial Development Organization office. Both headquarters and field partners were unanimously very appreciative of the support received, either from the local United Nations information centre or Department headquarters. Two thirds of partners surveyed rated the support received by the Department positively[27] and cited examples of support on messaging, campaigns and events. Almost three quarters of the partners surveyed who believed that the Department played a significant role in guiding the messages and the public image of the United Nations positively rated the effectiveness of the Department[28] in performing that role.

64. At the headquarters level, the United Nations Communications Group was set up in 2002 as an informal mechanism, primarily serving the purpose of information-sharing and networking among public information or communications representatives of United Nations system entities, with the Department as its secretariat. Half of the headquarters United Nations Communications Group members surveyed found the Group to be functioning effectively (see figure XIII).[29] At the country level, the importance of the Group was bolstered by the "delivering as one" approach of the United Nations Sustainable Development Group, as a means to strengthen inter-agency cooperation in the field of communications and to increase the media profile of United Nations activities at the national and/or regional level.[30] Field-level coordination involved deeper engagement with agencies, funds and programmes than at the headquarters level, which was more Secretariat-focused.

Figure XIII
United Nations Communications Group effectiveness, as rated by headquarters Group members



Source: OIOS survey of Department of Public Information partners, question 22, n = 65.

[27] OIOS survey of Department of Public Information partners, question 12, n = 76.
[28] OIOS survey of Department of Public Information partners, question 14, n = 79.
[29] The Department surveys United Nations Communications Group principals annually to gather feedback on effectiveness.
[30] United Nations Communications Group at the country level: basic operating model, adopted by the Group in 2006.

65. In practice, the United Nations information centres often exerted a convening and coordinating role for major international days and cross-cutting campaigns, such as International Day of United Nations Peacekeepers and the "16 days of activism" campaign, while working to ensure cohesive messaging, which staff reported as a challenge. The communications agendas of agencies, funds and programmes were typically driven by their own management and priorities, especially where they had strong, dedicated communications capacity in the field. Despite some calls by Member States for a more coordinated approach (see General Assembly resolution 61/121 B, para. 48), the Department lacked the authority or leverage to coordinate messaging at the country level and was therefore unable to ensure that a cohesive public image of the United Nations was presented. Staff and partners noted that the Sustainable Development Goals proved to be a good entry point for the Department's playing a coordinating role, in particular as a "neutral broker" with no specific sectoral emphasis.

66. Some United Nations information centres played an important coordinating role in the communications efforts of the United Nations country team. That was primarily dependent, however, on the interest and dedication of individual resident coordinators towards communications, as well as the respective centre directors' openness towards collaboration, and was not necessarily institutionalized consistently or sustainably.

V. Conclusions

67. The Department of Public Information had a critical role to play in disseminating information about the work of the United Nations, with the aim of ensuring the continuity of global goodwill and support for the United Nations among its 193 Member States. Its talented, dedicated and global staff worked to fulfil its vast mandates, but the Department had not adopted the sufficiently strategic and prioritized approach necessary to reach the widest possible audiences, communicate most effectively on the critical and relevant aspects of the United Nations work, counter misinformation and build the support necessary to enable its work to continue.

68. The Department made notable efforts to reach diverse groups with different communications needs, on issues ranging from conflict prevention to human rights to the Sustainable Development Goals, despite considerable constraints. It also adopted new modes of communication while maintaining traditional channels. Its global physical presence had not been fully leveraged to produce more timely and localized content relevant to its vastly diverse audiences. The Department effectively utilized partners to amplify messages, especially in the context of limited resources, but lacked a sufficiently systematic and holistic approach to partnerships. The lack of a strategic, Department-wide view, and a structure driven by medium rather than content, added to the challenges faced by the Department in navigating a crowded communications environment, distinguishing itself as a trusted source and influencing public opinion.

