

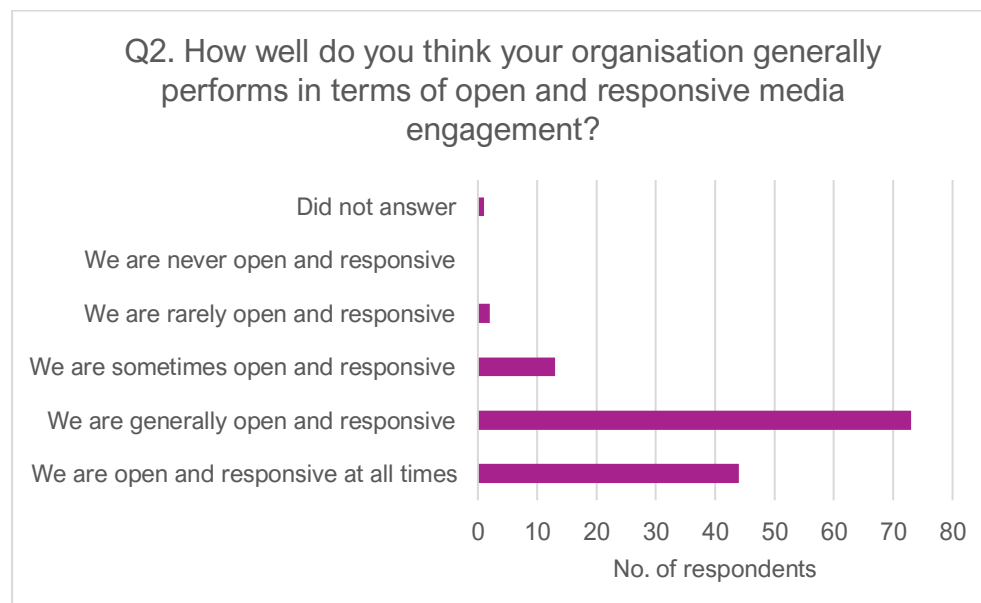
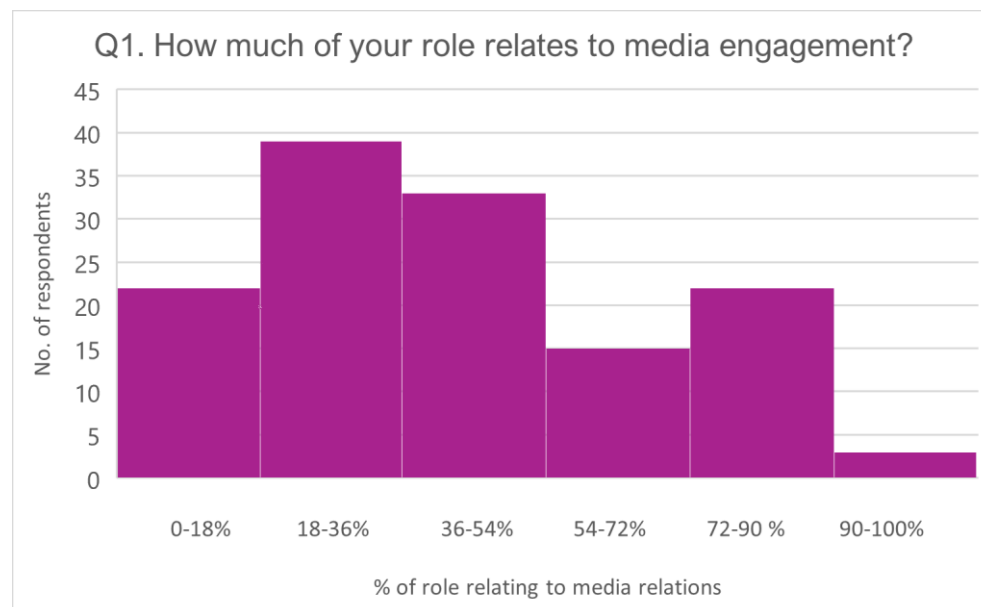


