Togetherness Index

The impact of communication on social cohesion

senate shj

It has never been more important for communities to pull together

It has become a cliché – because it is true.

There is, as a result, no better time to consider what brings people together. COVID-19 demonstrates the important role togetherness plays in the success or failure of our fight against a common threat. However, more broadly it can help prevent loneliness, racism, extremism, and violence; support mental health and wellbeing; increase workforce participation and promote economic growth.

As strategic communicators, SenateSHJ wanted to explore this idea from a communication perspective.

We wanted to explore the role communication plays in connecting people. We wanted to know how well communication from a range of sources brings people together – or not. We wanted to know what source and type of communication works in bringing people together.

That's why we created the Togetherness Index (TI) to answer these questions and more. Based on a survey of 1,000 Australians, it looks at what communication elements contribute to togetherness within the community, its social cohesion.

While a lot has been written about what drives social cohesion, the TI takes a unique perspective. It reviews communication from sources as diverse as government, media, social media, family, friends and community organisations. We recognise of course that much more than communication drives togetherness across communities. Wellbeing, health, economic opportunity and performance and a range of other factors are critical.

The research, however, looks at communication's impact. From the results, we can seek answers to a wide range of questions, including:

- How good are we at informing people?

- Do people feel like they have a say?

- How well do leaders connect and inspire communities?

- Who are the best messengers when it comes to bringing people together?

- How do groups and individuals create communication which shapes behaviour?

- How can institutions and leaders support and drive social change that makes a difference to lives and livelihoods?

We know communication is far more than information. It is being listened to and heard, finding channels for involvement and using stories to inspire, spark action and create change. Strategic communication such as this can help build cohesion.

This discussion paper seeks to paint a picture of what we found, and pose some questions based on what we consider some of the most interesting findings.

The Togetherness Index results

SenateSHJ's first step was to consider, at its core, what makes up social cohesion or a together society. The Index draws on the current evidence around social cohesion and combines this with strategic communication theory and best practice to provide a new framework for social change.

The starting point is the strength of our connection to community, particularly as it relates to communication people see, hear or read. In addition, the research considers the level of trust there is in information from people and institutions (family, friends, leaders from State and Federal Government, business leaders and people and organisations in our local community).

SenateSHJ then considered how and what communication influences these pillars of social cohesion. In effect, what elements of communication correlate with togetherness. The research found five defining elements that rated highly in those who had the strongest sense of togetherness. These have been named CLOSE:

1. **Closeness**: how close we are to different groups

2. **Listening**: whether we feel listened to by people and institutions

3. **Optimism**: how people feel after seeing, hearing or reading a message

4. **Stories**: how exposed we are to stories from other backgrounds

5. **Effectiveness**: how effective the communication we see, hear and read, is.

From this model (derived through multivariate statistical analysis) SenateSHJ developed an index to assess how well Australia is performing overall. This index is scaled on a score of 0 to 100. This provides a simple measure of overall performance against which we can compare future success.

A score of 100 means an ideal situation in which we are effectively using communication to drive social cohesion. The index shows the results for each of the five key communication drivers and a total index based on the average of the five.

Togetherness Index Australia July 2020

How well are we using communication to drive social cohesion?