VI. Recommendations

69. OIOS makes four main recommendations to the Department of Public Information.

Recommendation 1 (results A and B)

70. The Department should invest in high-level, sustained and forward-looking strategic thinking and prioritization. Towards that end, the Department should:

(a) Form a dedicated Department-wide strategic function in the Office of the Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications;

(b) Review and improve its annual communications guidance with a clearly articulated strategy and focus on priority messages and implementation;

(c) Advocate with the Executive Office of the Secretary-General for inclusion in an appropriate decision-making body, such as the Executive Committee, and for regular linkages with the strategic communications function of that Office.

Indicators of achievement: terms of reference for strategic function; revised communications guidance template

Recommendation 2 (results B and C)

71. In order to fulfil its mandates under resource constraints, maximize efficiencies and reduce structural constraints, the Department should:

(a) Eliminate gaps and overlaps in the headquarters structure to ensure that staff resources are allocated to prioritized and impactful work;

(b) Enhance collaboration between teams with potential synergies, such as language teams and video teams;

(c) Determine the best placement for strategic functions;

(d) Realign or reassign functions which may be better distributed in field locations;

(e) Ensure use of United Nations information centres for Department-wide functions, including integration into content development and audience analysis, and identify ways to improve interlinkages between the United Nations information centres.

Indicators of achievement: assessments of the headquarters and United Nations information centres' structure and related recommendations

Recommendation 3 (result B)

72. With its mandate to communicate to the general public about the work of the United Nations, the Department should create more modern and engaging content to reach greater numbers by:

(a) Conducting a global audience needs assessment with detailed analysis of key audience groups, their needs and the content that resonates with them and integration of that analysis across the communications plans and products of the Department's units;

(b) Ensuring coherent branding and a cohesive look and feel within and across channels and products so that messaging and content are instantly recognizable;

(c) Optimizing its social media and web presence.

Indicators of achievement: audience analysis paper; brand analysis review

Recommendation 4 (result D)

73. The Department should further strengthen its partnerships to amplify messages and inject new ideas, networks, audiences and financial resources into its work by:

(a) Developing an annual Department-wide partnerships strategy, with a holistic, integrated approach;

(b) Reducing barriers for partnerships by creating a mechanism, a unit or a working group, to manage contractual and other forms of partnership arrangements and act as a resource for the United Nations information centres' partnerships.

Indicators of achievement: partnership strategy document; terms of reference for the partnerships unit or working group

(*Signed*) Heidi **Mendoza**
Under-Secretary-General for Internal Oversight Services
22 February 2019

Annex*

Comments received from the Department of Public Information

I write with regard to your memorandum dated 21 February 2018, transmitting the draft report on the above-mentioned evaluation. I would like to express my appreciation for the work of your colleagues, and for having taken into consideration comments and concerns previously raised by the Department of Public Information.

The evaluation was both useful and timely. It came at a time when we were in the process of taking stock of our communications work and mapping out the future of the Department. Together with the UN staff engagement survey and the decisions taken at a recent senior staff retreat, the evaluation findings served as a key component for the proposals we have been developing, at the request of the Secretary-General, on the transformation of the Department.

With the goal of creating a rapid, strategic, integrated Department of Global Communications, we will strengthen strategic planning and coordination, increase multimedia content production and multilingual social media, improve our outreach to youth and partners, more closely align the work of the UNICs and strengthen internal communications. In preparation for our reform proposal, we have started to address many of the findings contained in the evaluation.

We appreciate the evaluation's recognition of the many advances the Department has made in responding to the rapidly changing communications environment, as well as the severe constraints its faces at a time of declining resources and proliferating mandates.

As requested, please find attached the completed Appendix I,** including the target date and the responsible entity for implementing the recommendations.

Additional comments on the text for proposed amendments are being sent separately.

Thank you.

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* In the present annex, the Office of Internal Oversight Services sets out the full text of comments received from the Department of Public Information. The practice has been instituted in line with General Assembly resolution 64/263, following the recommendation of the Independent Audit Advisory Committee. The comments have been reproduced as received.

** On file with the Office of Internal Oversight Services.