Survey: Openness and transparency in Public Sector communications

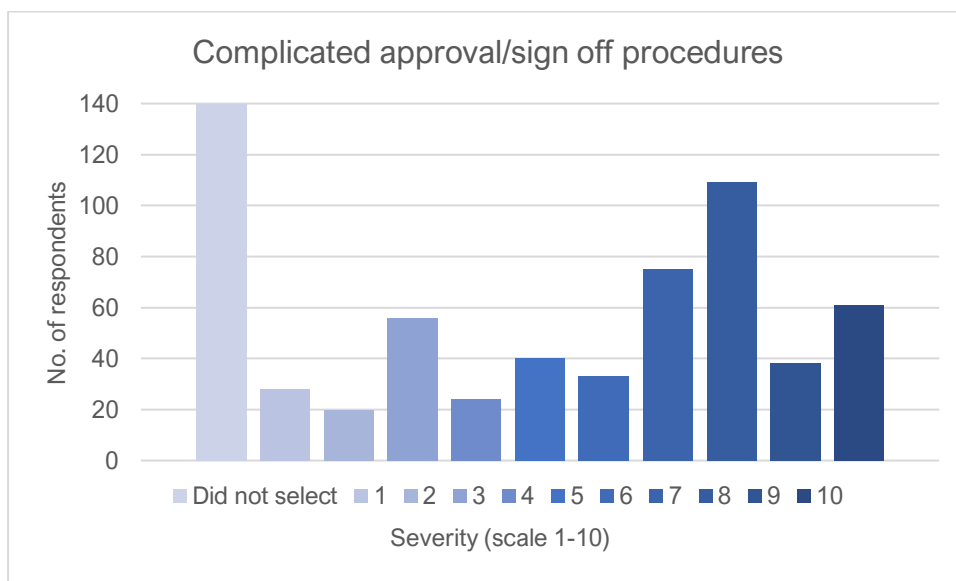
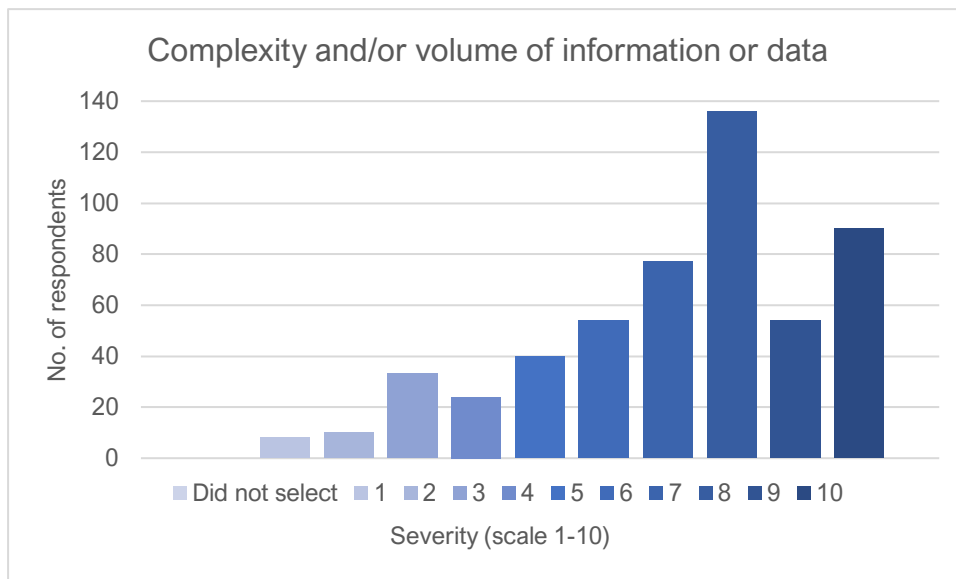
The Public Relations Institute hopes to meet with State Services Commissioner, Peter Hughes, and media representatives to discuss the important issue of transparency. To ensure the industry is accurately represented, the Institute sought the views of members on the issue of openness and responsiveness of public sector communicators.

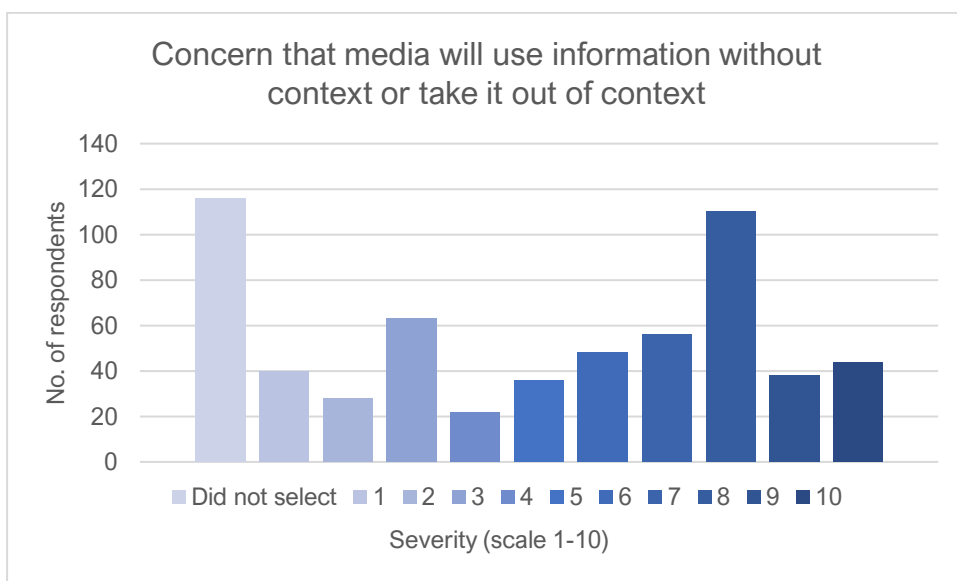
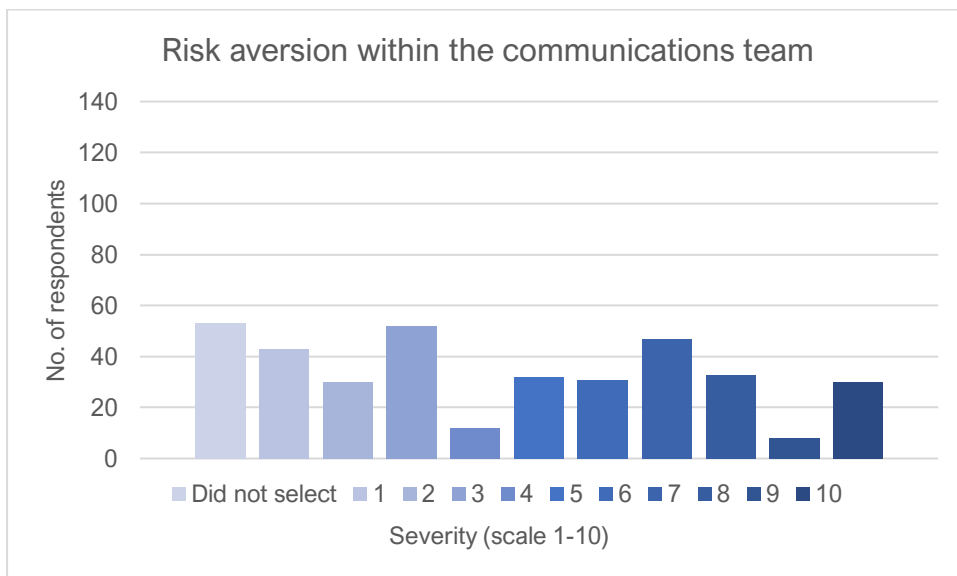
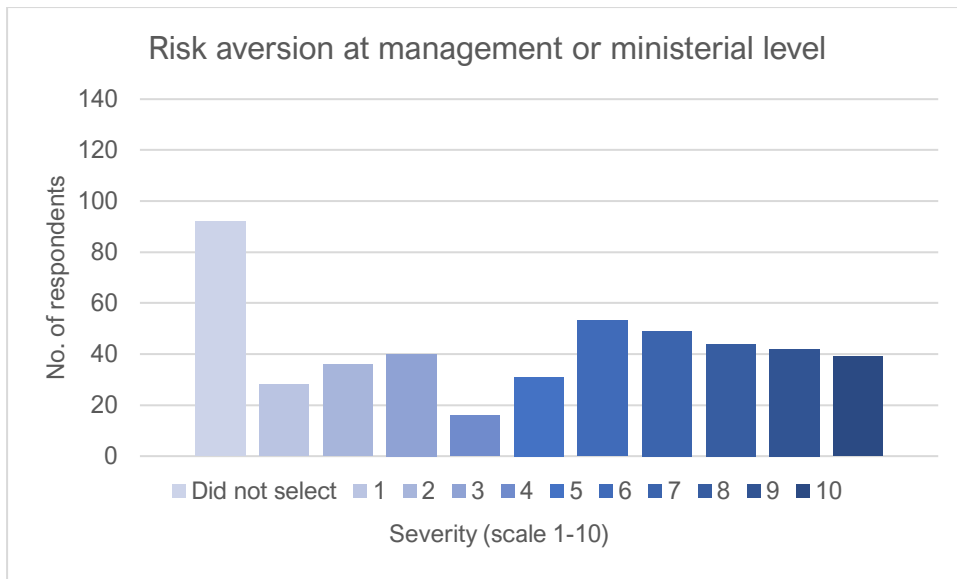
134 responses were collected.

