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Towards a Theory of News Management in Public Sector Organizations

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Abstract

This paper introduces a theoretical model for analyzing institutional conditions for news management in public sector organizations. In the wide body of empirical research covering public relations and news management, the distinction between private and public sector organization is seldom made. There is little theory development that explicitly takes account of the quite different contexts in public vs. private sector organizations. What are the specific circumstances that define news management practice in the public sector? How may such conditions vary between different types of public organizations?

In a first part, the paper traces the history of public relations in the public sector, acknowledging that public relations research has some of its deepest roots in political communication but that there has been less interest in the organizations that provide actual services or exercise authority. The paper continues to delineate major themes and approaches within traditional public relations theory, where researchers take the perspective of the agent who wants to promote its own interests. We argue that there is need to discuss this topic in terms of a fundamental contradiction between two rationales: serving the public's interest to learn about all sides of organizational activities (good and bad) on the one hand, and protecting the interest of the organization itself on the other. We propose a typology of three types of institutional conditions that are particularly vital for news management in public sector organizations:

- Governance
- Public interest
- Transparency

Governance conditions relate to the involvement of politicians in executive decision-making; the role played by professionals; the degree of external competition and how organizational activities are monitored and audited. Transparency conditions relate to how clear the mission and activities appear; how visible organizational activities are to the public and the formal possibilities for management to control information. Public interest conditions relate to the general newsworthiness of organizational activities; how broadly organizational activities affect the public; the involvement of interest groups. The impact of these conditions will be illustrated by contrasting different types of public sector organizations in Sweden.

Keywords: public relations, news management, public sector organizations, police, school, social services

Background

In recent years, organizations within the public sector have become increasingly attentive to how they are perceived by the public, which can be seen as yet another expression of mediatization of society (Schillemans 2012). Partly, this has to do with the concerns about risk that is characteristic of late modern society. In both private and public sectors, the management of various types of risk is becoming more important (Power, 2007). Rothstein, Huber and Gaskell (2006) have argued that this development has led to an overemphasis on institutional risks – harm to the image of the organization – while societal risks (e.g. failure in organizational performance) have become less important. Power, Scheytt, Soin and Sahlin (2009) warn that the preoccupation with external auditing and "reputational risk" cause organizations to be overly defensive and attuned to formal procedure, which prevents them from creatively finding new solutions to their first order tasks. Another development that changes the approach to the public is the growth of market solutions within the public sector. This shifts organizational focus towards competition, branding and marketing.

In this context of "audit society" and competition, public sector organizations need to consider how their activities are portrayed in mass media. Hence, professional news management – activities intended to promote positive and prevent negative publicity – play an increasingly important role in the public sector (Larsson, 2005). News management originates from the private sector, where the rationale has been to maximize profit, market value and the interest of the organization (corporation) (Ewen, 1996; Wernick, 1991). For organizations under democratic authority, the ultimate goals are different. The interest of the organization can be defined in terms of creating legitimacy to secure future funding. But there are also democratic and humanitarian values at stake that transcend organizational self-interest. As a result, the goals for news management become different in public as compared to private organizations. In the former, the challenges are about promoting the goals that are set by the citizens and to convey how these are met with in a manner that does not hide problems or obstructs the public's possibilities to critically observe performance.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the need for more research into news management in public sector organizations. More specifically, we attempt to introduce a theoretical model that allows us to analyze how news management activities are dependent on different sorts of institutional conditions that may vary between types of organizations.

This paper discusses news management activities within three such types: social services, the police and schools. These types of organizations are selected to represent different aspects of news management challenges within the public sector. For example, social service organizations have been subjected to intense media scrutiny in individual cases and media relations are affected by far-reaching secrecy rules. Media are crucial to the police when they want to reach out to the community to solicit help in on-going crime investigations. Public schools in Sweden are increasingly faced with competition from private schools which is why promotion on a market becomes essential.

Research on media relations in the public sector

Mass media apply specific techniques to build news stories that attract attention of the audience, e.g. simplification, personalization, polarization, intensification, visualization, and stereotypification (Strömbäck, 2008). Media often draw from a repertoire of stereotypical characters originating from traditional folktales, such as heroes and villains, when they portray participants of news events (Hartz & Steger, 2010). Media portrayals of social work tend to highlight negative events like "celebrated child abuse scandals" (Ayre 2001) while portrayals about police work also often covers positive events like the solving of high-profile crime cases (Dowler and Zawilski 2007). There is a small body of research dealing with how public sector organizations and professionals within them perceive and react to media depictions of their practice. For instance, Aldrige (1994) and Brunnberg (2001) have both shown how social workers are often frustrated with the media.