100

59

Closeness	52
Listening	55
Optimism	60
Stories	66
Effectiveness	61

0
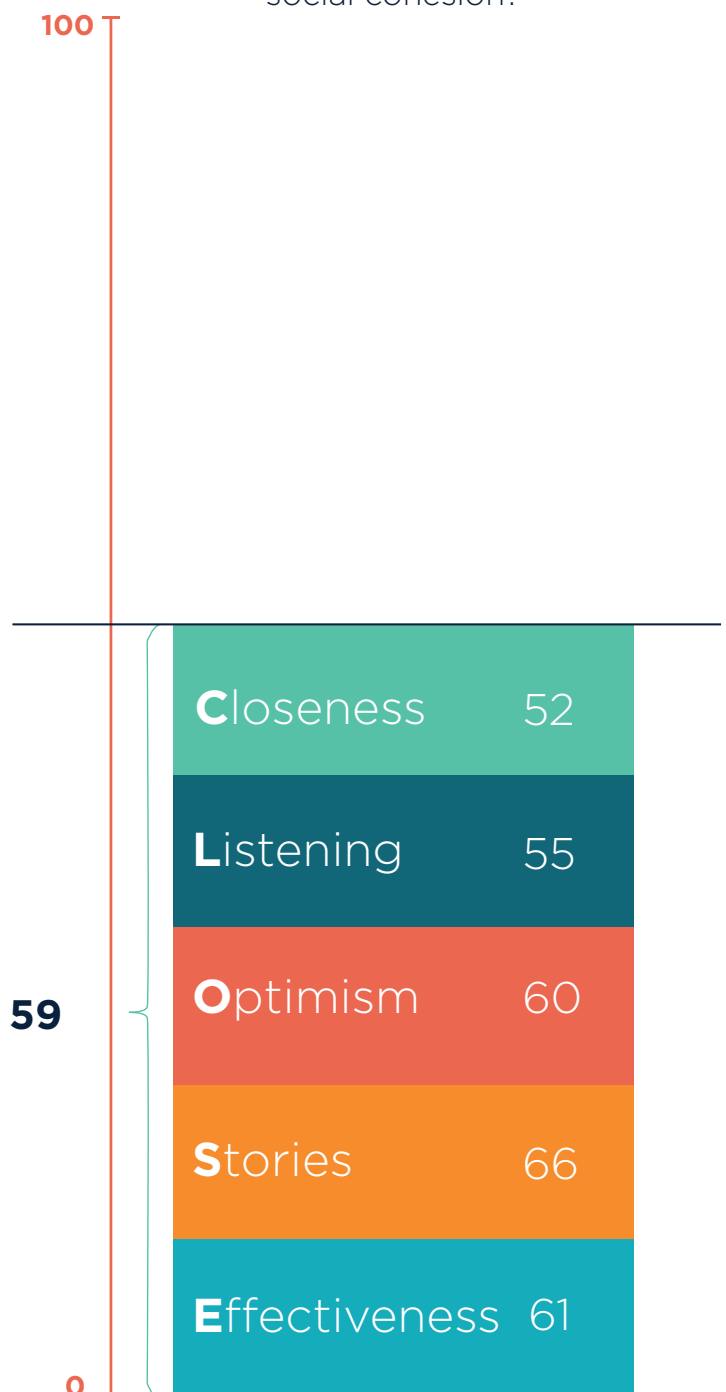
It is clear from the research that Australia has a long way to go before the nation sees the positive impact communication can have on togetherness realised in full. The overall score of 59 is a 'pass mark' so we have performed adequately – but not outstandingly.

According to the research, people regularly hear stories about other people (three fifths indicated this in the survey), and this is the element against which Australia is performing best as a nation.

However, there is less connection to our social circle (52 per cent) and there is some way to go before people feel listened to by institutions at all levels. Only one fifth feel close to their local community. Strikingly just three in 10 people feel their voice is heard in community debates and discussions.

While the research shows effectiveness and optimism scored higher, as the rest of this paper outlines, there is much to be done across a range of aspects of communication.

As a nation, we must get better at informing each other, whether our family and friends are sharing information, or we are getting information from government, the media or other institutions.

We need to get better at listening to each other. For communication to have maximum impact, there needs to be an uplift in how involved people feel with the community around them. And leaders need to step up with stories that inspire us.

The research reveals Australians also want Governments to communicate in a way that brings us together. Nine out of ten people thought this is important but only 65 per cent thought current communication was effective.

However, 75 per cent believe that the community does come together when times are tough.

More information on how the survey was developed and details about the approach can be found on page 11.

The Togetherness Index impact

The Index illustrates where Australia stands in terms of communication effectiveness on social cohesion. But the data also poses some interesting questions, allows us to draw out themes to explore and validates some things we might have known intuitively but couldn't empirically prove until now.

UNPACKING THE KEY QUESTIONS

1. **How can we tap into trust** to bring us together?

2. **What does trust in social media mean** for the challenge of misinformation?

3. **Have governments hit the mark** during COVID-19 so far?