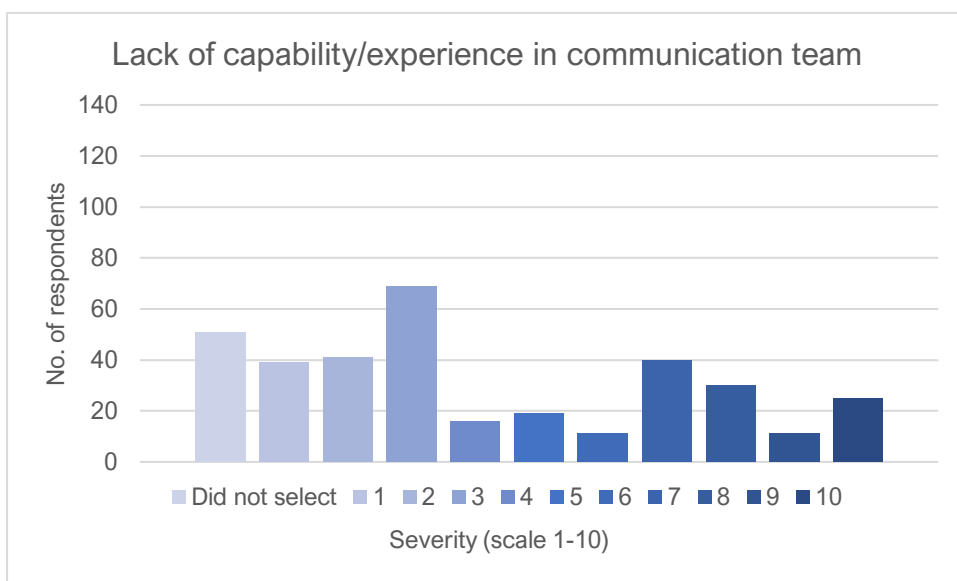
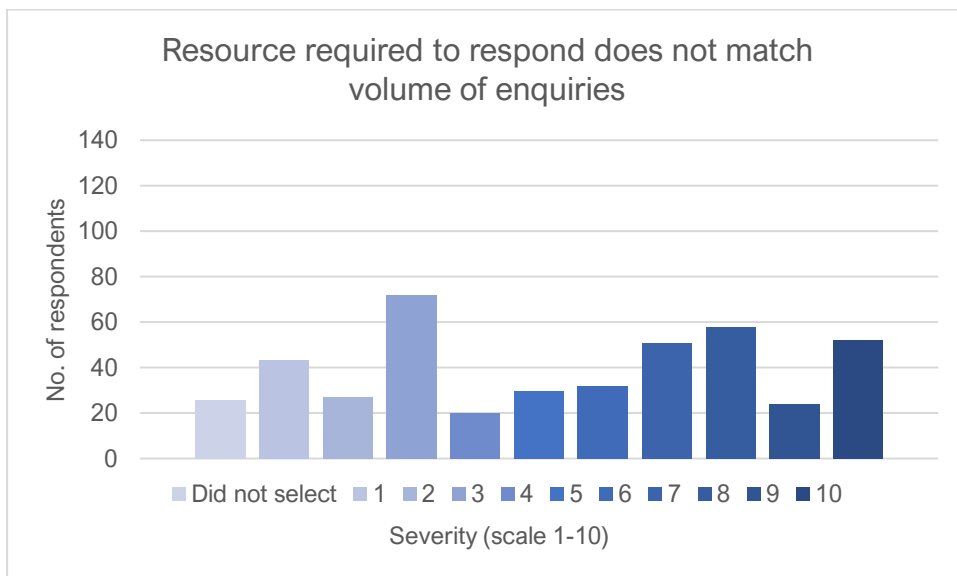
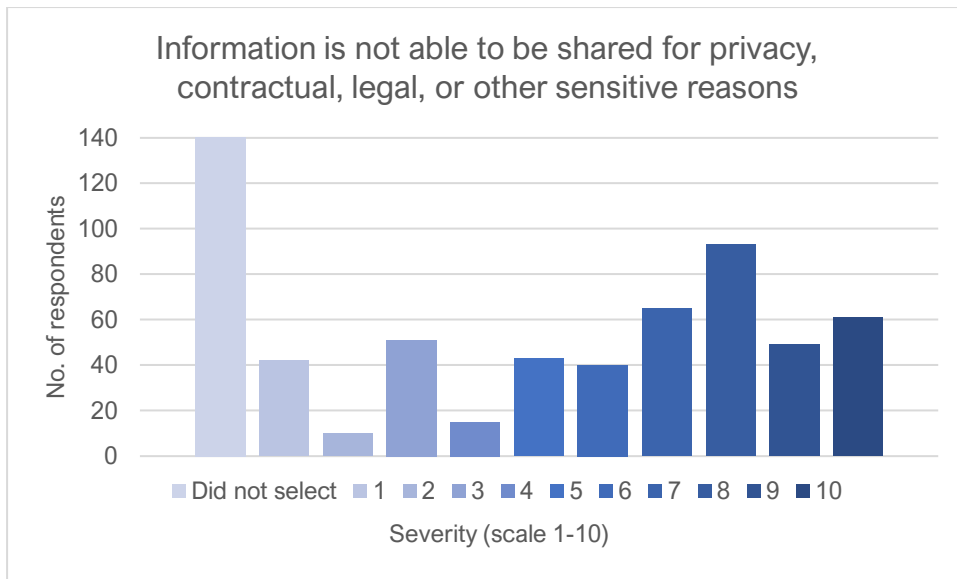
Survey questions