Social services

Even if there are no empirical studies of news management within social service organizations, a few scholars and practitioners have published insights about the topic. Drawing on anecdotes from practitioners, Reid and Misener (2001), as well as Franklin and Parton (1991), discuss possible news

management strategies applied to social work: networking with key journalists, the distribution of information “off the record”, initiating feature stories that provide a more nuanced picture of social work practice and arranging seminars for journalists. In the context of her research about news reports on social work in Great Britain, Aldridge (1990) has discussed social workers relations to mass media. She highlights two themes: experiences of being exposed to media coverage and ideas about how the social work profession can find more functional approaches to media relations. She contends that social workers in general are naïve in relation to the media; that they are unable to distinguish between different kinds of media and understand commercial and other conditions under which journalists operate. Aldridge suggests building relations with journalists and to proactively promote positive news stories and concludes that there is a need for educating social workers about journalistic practice and media contexts.

Police

There has been a rather extensive research on the relationship between the police and the news media, especially in domestic British and North American contexts. On the whole, these studies illustrate that the police have a strong position in relation to the media. Police officials are the source most likely to be cited within crime news, which allows them to influence the media image of police work through conscious strategies (Chermak & Weiss, 2005; Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1989; Lovell, 2001).

Police and the news media generally cooperate quite closely, with mutual benefits. The police is dependent on news media for positive publicity, and see opportunities to reach the public in order to retrieve new evidence, lobby for additional resources etc., whilst the media require continuous access to information and credible sources. Crime is a priority news topic (Chermak & Weiss, 2005; Ericson et al., 1989; Hall et al., 1978/2013).

In *Policing the Crisis* Hall et al (1978/2013) suggest that senior executives in the police become *primary definers*. Such primary definers are able to adapt to how the news production process is structured and thereby shape news agendas and define controversial topics.

In a number of case studies, Schlesinger and Tumber (1994) have investigated news management among the police and courts. In the context of crime, they identify institutional circumstances that come into play: the interest of media for spectacular crime and how the police risks to be affected by political battles about law and order. Mawby (1999) further points out that because police work is carried out in public, there is greater risk for mistakes to be observed by others. Schlesinger and Tumber (1994) note how the police monitor media content to be able to respond to critique quickly and also actively attempts to establish networks among journalists.

School

Within the school sector, the development towards market orientation, privatization and managerialism has put issues of performance, evaluation and accountability in a new context. Such reforms have placed an increased emphasis on performance in the school sector (Tolofari, 2005). Furthermore, the introduction of market principles in education has made schools more accountable to parents and other community stakeholders.

Contrary to the police though, there is only scarce empirical research that investigates the concrete practices of news management in the school sector. Rönnberg, Lindgren and Segerholm (2012) explore the relationships between the Swedish Schools’ Inspectorate and newspaper coverage. The study concludes that the agency has been successful in its media relations, for example by using the media to put pressure on schools to actually adress the problems that were identified. At the same time informants at the School Inspectorate view media relations as problematic because of the risk of undue exposure of indvididual pupils and a risk of media portraying the education system as 'in crisis' (Rönnberg et al, 2012).

By and large, the existing literature is a collection of empirical studies each devoted to one type of public sector organization. Comparative research is virtually non-existing and there is a need for developing theories that make sense of the overall empirical findings.

Traditional news management theories

From in the middle of the twentieth century system theory was the dominant approach to news management and PR. This theoretical approach was concerned with how a company or organization can successfully execute strategies and tactics that can be beneficial in a given context (Edwards, 2014). Such theories are seldom interested in evaluating PR and news management practice from a wider societal perspective – they typically take the viewpoint of the organization in question. To some extent, the excellence model suggested by Grunig & Hunt (1984) transcends this perspective in the way it addresses the mutuality and symmetry between the organization and its surrounding communities. It is still though centered on how PR practitioners should behave and defines PR effectiveness solely in terms of organizational effectiveness.

A quite different type of news management theory addresses its function and value for a democratic society. As early as in the 1920s, Walter Lippmann (1922/1946) noted the emergence of news management and public relations. He argued that the development of mass media in combination with the efforts of so called "publicity men" entailed new means to manipulate the public. Another pioneer in this field, Edward L. Bernays (1952/2011), instead treated the "engineering of consent" as an essential part of the democratic process. Similar to Lippmann, Harbermas (1984/2003: 185–187) has taken a critical stance towards public relations as a phenomenon. He regards PR as a method for corporations to defend and win support for their privileged private interests, rather than an approach to represent the people. Contrary to Bernays, Habermas (1991) argues that this development undermines a democratic and critical discussion on public matters to the effect that mass media merely legitimize the prevalent economic and political powers in society. In a similar vein, Carey (1997) proposes that PR is a means to “taking the risk out of democracy”, i.e. a way for those holding economic and political power to submerge a truly democratic discussion of public affairs.