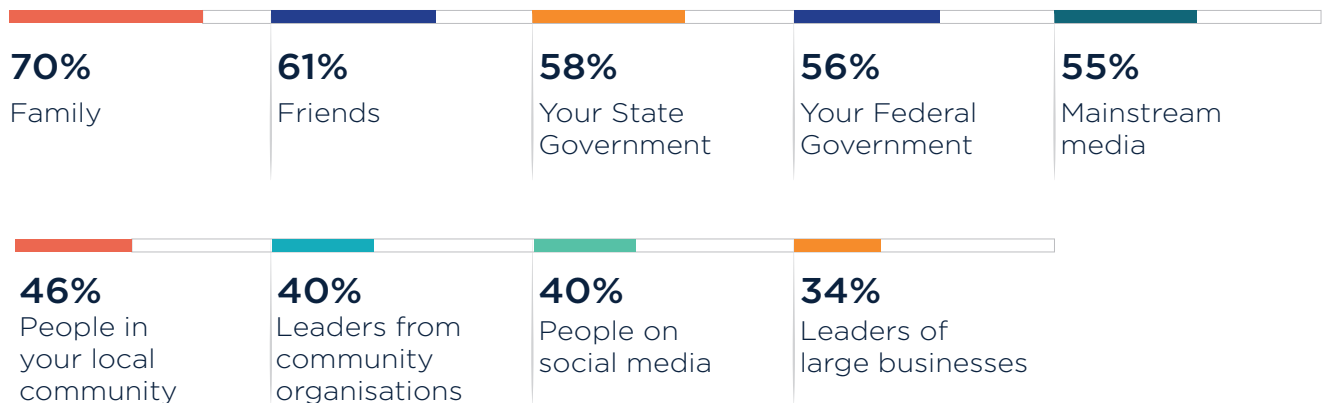4. **What role can business and the media play**?

5. **What does community mean** for Australians?

1. How can we tap into trust to bring us together?

Now we know Governments are not as effective as they would like to be at driving behaviour change. What might this suggest of their approach? Our research indicates they are effective at generally keeping the country informed about issues of relevance to the community. Almost 60% say they are effective at keeping us informed.

Perhaps then, the research points to three separate challenges. First, the messenger, second the intended target and third the appeals used to illicit behaviour change.

Proportion who believe the following people/organisations have been EFFECTIVE at keeping us informed about issues of relevance.

70% Family	**61%** Friends	**58%** Your State Government	**56%** Your Federal Government	**55%** Mainstream media

46% People in your local community	**40%** Leaders from community organisations	**40%** People on social media	**34%** Leaders of large businesses	

Proportion who believe that information communicated by the following people/organisations about issues of relevance is TRUSTWORTHY.

78% Family	**65%** Friends	**54%** Your Federal Government	**52%** Your State Government	**45%** People in your local community

45% Leaders from community organisations	**40%** Mainstream media	**33%** Leaders of large businesses	**24%** People on social media	
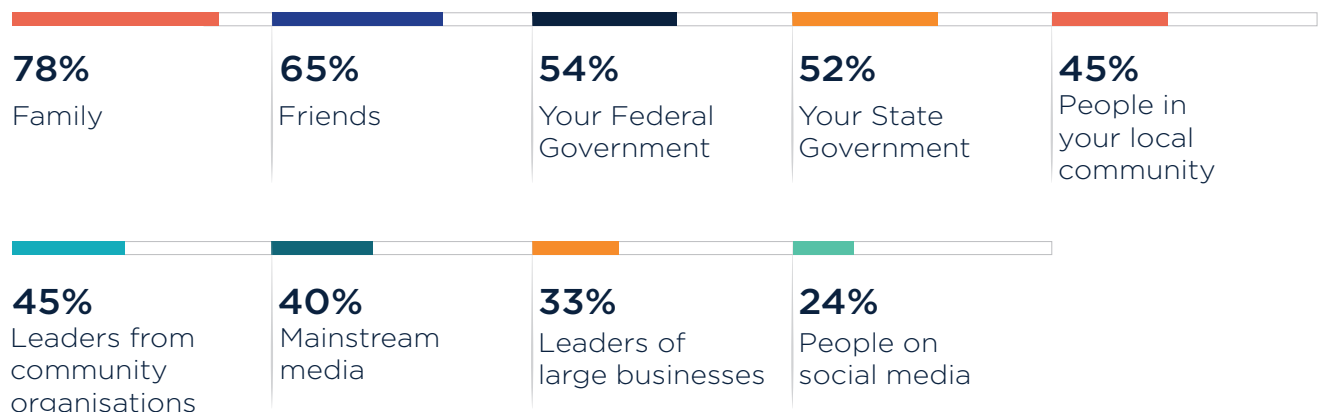
Messenger

The research found just over half of people find Government communication trustworthy. In an age of mistrust and misinformation, this presents significant challenge. Particularly as traditional messengers such as the mainstream media are viewed as less trustworthy (40% viewing the media as a trustworthy source).