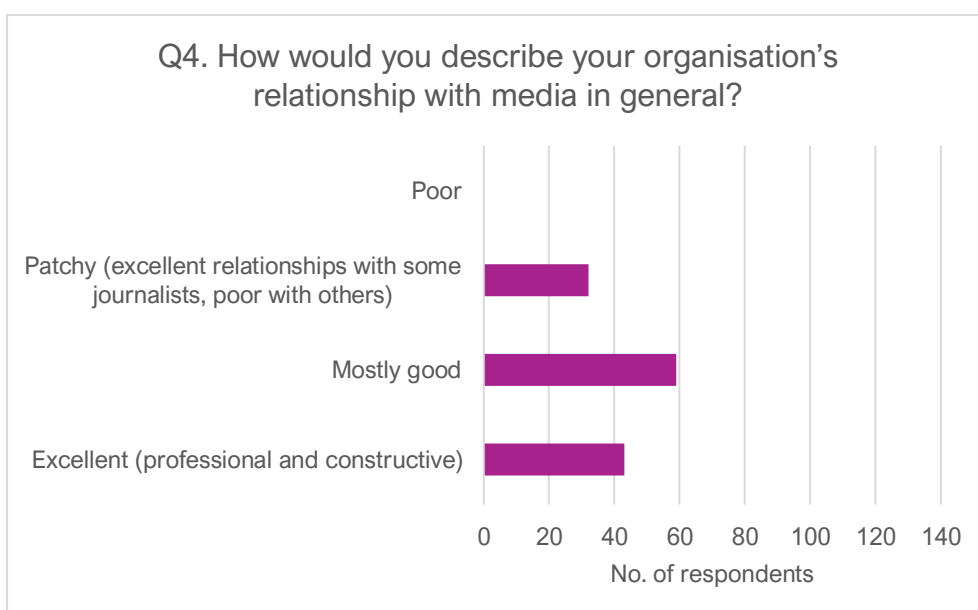
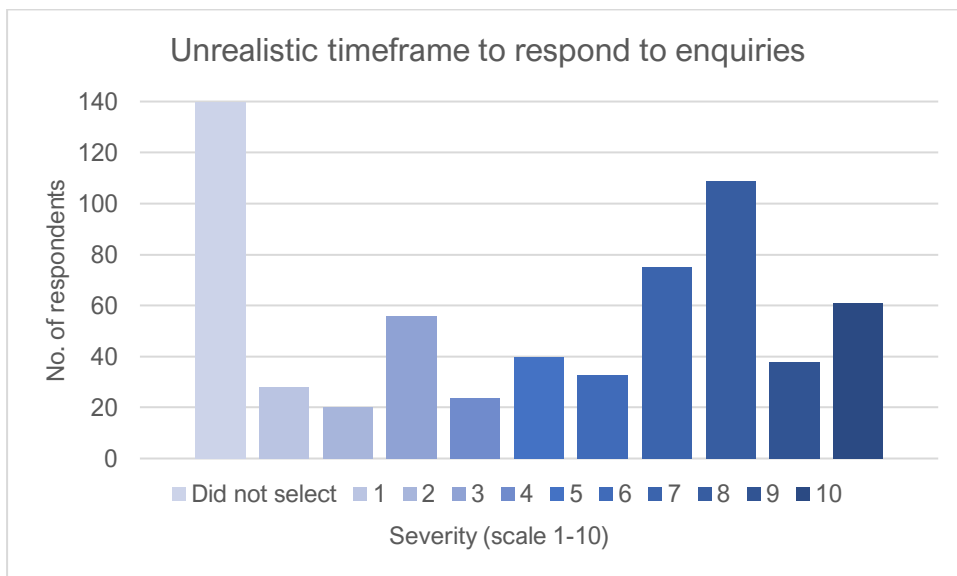
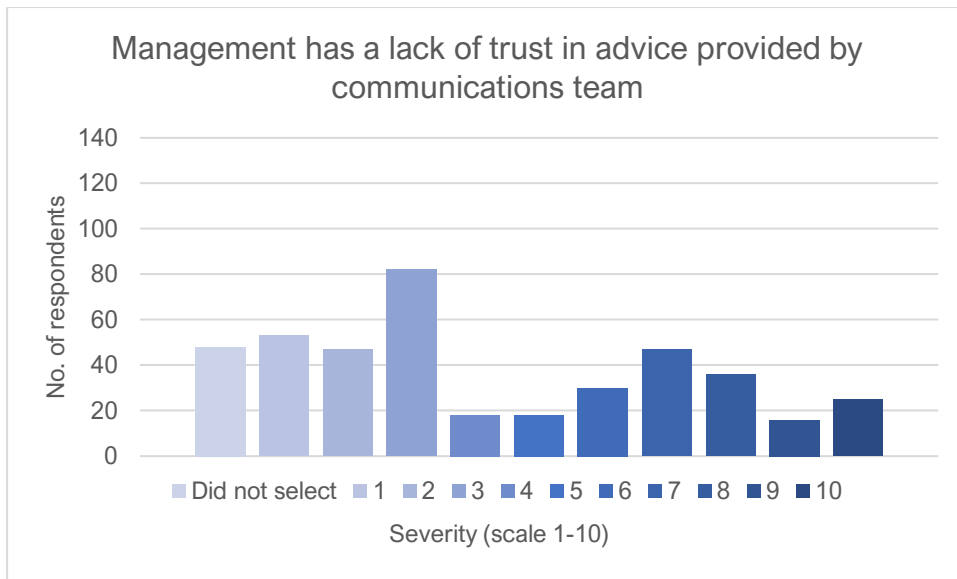


