

Communication management in the public sector: Consequences for public communication about policy intentions

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Abstract

Public communication about policy intentions is important but delicate. Government officials are confronted with four main constraints typical of the public sector compared to the private sector: more complicated and unstable environment, additional legal and formal restrictions, more rigid procedures, and more diverse products and objectives. These constraints imply that ministers communicating about policy intentions face specific communication issues such as intensive political and media interferences, need for democratic communication, and more rigid timing and budget constraints.

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1. Introduction

There is a growing interest in theory as well as in practice for the role of communication in public policymaking processes in general and more specifically of communication during the preparation stage of policymaking (Geul, 2001, pp. 61–62; Van Woerkum, 2000). Basic idea in this respect is that in all phases of the policymaking process communications should be analyzed and managed, not only in the phase of the announcement of new policies

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(Damoiseaux & Van Ruler, 1998, p. 14). This means that communication needs also to be managed in the preparation stage of policymaking, e.g., that it needs to be steered on the basis of certain ends and towards certain outcomes (Van Ruler, Elving, Van den Hooff, Smit & Piet, 2005, p. 16). The problem is that the theoretical framework regarding communication management in this phase of policymaking is still in its infancy and that most approaches keep working with a concept of communication as information transfer or as a sender who tries to persuade a receiver (Van Ruler & Verčič, 2005). Moreover, the available theory is mainly developed within the context of the private sector (Van Harberden & Van Oest, 1997, p. 120; for an overview of theories for the private sector, see Grunig, 1992; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002; Heath, 2006). Consequently, the question arises if and to what extent management models from the private sector are transferable to the public sector, and if so, what the consequences are for public communication management.

There is extensive literature available discussing the question to what extent management models from the private sector are transferable to public sector especially as a consequence of the New Public Management (NPM). This question has not been unequivocally answered. The topic is delicate because it questions basic principles of modern management science (the idea that management has general characteristics) and even questions the usefulness of public organizations (Desmidt & Heene, 2005, p. 70). We share Thijs' view stating that transferring models and techniques from the private sector to the public sector is partly possible as far as one takes the specific characteristics of the public sector into account as well as the determining elements of the environment (Thijs, 2004). So, if we use the theories developed in the private sector, we then have to consider the consequences for public communication management.

Relatively recent definitions of public information provisions (e.g. Seydel cited by De Roon, 1993, p. 54) as well as other publications cite a planned approach of the public information provision. However, this is often limited to a reference to some kind of 'communication model split into phases', as is argued by De Roon (1993). The organizational context of the public communication is scarcely considered. Some exceptions include publications by Garnett (1992) and Graber (2003).

Rainey, Backoff, and Levine (1976) as well as Ring and Perry (1985) present a comprehensive overview of factors and properties that determine, according to them, the unique character of public organizations. As Rainey, Backoff, and Levine state, they devised this list by (internal) consensus. Thus, the list is not grounded by extensive empirical study on each statement.

This article fits into a broader research agenda of analyzing and comparing the public and private sector, their reforms and the implications on the management of the global communication from and within these public and private organizations, and to the management of specific communication modalities, such as policy communication, crisis communication, service delivery communication, internal/external communication, etc. Fig. 1 represents the general question of our long-term research project.

The private sector and public sector are characterized by some differences and similarities (see Relation 1). Both sectors have changed the last decade (see Relations 3 and 4) due to

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