Compare this to the most trustworthy sources of our family (78%) and friends (65%) and there is clearly work to be done by Governments at State and Federal level.

When it comes to driving behaviour change however, it shows we can't just rely on one messenger. While family remains the most influential on behaviour it only applied for 57 per cent of people. While Governments (48%), friends (45%) mainstream media (31%), local community leaders (26%) still play influential roles.

Target

Much communication is targeted at an amorphous group labelled 'the community'. Over the years, communicators have become much more adept at targeting ever smaller populations, groups, segments, micro-segments and individuals. We know this works. Interestingly, when it comes to social cohesion there seems to be two key groups that are often neglected – our friends and family.

As we've seen, these two groups are the most trusted. For friends, it may be too easy to read this as peers. Behaviour change theory would indicate peers influence peers. However, not all peers are friends. In which case, we come back to the need to leverage the relationships, or our social networks, within family and friendship groups more effectively.

This is particularly the case because our research indicates our friends and family make us most optimistic when they communicate with us. They also make us think about what they are saying more than any other group. Two thirds of those surveyed indicated they give a lot or some thought to messages they hear from family. And almost three fifths have changed their behaviour because of what they heard.

Appeals

At a time when the community needs to come together amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and some division is likely, we know the role communication can play in promoting social cohesion. We have also seen the value in integrating this into strategic communication campaigns.

Strategic communication can deliver the facts and help shape public sentiment, calm fear and drive behaviour change.

There are, in effect, three approaches – or as we call them appeals - to meeting this challenge and persuading people. First, communication should reassure the public that its actions are worthwhile (an appeal to their virtue as citizens or to social rules). Second, communication must respond by appealing to the consequences of not acting (a utilitarian appeal). Finally, communication should reinforce the responsibility to family, friends and community (the duty appeal).

These three Rs are all ways to achieve communication success, and reach target diverse groups. The question is: has communication during the pandemic over-weighted or under-weighted any of these appeals given what motivates people to change behaviour?

The last appeal, reinforce, would seem to deserve attention given what our research has indicated about friends and family. We have seen some of this in the strong 'together' or solidarity messaging emanating from most countries in both formal and informal communication.

Some early research into communication during the pandemic (Everett, J.A et all 2020) has also indicated each appeal has a role. Significantly, it also shows that the duty appeal has a higher hit rate in driving the behaviour desired of communities.

2. What does trust in social media mean for the challenge of misinformation?

Across the world extreme, misleading views are on the rise, dividing communities and undermining togetherness.

Disinformation and misinformation connected to a range of subjects across domestic and family violence, misogyny and incel ideology, hate speech and vaccinations are increasing. This trend is heightening the risks associated with the subjects to the community and individuals. We know that more broadly this has risen during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is of growing concern.

While misinformation and disinformation have always existed, the social media landscape has amplified the threat. Gossip, rumour and lies can now spread easier and faster than a virus. It is harder than ever to spot misinformation.

The results from our research reveal interesting data about people's social media beliefs. A quarter of those surveyed believe the information communicated by people on social media is trustworthy.

Two fifths believe people on social media is effective at keeping us informed about issues. Finally, over a fifth have changed their behaviour because of what they have seen, read or listened to on social media.

Interestingly, it is not young people (18-24) most likely to act (31%). In fact, around 36% of those

aged 25-44 act on what people outside their friends say on social media. This compares with just 11% of 45 to 54-year-olds and 7% of over 65s.

Of course, not everything on social media is misinformation. The data, however, reveals a significant proportion of people rely on social media for information.

Social cohesion relies on trust – in institutions and other people. Misinformation which undermines this is prevalent on social media. Given the data, this highlights the need for a response.

We are all at the forefront of this challenge – whether government, media, business or individual citizens. Making people aware of misinformation is one thing. Monitoring for it and acting to prevent it are another.