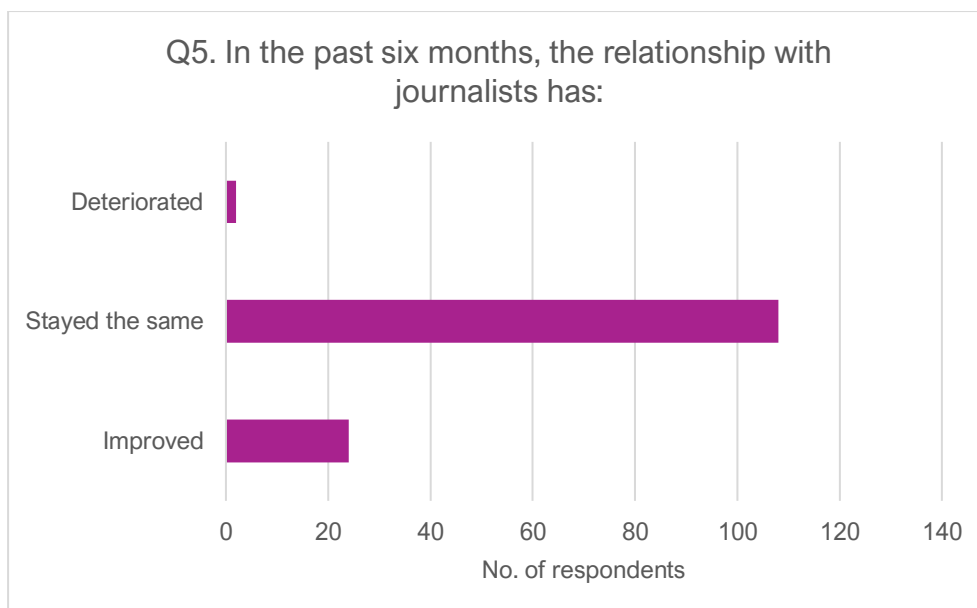
Q3. In your organisation, what are the key barriers to being open and responsive?
[Response scale: 1 = not severe, 10 = most severe]











Q6. Are there any additional comments you would like to make?