In contrast to the normative ethos of the two types of theory above, there are also theories that take an interest in the more concrete empirical sides of news management. Hall et al (1978/2013) discuss how primary definers – large corporations, interest organization and governments – can control media agendas and content. On a more concrete level, Gandy (1982) describes how those in power strategically provide news media with “information subsidies” – ready-packaged material and exclusive information.

From the early 1990s there was a renewed interest in the study of news management, especially in a British context. Many of these studies were inspired by Schlesinger’s (1990) call for the need to analyze news management practice from how it is conditioned by political, economic and ideological structures.

The contribution we aim towards is not to develop a model for how news management in public sector organizations ought to be performed. Rather, our ambitions are akin to those theories that serve to analyze the practice of news management in concrete organizations. Within this field of research, our specific contribution is directed towards how certain institutional conditions affect news management. Indirectly, we also hope that our theoretical proposal feeds into broader discussions of the function and value of news management in a democratic society.

Towards a model for understanding news management in the public sector

In the wide body of empirical research covering PR and news management, the distinction between private or public sector organization is seldom made (Schillemans 2012). There is little theory development that explicitly takes account of the quite different contexts in public vs. private sector organizations (Thorbjornsrud, Figenschou & Ihlen, 2014). Instead theories on Public relations and news management tend to be solely concerned with the relationship between the organization and its target groups. What then, are the specific circumstances that define news management practice in the public sector? And how may such conditions vary between different types of public organizations?

We propose a typology of three categories of institutional conditions that are particularly vital for news management in public sector organizations:

Governance	Transparency	Public interest
Politics Profession Competition Monitoring	Clarity Visibility of activities Information control	Newsworthiness Stakeholders and target groups Other groups

Figure 1: Typology of institutional conditions for news management

The discussion of these conditions will be carried out by contrasting three types of human service organizations in Sweden. Although the specific differences we will outline reflect the Swedish context, this sample will illustrate the more general relevance and utility of the model we present.

The main category governance is divided into four institutional conditions: *Politics* refers to the extent to which elected political bodies have influence over strategic governance, as well as concrete official decisions. For instance, a health and medical board in a county council take strategic decisions, while a municipal town planning committee can handle both layout plans and building permits. In this model, *profession* refers to the degree of autonomy for various professions. While medical doctors have relatively high autonomy in their work, administrators at CSN have considerably less room for maneuvers. *Competition* highlights whether there are competing actors in the respective organizational. The final aspect of this main category refers mainly to the possibilities for *monitoring*. For instance, it is relatively easy to evaluate the motor-vehicle inspections, in comparison to the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency.

The second main category in our theoretical model is called transparency. *Clarity* is about how clear the mission is formulated. For example, a court has clear mission, i.e. to decide guilt or innocence, whereas The Public Health Agency of Sweden's mission, that is, through knowledge sharing promote health, is less clear. *Visibility of activities* refers to the degree to which the organizations' operations are visible to the public. In this respect, the fire brigades operate under direct observation from the public, whereas the National Archives is not as transparent. The final condition (*information control*) mainly concerns to what extent the organizations are affected by secrecy rules. The emergency medical services have far-reaching secrecy rules to take into account, while only a small part of university work is confidential.

Regarding public interest, *newsworthiness* relates to what importance the mass media place on organizational activities. An example of a public sector organization, which generally has a high news value, is the military intelligence service. By contrast, libraries' everyday activities do not attract media attention to the same extent. The next two conditions, *stakeholders and target groups* and *organizations* both refer to agents in the surrounding society, which the organizations more or less intensely have to relate to. In this context, the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention has a very broad public audience, whereas The Agency for Export Credit has a much narrower audience. Furthermore, unions that are actively working with the mass media can, for instance, illustrate the last condition in this category, other actors.

Applying the model by comparing three types of organizations

To be able to show the merits with the model of types of institutional conditions we have applied it to three types of human service organizations in Sweden. Although they share many institutional traits as public sector organizations, social services, the police and the school sector operate under different institutional conditions that affect news management.

Governance

When it comes to governance the relation between administrative management and political leadership is one important condition. Here, Swedish social service organizations stand out in the way in which the executive responsibility lies under a political body – the municipal social welfare board.

This means that many formal decisions about individual cases – e.g. regarding adoption, licensing restaurants to serve alcohol and coercive intervention in child protection or drug/alcohol abuse cases – are made directly by lay politicians. On the other end of the spectrum, the police operate under limited direct influence from politics, whereas schools are governed by a political board on municipal level that largely makes strategic decisions about budget, organizational structure and policies. In the organizations penetrated by politics, there is a potential conflict between political interests and conveying a non-partisan image of activities. The former may also be more likely to produce leaks from the political leadership.