As individuals, we can better understand how to verify the sources of our information to find out where they are from. We can also seek out more than one side of a story, to escape our own echo chamber of information.

This is a skill that is more important now than ever.

As communicators, it is also more important than ever to consider the role of alternative narratives in taking on misinformation.

Who has the most impact on what we think, feel and do?

	Proportion who have given a lot more thought to messages communicated by the following people/organisations in the last six months	Proportion who feel OPTIMISTIC after hearing communications by the following people/organisations in the last six months	Extent to which messages communicated by the following people/organisations in the last six months have been influential on behaviour
Your family	65%	68%	57%
Your friends	57%	61%	49%
The Federal Government	54%	51%	48%
Your State Government	52%	49%	45%
Mainstream media	38%	43%	31%
People in your local community	31%	42%	26%
Leaders from community organisations	31%	34%	25%
Leaders of large businesses	27%	33%	22%
People on social media	23%	26%	20%

3. Have governments hit the mark during COVID-19 so far?

There is much to praise in how Australian governments have communicated in recent times.

Nine in ten of those surveyed reported that it was important for governments to communicate messages that bring us together and encourage cooperation with each other. The finding is consistent across States and age groups.

In addition, they are considered more trustworthy and effective than both leaders from community organisations such as sports groups and people in the community more broadly. People are more likely to change their behaviour having listened to government than to these community groups also.

However, this does not mean that everyone believes that government is effective. In fact, only 64% of those surveyed thought government is effective in communicating messages that bring us together. In addition, only half are optimistic when they hear or see messages from State and Federal Governments. A similar proportion give such communication little or no thought.

And, unfortunately, only half find that Government communication influences whether they change their behaviour. With COVID-19 raging, this is a disappointing if unsurprising result, particularly when you consider a quarter of people do little or nothing to change their behaviour when they see, listen to or hear communication from Government.

Interestingly, the groups least likely include the younger age group of 18-24, as you might expect, but also those aged 45-54.

Trust in Government has risen during COVID-19 as people look for direction and leadership. So it is likely that Government has been at its most impactful in changing behaviour given the public health crisis we face. With this in mind, we might expect worse results prior to the pandemic. It will also be interesting to see whether Government can keep up this level as the pandemic continues.

Extent to which messages communicated by the following people/organisations in the last six months have been INFLUENTIAL on behaviour.

57%
Family

49%
Your Federal Government

48%
Your State Government

45%
Friends

31%
Mainstream media

26%
Leaders from community organisations

25%
People in your local community

22%
People on social media

20%
Leaders of large businesses

4. What role can business and the media play?

Media	Businesses
55%	**34%**

Proportion who believe media and business have been *EFFECTIVE* at keeping us informed about issues of relevance

Media	Businesses
40%	**33%**

Proportion who believe that information communicated about issues of relevance is *TRUSTWORTHY*

Media	Businesses
38%	**27%**

Proportion who have given *A LOT OR SOME THOUGHT* to messages communicated in the last six months

Media	Businesses
33%	**34%**

Proportion who feel *OPTIMISTIC* after hearing messages communicated in the last six months

Media	Businesses
31%	**20%**

Extent to which messages communicated in the last six months have been *INFLUENTIAL* on behaviour

We have seen a backlash against institutions whether its government, media, business, religious institutions or otherwise. Our research suggests we are sceptical about whether institutions are trustworthy sources of information. Just a third view business leaders as trustworthy and two fifths see the media as a trustworthy source.

Both sets of institutions have been undermined in recent years. A great deal of this has come from scandals, Royal Commissions and other investigations into misconduct in the business sector. For the media, the challenge has been magnified by a polarised political and media landscape, populism and mainstream media's attempt to adjust and survive in an era of declining engagement from many in the community and plunging revenue.

COVID-19 may have re-energised our engagement with both these institutions somewhat. People are hungry for news and information. The ABC has seen rising audience levels. Brands have been front and centre in the response against the virus, taking a stand on social issues and participating in social movements. Financial institutions have had to support customers in depressing economic circumstances. Supermarkets have had to respond to panic buying and fears of supply chains breaking down.

Time will tell whether trust is being rebuilt. Our research indicates business and media have a role to play in bringing communities together that goes beyond a social post.