Additional comments from respondents can be broadly categorised into the following themes:

No. 1 issue: Media requests are “not well thought-out” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Journalists are inexperienced Media don’t have sufficient background for complex issues 		
Media bias <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Journalists only interested in covering negative or “gotcha stories” - clickbait Issue re weighting of misinformation/opinion vs fact General mistrust of media in facts provided by comms teams 	Difficult to establish constructive relationships with media <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 50/50 split between positive and negative “combative” relationships Key challenge in establishing relationships – especially via written requests/responses Little opportunity to provide background or context 	
Unrealistic timeframes for response <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complexity of data Availability of spokespeople Media relations is one component of role 	Public Sector culture <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Management does not support culture of openness and transparency Organisation has high mistrust in media 	Political pressure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenge to remain politically neutral due to direct or indirect pressure from Ministers, Press secretaries or management

Additional comments from individual respondents:

Many of the requests we receive are either copied & pasted from previous years or responses, or not well thought out.



I think the wider culture around openness and transparency is the main reason for information to be withheld. Whether or not there is actual pressure from above to withhold information, there is a perception that one shouldn't be open, that one should assume foul play from journalists or members of the public. I think this culture is toxic.

Mainstream media tend to look for the deficit side of stories.

National media relationships positive and professional, local media relationship is more combative.

The organisation tends to "buy" favourable coverage and use unethical comms.

Media is such a small part of the work a majority of Public Relations professionals are engaged in. In addition to broad rejection of unfair media coverage levelled at PR professionals, I'd also like PRINZ advocacy to include a focus on what we ARE doing in our sector to promote open and honest communication.

The brick bats being thrown by media is, I suspect, overcooked. I think this is their ideal high horse to get on. I do admit we don't always get it right but I think we are better than media make out. Also, if we are so horrible, why do so many journos become PR people? Look at [REDACTED] from the [REDACTED] - he's just jumped to the [REDACTED] Party.

In our area (science Comms), the ability and willingness of spokespeople to respond, plus the short timeframes, sometimes make it impossible to respond to media. We are often accused of gagging our scientists, but their primary role is not media relations so journalists need to realise it's not always possible to get comment.

There is a willingness to share with journalists' but we live in such a busy, fast-paced world where issues quickly move on. It feels hard to do things justice at time.

Scale of organisation is another key issue - 15,000 people spread across country/world means longer lead times on some enquiries. Also, trying to undo past perceptions of the comms unit i.e. shake the reputation of being a closed shop, unhelpful, dismissive etc.

The problem is Chief Executives who forget that it is not THEIR information, but belongs to everyone. Also, there is no accountability on CEs who breach OIA.

MoH is looking more and more like mouthpieces for the [REDACTED] Party. I don't envy my [REDACTED] colleagues having to give effect to govt policy in a politically neutral way. It feels like that concept was abandoned a long time ago. But this is a comment about the tremendous and unusual political pressure they are probably under.

Media awareness and understanding is changing also, which has helped improve trust and confidence. The likelihood of 'sensationalism' is now lower, and so clients / organisations feel more confident to engage.



Journalists need to understand that they have a public obligation too. We are often trying to protect information so journalists don't use it to scare monger and create panic in the public domain. They think we are holding it back to be less transparent.

Ability to collate relevant data from an ocean of complexity and make it available in a way Ministers can follow and media can understand/report is the biggest challenge we face.

Journalists who use social media in a personal capacity and express views that may look like campaigning should be held to account for this. They need to be impartial to be trusted. Trust and transparency needs to go both ways.

We are often asked for comment on areas which are not ours to comment on and so many of our requests are transferred to the [REDACTED] because it is there area of responsibility. I find many journalists don't understand the subject matter or systems they are asking questions about and haven't really done their research before asking questions taking a scatter gun approach.

Our main struggle with journalists is that they often expect in depth answers and they don't ask enough questions. We barely know what they are asking sometimes, especially when they just say we want more information with the complex nature of our work that's too broad of a question.

Our organization is not normally the focus of mass media attention. It is a very different situation for organisations that are of great public interest.

There is often a drive to "manage reputational risk" that outweighs transparency.

Risk aversion at a management level has increased over the past couple of years - it's closely tied to distrust of media. There is a increased sense that many media have an agenda, and that responses to media enquiry will be edited or headlined to suit that agenda.

As a consultant I work for a number of organisations in government and local government so it's hard to pick one. But in general, the organisations I've worked for have done their best to respond in a timely manner though not always answering in the immense detail the media sometimes want.

The communications team is up for the job - senior leaders are risk adverse and often don't understand how the media works. This means the communications team appears to be slow and unresponsive. That is not the intention.

Increasing lack of experience in the media.

Test me - ask the media what they think of my organisation and how it handles the media. That's the real test.



This is primarily only relevant to in house PR communicators. For agency clients, everyone is different.

We take the time to know journalists who understand our perspective. When we can't comment, we tell them why and it is almost always because we cannot compromise an investigation.

I understand media concern. They are channelled into sending emails with questions to which they often get a one or two sentence response. There is mostly no context which is damaging for both the outcome of the story and for the organisation they are questioning. Real openness and transparency would be providing spokespeople more readily to add context to stories. Strangely the media mostly seems to have bowed down and accepted this way of working.

My organisation is risk averse and does not empower people to have relationships with reporters without supervision by the media team.

Journalists need to understand that sometimes a company wants written questions and to provide a written response for a variety of reasons. This is often because of previous experience with misrepresentation from journalists. Sometimes they will demand an interview and it just isn't possible or practical. They need to understand reasons for this and not make threats about how they will report a request for written questions and written replies in the media.