When it comes to the role of the professions there is a clear difference between on the one hand the schools and the police and on the other the social services. The two former are characterized by quite strong professions, teachers and policemen, with a relatively high degree of autonomy. The autonomy of social workers is more strictly restricted by legislation and organizational rules. This might for example influence the possibility for street level personnel to speak for the whole profession. As a consequence there may be less probability in social service organizations that front-line staff make critical statements in the media.

Another institutional condition is the extent to which an organization is subjected to competition from other service providers. In this respect, especially the upper secondary school sector has become a market for competition between public and private schools. Private competition is considerable in some parts of social services, e.g. within social care and housing for the elderly. There is less competition within the domains of the police, which then leads us to expect less interest in branding and marketing.

A key aspect of monitoring is the internal and external evaluation of activities. Evaluating goals appears relatively straightforward in individual cases in policing. In social work, it is often more difficult to identify what the problem is, which also means that the evaluation of interventions becomes more ambiguous. In the school sector, grades are a universally accepted, although somewhat contested, means to evaluate students' progress and indirectly the performance of individual teachers and schools. Another aspect of monitoring is how organizations deal with misconduct among staff. Organizations where monitoring is carried out in public are more likely to be targeted by news media.

Transparency

Our three organizational types are somewhat different in complexity and perception of goals, there is variation in clarity. This in turn may affect the perception of performance among the public and journalists.

The next condition related to transparency is the visibility of the actions performed by the organization. The extreme here is the police, who often operate under direct observation from the public. The secrecy culture of social services implies little visibility for outsiders, while schools are slightly more open for outside observation, particularly from parents. It is difficult for an organization to affect what media report about activities that are carried out in public. The recent development of social media will change information control conditions further.

With regards to conditions about transparency, public sector organizations are obliged to abiding to secrecy rules. However, such rules seem to carry more consequences in social services, where there is a strong secrecy culture. Secrecy rules also prevent public organizations to fully explain the rationale for actions in individual cases, something that appears most problematic for social services. But they can also be called upon in order to avoid responding to critique in the mass media. Public sector organization are also affected by the broad constitutional right for public officials to forward information to journalists (*meddelarfrihet*) and the constitutional right for journalists as well as the general public in Sweden to access any public documents that are not specifically classified as secret (*offentlighetsprincipen*). Such rules, together with labor laws that strongly protect employees from being acquitted, create a fertile potential for whistleblowing, i.e. for employees to call out about ill-doings within the organization (Hedin, Månsson, & Tikkanen, 2008). These rights exist on all three types of organizations. An exception though is the privately operated schools and service providers involved in social work.

Public interest

An important condition for news management in a particular type of organization is the newsworthiness of the activities performed. Police work has obvious dramatic qualities and therefore has a high appeal for the media. In a few individual cases, the same can be true for social services. The main news appeal for the school is its broad impact on many citizens (pupils and parents).

When it comes to stakeholders and target groups police work is largely directed towards protecting the general public. Schools mainly have parents and pupils as stakeholders and target groups. In the social services those mainly concerned are diversified client groups and relatives. With a larger and more loosely defined target group the police have more incentives to strive towards publicity in broad news media. Schools and especially social services can reach large parts of their stakeholders through more direct channels.

The most important of “other groups” in the model in our case are trade unions. The Swedish Police Union is quite strong and visible in the public debate. Especially the two national teachers’ unions are very active in their respective news management. The unions representing employees in social services appear less frequently in the mass media. The existence of other organizations in the same field may increase media coverage but carries the risk for conflicts in the public (Deacon & Golding, 1994).

Conclusion

This paper suggests that the news management of social services, the police and schools could be analyzed by applying a typology of institutional conditions. The model reveals contradictions in goals and conditions that are specific to public sector organization and complicate news management practice. It is of particular value in understanding how the conflicting goals of protecting the interest of the organization and providing the public with complete information are balanced. We further believe this to be a fruitful approach in the research of news management practice in all types of public sector organizations. The application of our model will potentially enhance our understanding of different approaches to news management within the public sector. Moreover it casts light on the further effects on ordinary activities and performance. The implications of our proposed model have obvious relevance for leadership within public sector organizations, where communication is an increasingly imperative aspect. Above all we would suggest the need for more studies into the practice of news management in the public sector. The development towards more scrutiny and audit, the ever-present importance of media in public debate and the increasing use of marketing and public relations in public sector organizations all contribute to this being a new urgent agenda for research.

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