For example, at 40% we are more likely to give some or a lot of thought to what the media reports than we would to our local community organisations (churches, schools, sports clubs, etc.). And almost a third of us would change our behaviour based on what we've seen, heard or read in the media.

For business, the challenge to influence is greater but so is the opportunity. About a quarter of those surveyed, however, still give thought to what business leaders say and act on what they've heard.

5. What does community mean for Australians?

We all have a role to play in coming together. The pandemic has proven this in ways we are only just beginning to consider and understand. Togetherness relies on a sense of connectedness to our community. This community could, for example, be geographical, cultural, religious or sporting-based.

Our research shows we feel most close to our friends and family. However, there is a big gap between people within the local community. Just 22% say they are close to others in their local community. This is despite 56% saying they can and should contribute to improving their local community. In addition, two fifths feel they have a voice with opportunities for them to provide a valuable contribution to debates and discussions concerning their local community.

It seems many are not involved, though they wish to be and feel there are avenues for this.

The research also showed that those living in metropolitan areas scored higher on the Togetherness Index than those living in regional and rural areas (60 versus 55).

Those in metropolitan areas feel more connected to their local community than those is regional and rural areas (43% in metro, 38% in regional/rural areas). While like their metropolitan counterparts those in regional and rural communities feel close to family, they don't feel as close to friends (68%, 58%) or people in their local community (23%, 17%).

There has been much commentary about the way different generations have responded to the pandemic. This includes whether the young or old are heeding the generational warnings or which generations are most impacted or taking it in their stride.

The research found a series of differences across the generations.

When broken down by age group, it is the 45-54 and 55-64-year-olds that score lowest on the Togetherness Index (56, 52), compared with those aged 25-34 and 35-44 who scored the highest (64, 63).

People aged 45-54 have the lowest levels of trust in Government communication with those aged 65+ with the highest. Those respondents aged 18-24 feel the least optimistic after hearing Government communication even though they give it similar levels of thought to most generations.

Increasingly, the research shows, people say they often mix with and interact with people from different cultural groups. Overall, 62% say this is the case. The proportion in younger age groups rises to 72% while it is down at about 50% for older age groups.

Similarly, there is a strong trend of people regularly hearing stories about people from other faiths, backgrounds and cultures. This suggests we are getting closer to those of different backgrounds over time.

If the trend continues, it bodes well for connectedness in the future.

Levels of AGREEMENT relating to interactions and connection with others from the local community.

62%	56%	43%	23%
I often mix with, interact and talk to people from different cultural groups	I think I can and should contribute to improving my local community	There are opportunities for me to provide a valuable contribution to debates and discussions concerning my local community	I feel a strong connection to my local community

SURVEY AND REPORTING INFORMATION
Research methodology

- The research was an **online survey** with a sample size of 1,031 people aged 18+ taken 30 June to 7 July, 2020.

- Data was weighted to match the latest Census population statistics for gender, age, state and location, and resembles the Australian population based on these criteria.

- Fourteen demographic variables were also collected, including religion, country of birth, household income, education, employment status and NESB background.

- While the survey questions were not specific to COVID-19 we have taken the timing of the survey context into consideration when analysing the results.

- The questions were developed by drawing on pillars of social cohesion identified by the Social Cohesion Radar (Dragolov, 2016) and the Scanlon-Monash Index of Social Cohesion Index.

- Further research into strategic communication and change theory was then undertaken to understand which of these pillars could be influenced by communication and how communication could drive change.

- The index was created using a multivariate statistical analysis technique called Partial Least Squares – Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). This was used to help determine a construct (derived from a number of questions in our survey) that best explains the concept of communicating Social/Community Cohesion.

- This identified that 'Social/Community Cohesion' was best and most effectively defined as a combination of Q3 and Q5 which focus on community connection and trust in information being communicated by various institutions (family, friends, leaders from State and Federal Government, large businesses and from local community groups).

- All of the questions in the survey have some influence on the overall index score but there were five questions (Q2, Q4, Q6, Q7, Q11) where the relative influence was greater than others. They account for 88% of the 'explanation' of the overall SCI/CCI and all other variables (questions) in the survey account for 12%.

- This analysis provided the basis of our model for the index which seeks to measure current performance and will be a simple way to compare and contrast performance over time.

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