Centralised media functions have created a gap in telling positive regional stories.

Govt is very secretive and more controlling of information than in previous administrations.

Journos are generally aggressive when asking questions and often make their frustrations clear when they have asked a massive multi layered Q and we put it to OIA because it is so massive. They see that as an evasion tactic when it is self-preservation! There was a note from the editor of one of the papers recently sent to the whole media team inbox saying they won't run stories or PRs unless we put up a spokesperson'...fair enough, but his language was so rude. basically saying 'so if you numnuts can't be bothered giving us a person to interview we will never run any stories about you, and by the way, you should be grateful we even talk to you. Terribly depressing.

I think our biggest struggles are time and resource to respond to incoming enquiries. Most staff are already swamped with work and in back-to-back meetings and it's difficult to fit media responses into an already hectic work day. Some media don't seem to understand that a 3-4 hour deadline is just unrealistic. A lot of the enquiries also don't seem to be time sensitive but have very short timeframes, the reporter has sat on LGOIMA information for months and the offers us a few hours to respond to their follow up questions.

Journalists cannot be trusted to do the right thing to report facts.

Our policy is to be as open, transparent and helpful as possible in responding to media enquiries. We often find timeframes are short (3 - 4 hours) which makes it difficult to engage staff within the organisation who are already pushed to capacity and rush them into providing information. We have often given media the opportunity to come and learn more about more complex issues and opportunities



have not been taken up. We often find it difficult to see the value in participating in media stories because people tend to read the short headline on social media rather than read the full article. Often people don't get the full story and there is little to no moderating of comments to correct people who have taken a headline and not understood the full context of the subject. We would like to have a better relationship with the media but we find out helpfulness and respectfulness is not reciprocated.

We deal in sensitive issues and sometimes this means we need all types of permissions.

There are two particular issues in my area that hamper engagement with the media. The first is that I am my organisation's media liaison and this is half of my full-time position. In my area I have five different publications that regularly (multiple times a week) request information from my organisation. The second is that I am in an area where often these are inexperienced reporters or we are an afterthought for time poor reporters. This leads to a regular situation where I am approached by reporters who do not understand the topic they are covering, but want quick answers. Sadly, it is often reporters with national organisations or senior reporters who are rude or unrealistic in their requests either about what is a realistic timeframe for getting a response or when the response is not what they wanted to fit their story. Reporters who contact me often demonstrate a very limited understanding of the topic they are reporting on, but seem to view basic factual corrections with suspicion based on an assumption that seems to be growing in newsrooms that comms people are out to mislead. This leads to regular mistakes or imbalances in reporting that erode my staff's trust. Despite my best efforts to encourage engagement with media staff are increasingly reluctant to engage due to their comments being taken out of context or tacked on as a very short response at the end of a long story based around incorrect information. These comments are often framed in a way to imply the organisation is covering things up. Much of this stems from the time pressure reporters are under, but also the growing suspicion with which reporters seem to treat comms people. This has led to an extreme version this week of a frequent situation I face where a reporter has sent through questions based on a misunderstanding of a topic they have not researched and rather than accept the factual correction has doubled down on demanding an interview where they have made it clear they intend to criticise my staff member for not being up to standard on work where the organisation is one of the best in the country. If I do respond with written replies we face the possibility of a story running anyway with the usual line that 'the organisation declined to be interviewed'.

We generally enjoy a good relationship with journalists and try to be responsive as possible. Our CE understands the value of media engagement.

Many journalists request under the OIA then don't even use the information they get, when you know there is a story in there if they bothered to look.

We follow a code of ethics which sets out the basis for ethical public relations practice.

I recently left my Executive Director Role to run my own PR consultancy. The surveyed questions answered relate to my 13 years in that role.

Local govt not well understood by media, its complex and journos have immediate time frame, thus immediate disconnect.

It's extremely hard to work in government and see so many articles negatively talking about work we do and getting it completely wrong. It's extremely hard when there is so much reporting and media



requests that are made public to then respond to requests for the same information or information that doesn't exist and be labelled as worse than *insert country name for shock value*.

A sense that journalists are scrambling for stories and will trample anyone in their way to get them, and will drop govt departments in the doo doo without bothering to check with them.

What about Ethnic Media?

Media weighting of opinion, speculation and misinformation as equal to official and verifiable information is a significant and worsening issue.

I'm struck by how many journalists no longer seek an interview, but actually ask for a written statement. I can't say if that's because they don't expect an interview request to be responded to, or if they actually prefer working with a written statement.

Having a relationship with the individual media makes a difference but outlets reluctant often to give contact details.

I am not in the public sector but I am often trying to access decision makers within government departments on various issues. I'm very concerned at the lack of transparency, openness and willingness to engage that is currently taking place in the public service. It's not just from the armies of communications employees and consultants but leadership too.

Media seem to be blind to the role they have played in creating a highly risk averse approach in many government agencies. Repeated gotcha stories and absolute determination to present the negative side of everything has played a major role. They say their role is to hold to account, and that is true, but it is a different thing to just digging up and focusing on problems or presenting small issues as major failures. Commentary Assumes Comms teams are the ones blocking and preventing, I spent a lot of time pushing reluctant senior managers to say more. "Tell them to bugger off" actual quote.

As a regional organisation we share a positive relationship with our local media each recognising the pressures we each face. We have the advantage of being able to build long relationships something missing in my experience at a metro level due to the high turnover of staff and a general mistrust and unfounded aversion to spin in media circles. In metro-based days I did find many of the questions were focused not on what happened and why but who was to blame and how are they going to pay. It is there and does not lead to constructive relationships nor a willingness to engage openly on the issue at hand.

The articles quoted are as much a reflection of the journalists' poor understanding of circumstances and in some cases is fuelled by their current stance on political environment.

Notice the time and money constrains in journalism for research.



I don't do much media engagement work now by choice, but when I did/do the gold standard approach is always to front up, tell the truth and get information out quickly and in a way that people can understand, with context. I agree the 'click bait' approach is problematic and the issues are not one-sided - journalists and media organisations have work to do too. The ideal 'back and forth' discussion between media and experts/spokespeople would happen more if there was trust in the media not to take isolated comments out of context, and target people for a good headline. Deadlines are often unrealistic.

Journalists fundamentally lack understanding of the broad array of work comms professionals do, which doesn't help. But there's also huge variation across agencies. [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] are some of the worst. Their lack of transparency harms those of us actively working to do better. We also need to stop vilifying comms people for being paid. It's a high skill, high risk role! We bear the brunt if media report poorly on our agencies.

Often journalists will approach us for comment on commercially sensitive information, which we are unable to share.

As an agency, relationships with media really depend on a client's attitude. It's up to us as PR advisors to help them navigate the best way to mitigate reputation risk while being as open and as transparent as possible with media - and, thus, their publics.

A lot of state sector comms staff feel we are part of the current govt's re-election team. The line between operations and serving our Minister is very blurred. We create media opportunities for govt. We don't always tell the truth once managers have reworked comms to avoid public or media scrutiny.

Very few journalists with experience/context for our sector. Day to day inquiries which tend to damage our view of media mostly seem to be click bait, or poorly research/fact checked.

The volume of material required these days is phenomenal and the deadlines are generally unrealistic. Sometimes we get 2 hours to provide what is quite technical information. Journalists are also relatively green these days and don't take the time to understand what it is actually they're after. On the flipside 90 per cent of media release get printed word for word without any contact from the media organisation.

Journalists seem to be getting more stupid by the day. Few of them take the time to do basic research before putting in requests for information, and then they don't bother to frame questions properly - as per the example here: Are weta protected species? What are people urged to do when they find one? A few people have reported seeing flying weta also - are they a thing now?

Often our work is complex, accountabilities for delivery are shared and complex, media want to look for a single person or a single factor to blame when things go wrong. This rarely exists.

Criticism of pre-release briefings/ stakeholder engagement is pretty rough, considering the amount of embargoed info the media gets.



Based on previous experience many government departments take as long as possible to answer media queries and have no idea of time frames for a journalist who is producing content. They also often try to hide the details and answer in a very roundabout way instead of being clear, direct and concise.

Additional comments received via email:

We're all working so very hard to do a good job and the insinuation we're "anti-customer" and not trying to help media where we can (most of us are literally advocating for their needs, internally, most weeks) is so far from what I've seen over the last decade. Hand on heart, I think if most of us saw any practitioners behaving like the articles imply, we'd be the first to do something about it and it just isn't what a comms professional stands for in this day and age.

... I have filled out the survey you sent out today, but am concerned that the structure / answers won't convey the sentiment I have on this issue.

Having spent 10 years working directly in the public sector and been privy to the volume of political pressure to obfuscate that gets applied either directly from press secs or indirectly through agency / department leadership, unless things have changed dramatically (and I very much doubt they have), I wouldn't be too bullish about this.

Blame is a two way street though – when I was at [REDACTED] I had to deal with some outrageous journo tactics and behaviours to try to make stories bend to an agenda – and this sort of thing simply serves to further erode trust. Plus no one wants to give away an easy clickbait quote these days!

What I'm trying to get across here is that I think the issue is far more nuanced than just saying we are transparent as per our code of ethics. The practice of providing media with accurately, timely, apolitical information from within the public sector is broken and serves neither side well – and so moves to rebuild trust and efficiency will require willingness to change on both sides.

Amongst my various monologues to the poor [REDACTED] team I had talked about those articles, and it being the sort of thing it would be great for PRINZ to tackle. [REDACTED] comments about [REDACTED] and social media listening reports were so bad. The fact she was still alleging covert surveillance and doesn't realise [REDACTED] is part of [REDACTED] several weeks later shows she's not interested in checking facts. The general use of 'spin doctor' in the media with journalists and commentators in the last 6-12 months seems to have risen, and certainly not being used in a favourable way. Really doubt those same people realise what most comms people spend most of their work days doing.

I'm not sure my view/approach necessarily aligns with a majority of comms people/PRINZ members, but I'm a bit bored/sick of our industry almost being apologist for what we do, or not wanting to stand up for our roles, and re-set what it is that we do. [REDACTED] being [REDACTED] we attract all sorts of stories, but the way media contact us these days, and their attitude can be terrible. Overlay those who use the easy tropes of spin and propaganda, and it's all pretty annoying. I don't think op-eds are an unreasonable approach, especially to cover off subjects like 'what is a social listening report'. But as I say, I may be a sample of one!

What a good initiative, happy to complete the survey from a state sector comms perspective. FYI a lot of us are not happy with the current situation where we are required by our management to enhance the re-election prospects of the government!



About the respondents:

