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Communicating under the regimes of divergent ideas: How public agencies in Sweden
manage tensions between transparency and consistency

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Abstract

In this paper we draw on Scandinavian institutionalism to argue that ideas act as imperatives for organizations' communication, whereby differences between ideas can generate tensions that organizations must manage. We focus on transparency and consistency, ideas that frequently underpin organizational communication, but are mobilized by different problems and offer different solutions. An analysis of communication policy and strategy documents in 188 Swedish public agencies shows how transparency and consistency co-exist, but are translated into local settings in divergent ways. The resulting tensions relate to the purpose of communication, roles of organizational actors and of media, and stakeholder identities. Tensions are managed using three strategies: firewalling, ranking, and compromising. The findings show that ideas are fundamental to organizational communication, but that organizations also contribute to transformations and hybridizations of ideas. We suggest further analyses of interactions among institutions, organizations, and communication, particularly of how the translations of ideas generate tensions that must be resolved.

Introduction

In this paper, we explore how ideas shape the way organizations understand their communication and the approaches they use to manage tensions produced by the co-existence of divergent ideas. Our focus is on transparency and consistency, ideas with a well-established history as desirable and often taken-for-granted characteristics (Birchall, 2011; Christensen, Morsing, & Cheney, 2008), but mobilized by fundamentally different problems and offering different communicative solutions (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2016). Consequently, these ideas generate tensions as they take organizational communication in different directions. These tensions are persistent forces and are observable in organizational discourses as struggles for primacy of meaning (Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004) and/or, as solutions for the sustainable co-existence of ideas (Lewis & Smith, 2014). Accordingly, in this paper we define tensions as discursive expressions of a persistent *potential* for conflict in the objectives, processes, and practices of organizational communication likely to mobilize responses from organizations (Christensen & Langer, 2009).

Tensions between transparency and consistency are particularly prominent in public sector contexts, where organizations are often subject to legal requirements for transparency as a means of scrutiny and control (Erkkilä, 2012). At the same time, competition, decline in trust and audit cultures have led many public services to become focused on coherent self-representations (Wæraas & Maor, 2015), driven by self-interest and the need for recognition. The organizational dynamics produced by the two ideas in these contexts have been discussed by others (Bjørnå, 2015; Byrkjeflot, 2015; Erkkilä, 2012; Fredriksson & Pallas, 2016; Wæraas, 2008; Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012), but there are few studies of the approaches organizations use to manage their divergent natures.

To understand how tensions are managed, we turn to organizational institutionalism and in particular its Scandinavian branch. This stream of research highlights the construction,

distribution, and adaptation of ideas and has illustrated how ideas circulate widely and function as imperatives for organizational activities (Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017). In order to gain broader cultural significance, ideas must be de-contextualized and abstracted; this in turn means that they need to be re-contextualized and translated to gain relevance in local settings (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996). Translations take place in the intersection between social, organizational, and professional value systems (Pallas, Fredriksson, & Wedlin, 2016). Tensions are therefore likely to emerge when transparency and consistency are translated, which in turn will invoke responses from organizations to avoid conflict.

Taking these theoretical conditions as our point of departure, the aim of this article is to further our understanding of how tensions in organizational communication are produced and managed through translations of transparency and consistency. We contribute to the growing literature on the interactions between institutions, organizations, and communication (Cornelissen, Durand, Fiss, Lammers, & Vaara, 2015; Fredriksson, Pallas, & Wehmeier, 2013; Lammers, 2011) by providing an empirical account of these activities in public agencies in Sweden. We focus on communication policy and strategy documents, understood as types of ‘communicative events’ (Ocasio, Loewenstein, & Nigam, 2015) that prescribe and support the practices through which transparency and consistency are realized. Our analysis rests on three questions: 1) how do public sector agencies translate the ideas of transparency and consistency in communication policy documents and what kinds of activities do each of the ideas advocate, 2) what tensions emerge as a result; and 3) what approaches do the agencies use to manage and alleviate these tensions? We first describe our theoretical framework, then introduce the Swedish context and methodology, before presenting the results and discussion.

Institutions and ideas

The literature on organizational institutionalism has contributed substantially to understandings of the interplay between institutions and organizations (Greenwood, Oliver, Lawrence, & Meyer, 2017). To explain how institutions intervene with organizations, institutionalists frequently refer to structures and the importance of myths (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), and, more recently, logics (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012) as mechanisms for the diffusion of institutions. There is a tendency, however, to overlook the motives and skills of actors and how they relate to the institutions in which they are embedded. Scandinavian institutionalism provides a response to this lacuna by highlighting the interplay between organizational and institutional contexts (Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017). Central to this approach is the importance of widespread narratives conceptualized as *ideas* (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996). Ideas 1) connect causes and effects, 2) provide descriptions of universal problems, relevant across fields and organizations; and 3) offer solutions to these problems (Höllerer, Walgenbach, & Drori, 2017). Hence, ideas provide organizations with motives and justifications to act and communicate, as well as calling out roles, identities, and behaviors (Zilber, 2016).

Scholars have identified different types of ideas, but management ideas (Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002) are most relevant here. They refer to leadership, administration, production, communication, and other aspects of organizational life, often appearing as pre-packaged solutions to general problems such as productivity, diversity, or communication. TQM (Total Quality Management), NPM (New Public Management), CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility), and Strategic Communication are some examples. Like other ideas, they have gained wide distribution by virtue of being de-contextualized, theorized, and made abstract. Abstraction is achieved when location-specific detail is omitted or downplayed so that the ideas can be generalized to a wide range of organizations (Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017). In

turn, when applied to local contexts, they need to be re-contextualized, modified, and made specific. This translation process (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996) occurs at the intersection of social, organizational, and professional value systems where ideas are materialized and turned into objects and/or actions (Ansari, Reinecke, & Spaan, 2014; Pallas et al., 2016).

Transparency and consistency

Both transparency and consistency qualify as ideas, and transparency has been studied as such elsewhere (Blomgren & Sahlin, 2007). Both refer to problems faced by a wide range of organizations and provide solutions for handling those problems. Both have undergone extensive theorization and attained high levels of abstraction, which means they appear in many different forms and contexts. Furthermore, both are frequently described as desirable characteristics of organizational communication and often occur as taken-for-granted organizational objectives (Christensen et al., 2008).

Transparency is invoked in relation to problems related to collective welfare, governance and accountability, and organizations' ability to show how they comply with regulations or how they make use of allocated resources. As a social value oriented towards the continuous acquisition of information (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2015), transparency responds to the interests of external actors concerned about an organization's ability to act as a responsible social citizen (Hood, 2007). Translating the idea of transparency inevitably involves acknowledging the validity of external stakeholder interests, including policymakers, the media, customers, and activist groups. Transparency reflects ambitions to be open and ready to change in response to feedback, and may be understood best as a socially-constructed, dynamic set of interactions and processes that emerges as organizations engage with various actors. As a prescriptive idea underlying the aims and patterns of organizational communication, it can discipline organizational members into particular ways of engaging with audiences (Flyverbom, 2015). From an external perspective, it influences

how audiences make sense of organizational communication and is often understood as a tool through which organizational power can be held to account. For example, the recent introduction of transparent gender-based pay reporting by the UK government helps to both reveal and challenge organizational reward systems that produce gendered inequalities.

Transparency suggests an ability to see into and through organizations, revealing how power operates and opening up grounds for challenging inappropriate practices, and is normatively associated with good governance and accountability (Christensen & Cheney, 2015). However, this democratic interpretation of transparency has significant limitations. It requires transparent organizations to have both comprehensive self-knowledge and stakeholders who trust in the information being delivered (Birchall, 2011), neither of which is easily guaranteed. Access to information via ‘transparent’ communication does not guarantee better audience understanding or an improved ability to critique organizations, and in practice, the pursuit of transparency can be ambiguous, simultaneously prompting measures to obscure issues that the organization wishes to keep private (Christensen & Cheney, 2015).

Consistency is connected to organizations’ identity, autonomy and ability to answer questions referring to its values, actions, history, and future. These qualities are expected to be unique (to some extent), coherent across different contexts and to stand the test of time (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000). Inconsistent organizations risk being perceived as hypocrites and/or unreliable. In line with this view, success is seen as dependent on how an organization is perceived and earns respect (Fombrun & Rindova, 2000; Rindova, Williamson, & Petkova, 2010). Accordingly, communication is mobilized by organizations’ self-interest and a desire for public recognition; external stakeholders are of interest for the affirmation they offer, and the creation and maintenance of organizational visibility is prioritized (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2016). Coherence and clarity become essential qualities across organizational culture, identity, and action. Thus, consistency obligates uniformity and

stability in how organizations make decisions, act, and communicate in different situations (Edwards & Fredriksson, 2017).

Approaches to managing tensions

It has been suggested that transparency and consistency are two interrelated ideas that, when applied to organizational communication, can generate trust, legitimacy, and a favorable reputation. Transparency is then a state when an organization's identity, represented by consistent and expressive communication, reflects stakeholders' expectations (Fombrun & Rindova, 2000; Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007). We argue this position is open to challenge, as it overlooks the tensions that will emerge from the contrasting emphases on collective welfare in transparency and self-interest in consistency (Christensen, 2002; Flyverbom, 2015) - tensions that must be managed as organizations translate the two ideas into their local contexts.

These kinds of tensions are a common feature of organizations (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996) and institutional theorists have revealed a wide variety of approaches used to manage them. One is 'ranking', or giving one idea priority over the other (Arman, Liff, & Wikström, 2014). For example, Byrkjeflot (2015); Christensen et al. (2008); Erkkilä (2012); Hood (2007) and Roberts (2006) have pointed out that increased demands for transparency have mobilized managers to increase control over information flows, rather than increasing their openness. Confronted with the risk of being perceived as irrational, unreliable or inconsistent, or being shackled with blame, managers centralize their organizations' communication efforts and prioritize consistency so that ultimately, increased demands for transparency lead to more closed organizations.

Another approach is to adhere to ideas in a symbolic rather than practical sense. For instance, Christensen (2002) noted that transparency often seems to be decoupled from organizational activities. Instead it is focused on the creation of consensus between an

organization and its stakeholders about the extent to which the organization lives up to an ideal. Several variations of this separation between formal structures and actual activities have been identified, including ‘cycling’ (dealing with ideas sequentially, one at a time, such as ensuring consistent messaging before introducing more transparency into communication strategies), ‘firewalling’ (creating separate contexts for different ideas related to the same domain, such as establishing one department for citizen dialogues and another for strategic communication), ‘casuistry’ (avoiding general directives but promoting ad hoc solutions) and ‘flooring’ (making sure that no single idea ever falls below a given minimum of influence, such as allowing transparency only in situations where consistency is evident) (Thacher & Rein, 2004).

A third approach is to ‘compromise’ (Oldenhof, Postma & Putters, 2014) by modifying normative ways of performing the activities associated with a certain idea (Røvik, 2008; Wæraas & Sataøen, 2014). By making some elements more explicit or prominent – for example, emphasizing organizational history as a basis for consistency - organizations influence already established activities in a particular direction. Compromises can also be used to adapt ideas to local circumstances and thereby avoid excessive interruptions or disturbances to normal practice. For example, Erkkilä (2012) has shown how new mechanisms in the Finnish public sector, through which organizations are made accountable for their actions, have promoted an economic understanding of transparency expressed in new vocabularies. Accordingly, the legalistic concept “openness” has been replaced by the transnational and managerial concept “transparency” (also see Hood, 2006). But as Zilber (2002) has noted, changing behavior need not be supported by new vocabularies - it is sufficient to have collective agreement of what a certain concept connotes in new situations.

In some instances these approaches have been framed as the result of strategic trade-offs (Bozeman, 2008), where actors balance the gain from one idea against the cost of others

(Thacher & Rein, 2004). However, given that there is no single evaluation standard for different ideas (Spicer, 2001), it is arguably more logical to interpret the approaches as a feature of the negotiations, contestations, and adaptations inherent to translation processes (Ansari et al., 2014; Pallas et al., 2016). Here, Scandinavian institutionalism can help us to understand how it is possible for transparency and consistency to co-exist as translated, localized ideas in organizations, despite the tensions that they generate as a result of their contradictory impetus towards public interest versus self-interest.

In the next section, we outline the context for our empirical study of the way transparency and consistency are translated into organizations, what tensions emerge and how they are managed in practice.

Research context and methods

Three factors make public agencies in Sweden a particularly interesting context to explore the tensions between transparency and consistency:

1) The long history of legal and normative support for openness in the public sector, legitimizing the idea of transparency. Sweden has the oldest Freedom of Information Act in the world, dating back to 1766 (Erkkilä, 2012). It frames public agencies as accountable to public scrutiny, particularly from the media, and secures freedom of expression for employees irrespective of organizational interests.

2) Recent reforms increasing the power of consistency as an operational ideal. The Swedish public sector has undergone a number of reforms over the last 20-30 years oriented towards efficiency, structural devolution, and contractual exchange. Changing modes of governance and management have increased the focus on competition and results (Sundström, 2006), in order to transform public agencies into “complete” organizations (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000). The reforms have given the idea of consistency a new centrality as

agencies have struggled with issues concerning identity, autonomy, and control (Byrkjeflot, 2015).

3) Their legal independence and extensive, highly valued, and protected managerial autonomy. The government appoints the director general or equivalent and provides funding, but the agencies have the freedom to set their own priorities regarding structures, routines, resource allocation, and employment (Niklasson, 2012). While the political context confirms the agencies' accountability to the public interest, the autonomy they have and the dependence on annual reassessment fosters self-interest. An agency's ability to maintain its autonomy is largely dependent on how it is perceived and evaluated by its political principals, so a coherent and positive public image is often regarded as an important resource (Jacobsson, Pierre, & Sundström, 2015).

Sample and selections

Ideas become organizationally embedded as they are translated and are eventually manifested in artifacts, routines, relations, and symbols (Pallas et al., 2016). This provides scholars with a number of options for data collection and analysis, including single, or categories of, organizations, interviews and surveys, observations, document analysis, media content analysis, and discourse analysis (cf. Ansari et al., 2014; Doolin, Grant, & Thomas, 2013; Kjeldsen, 2013; Wæraas & Sataøen, 2014). In our study we included all national public agencies (N=245) and conducted a textual analysis of policy and strategy documents (Helder, 2011). There are four reasons for these selections:

1) Our primary interest was to provide an extensive account of the approaches organizations mobilize to manage the tensions that emerge from their translations of transparency and consistency. This It was the agencies' collective efforts to manage the tensions we were interested in, rather than the efforts made in single organizations or by

particular types of agencies (cf. Whittle, Suhomlinova, & Mueller, 2010). In order to achieve this we decided to include all agencies in our sample.

2) The large number of agencies meant that we needed a consistent data source, present in all organizations, which could illustrate how the two ideas were translated. Policy and strategy documents fulfil this criterion. They are a common feature in Swedish public agencies and perform the rhetorical and social actions of both justification and explanation, providing employees with instructions for how to act (Koskela, 2013).

3) The documents function as means of management, governance, and control (Ekonomistyrningsverket, 2012), providing regulatory and normative bases for organizational activities, defining and setting standards, and acting as a reference for practice. Thus, they are also an important symbolic indicator of the significance attached to certain activities and issues (Statskontoret, 2013). Moreover, the language used in the documents helps their readers ‘decipher’ the repertoires for action proposed by the organizations (Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016) in their translations of transparency and consistency.

4) Because translations are political processes in many ways, mobilizing a variety of interests (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2000), we needed a data source that represented collective efforts, but could also capture different positions. We expected policy and strategy documents to include arguments from different positions, even if they were dominated by a managerial perspective.

We limited our sample to documents that were effective at the time we made our request, excluding archived documents. In line with the focus of our study, we only included documents where the title explicitly referred to different forms of communication (e.g., “information”, “branding”, “media relations” and “internal communication”).

Our broad sampling strategy and our focus on policy and strategy documents helped us to gather rich and varied data. Nonetheless, limitations to the study arise from the nature of

the data sources and the synchronic approach. We could not study the ways translation strategies and corresponding tensions emerged and changed over time, nor how the normative advice in the documents was further negotiated in practice. The focus on communication documents also discounted an analysis of how translations of transparency and consistency might articulate with other areas of management.

Document analysis

We compiled a list of document types and sent it to the registry clerk at each national public agency. According to “The Public Access to Information and Secrecy Act”, documents held, received, or drawn up by a government agency must be made public upon request. In total we received documents from 188 agencies; 51 declared that they didn’t have any documents and 6 didn’t respond to our request. The final corpus included 357 documents (see table 1 for a detailed overview).

Table 1 about here

As shown in other studies (Koskela, 2013), the documents were very alike in terms of framing and tone even if they differed in name, scope, and length. A common focus was the importance of communication for helping an agency to reach its goals. The documents frequently specified that “communication” isn’t just for communicators and that it was important for all employees to take communication into consideration. They contained descriptions of the strategic positions, goals, and target audiences for communication. The general tone was instructive, clarifying where, when, and how employees should perform communication activities.

We read the documents several times, searching for references to transparency and consistency. Given our focus on how the two ideas are translated into organizational contexts, we looked for instances where they were presented as ideals, used as motives, or described as

a result of activities. In terms of transparency, we paid particular attention to sections of text concerning “transparency”, “openness”, “honesty”, “sincerity”, “responsiveness” as well as references to external actors requiring insights about motives, performance, and/or results. For consistency, we paid particular attention to sections that referenced “consistency”, “univocality”, “core values” and “identity”. We also included text where employees were encouraged and/or asked not to answer questions, and/or to forward questions to the communication department or senior management (see table 2 for examples from the documents).

Table 2 about here

Relevant sections of the texts were marked and copied into a separate document, indexed by agency and source. At this stage we used a generous approach (Hycner, 1985): when in doubt as to whether a section was to be included or not, or where to start/end our marking, we chose to include as much text as possible. Separate corpuses were created for text related to transparency, consistency, and sections where both ideas were present. Accordingly, the same passage could be represented in all three corpuses if it included references to both ideas.

We then conducted a detailed analysis of how activities referring to the two ideas were described, contextualized, and ordered in the documents. We decided to focus on activities because the documents are largely practice-oriented, but also because ideas are materialized in activities when they are translated. In addition, focusing on activities gave us an opportunity to make use of the categories suggested by Van Leeuwen (2008) to structure our analysis.

As a first step, all instructions regarding activities that referenced either of the two ideas were identified, marked up, and given a label. We tried to be as specific as possible to

make sure that relevant distinctions between activities were not lost (see table 3 for a list of activities included in the documents). Thereafter we categorized each activity according to the following criteria:

- How the activity was supposed to be executed
- How the presumed reader was positioned and/or labelled
- For whom the activity was (not) supposed to be performed (the ‘patient’, in Van Leeuwen’s terms)
- The beneficiary of the activity
- The eligibility conditions for the actor(s)
- In what mode the activity was supposed to be performed
- Whether the activity was supposed to be performed at a certain time and/or location
- The resources available for the activities
- The expected consequences if things were done right/wrong
- The overall aim of the activity
- How the activity was justified

In the next step we clustered activities associated with similar actors, modes, consequences, aims, and/or any other criteria. This was an iterative process, concluding once we had produced a set of mutually exclusive categories of activities related to transparency or consistency. In total we identified eight categories of activities (see table 3).

Table 3 about here

For example, the category “Talk with one voice” was related to consistency and included six activities: 1) Only make statements regarding one’s own field of expertise; 2) Collect information to make sure what the agency’s position is; 3) Media training; 4) Select (remove) messages that can contribute to (disturb) the agency’s image; 5) Adapt messages to the context/audience without losing track of the agency’s position or vision; and 6) Act as ambassador for the agency. All these activities were expected to be performed according to established routines. The reader was made eligible by being an “employee”, “spokesperson” or “expert” and often positioned as part of a collective “we”, “us” or “the agency”. The ‘patient’ was often journalists, “the media”, or “target groups” and the main beneficiary was

the agency. The activities had no limitations in time or space, and if they were performed correctly they would lay the foundation for more efficient communication. If messages were clear they would also make their way through the noise of the cluttered communication environment, the target groups would make the right associations, and the agency would be perceived as more attractive. If the activities were poorly performed or not performed at all, then the agencies or their standpoints would be unknown, misinterpreted, or seen as poorly managed. The overall aim was to create a clear and positive image of the agencies; their media image and their perceived legitimacy were treated as benchmarks for organizational success.

In the next and final step, we returned to the three data corpuses and coded the sections in terms of the eight categories, using the results to identify the approaches used to manage tensions between the two ideas. One way to accomplish this was to see whether the agencies referred to tensions when the two ideas were presented simultaneously and identify what recommendations they provided for the reader. Another was to identify how the agencies described different activities depending on context. For example, we noted whether a certain category of activity was justified differently if it referred to various beneficiaries or patients. A third way was to note whether an activity was supposed to be performed at a certain time and/or location and how it related to other activities. Our fourth strategy was to see whether the presentation of an idea changed across documents, or was presented in the context of similar activities or activities mobilized by the other idea. By reading the data across documents in this way, we could also compare how the activities were described by different agencies.

Results

Our analysis of the policy documents confirmed that the ideas of transparency and consistency are pivotal when communication is conceptualized and planned for in Swedish

public agencies. Out of the 188 agencies that had drawn up some type of document(s), 130 mobilized both ideas, 30 promoted consistency, 12 advocated transparency and 16 did not adhere to any of the two. That is to say, both ideas were promoted as central aspects of communication and both were often mobilized by the same organization. In the following section we discuss our findings in relation to the research questions, starting with: *How do public sector agencies translate the ideas of transparency and consistency in communication policy documents?* and *what kinds of activities do each of the ideas advocate?*

Transparency

Transparency was most often translated as various forms of “openness” by the agencies. The term openness is historically associated with the Swedish legal context and public responsibility, and the term was retained in most documents at the expense of transparency, which did not appear frequently. While the terminology of openness has remained constant in public sector contexts, it was associated with several different meanings and activities, many of which reflect the more managerial notion of transparency (Erkkilä, 2012), and this was reflected in the documents.

Openness was associated with organizational cultures, employee attitudes and activities: agencies proclaimed that they must be “an open and perceptive organization”, that their “communication ought to be open”, that they have to be “open regarding transformations and changing conditions”. An example of a specific activity reflecting openness was the need to provide documents and public records when asked. It was prompted by the agencies’ legal obligations and was often referred to as a general requirement that applies when others (journalists, citizens) use their constitutional right to seek information. The activities thereby reflected the outward-looking dimension of openness as something beneficial for others, rather than for the agencies themselves. One example is Länsstyrelsen i Södermanland (The County Administrative Board of Södermanland) who argued that:

Länsstyrelsen is a part of the democratic system in our country. We contribute to a vivid democracy by communicating with citizens, corporations, other authorities and mass media. Länsstyrelsen is an open public agency that defends the principle of public access to official records and rule of law. (Strategy for Information and Communication Policy, rules and guidelines, p. 3)

Here, openness was justified by calling on civic concepts such as democracy, open society, and the rule of law. In addition, the texts draw on the fact that the agencies are tax-funded, work for others' (read: politicians) ends and should support others' (read: journalists or "the media") efforts to perform their role in a democratic society. In this context the agencies often positioned the employees as *civil servants*, members of a profession rather than an organization. As such, they were expected to know under what circumstances they were required to distribute or withhold documents, and they were expected to seek advice from the communication or legal departments if there were any doubts about whether a document was public.

A second category of activities related to employees' constitutional right to anonymously provide documents and information to journalists without risking punishment. To a large extent, these descriptions followed the same patterns as those above, in terms of external interests and application. The motives for why it should be in the individual's interest to use her/his rights was often omitted however and they were often framed in legal terms without further explanation. Less common were also reasons for why the law is in place or explanations of why activities are legitimate. Instead, there was a tendency to identify the employee as a "private person" or "citizen" when their right to provide documents and information was described, even though the fact of their employment gave them access to the documents and guaranteed them anonymity and legal immunity. Here, the performative nature of transparency (Flyverbom, 2015) was reflected in the repositioning of the employee-as-citizen, in order to make sense of activities that might otherwise damage the

organization. For example, the ‘Communication and Mass Media Policy of Ekonomistyrningsverket’ (The National Financial Management Authority) states:

Co-workers of ESV have, as other citizens, the right to participate in media as private persons (individual's right to anonymity). In these situations one has to point out that it is as a private person one makes one's statement. The corporate identity of ESV may not be used. (p. 3)

A third category of activities relating to transparency was mobilized by the *Administrative Procedure Act*, which stipulates that all government agencies have to provide information, guidance, advice, and other forms of help for citizens to take action in situations relating to the agencies' responsibilities. The obligatory nature of these activities meant that transparency appeared as a form of disciplinary control over employee activities. Employees were urged to be service-minded, collegial, provide information, be straightforward and clear in their communication, explain facts, and help the receiver understand the information they provided. They were also encouraged to be available for questions and comments, refer to others if they don't know the answer or don't have the time, but also be open and listen. One example is the ‘Communication Policy’ of Migrationsverket (The Migration Agency), which states:

Obligations to provide service

The obligations to provide service and be available are stipulated in the *Administrative Procedure Act*. /.../ Externally it means that we must be available and answer questions. We should take the initiative to distribute facts, provide background and explain situations in a way that is adapted to the receiver. Openness fosters a constructive dialogue with those who are affected and motivated by our activities. (p. 2)

Consistency

The translation of transparency in the documents tended to consolidate around various manifestations of openness, where the two main reference points were the legal context and responsiveness to external demands. Consistency appeared in a more fragmented way and to some extent, this was a reflection of the broad terrain that the idea of consistency has been

able to populate in the course of public sector reforms, from employee behaviour and communication, to the more abstract arenas of brand and reputation.

Consistency was associated with activities that support the creation and maintenance of trust, trustworthiness, and a strong brand. Many of the agencies declared that they have to pay attention to, nourish and strengthen their reputation and therefore have to act as one body and talk with one voice. The opposite – to act in one way and say something else, express different standpoints or give different accounts at different times – was described as a malfunction and a severe threat, not just in terms of reputation but also when it came to the ability to perform duties and maintain autonomy. The articulation of consistency in the documents often simultaneously mobilized arguments about organizational mission, vision, values, culture and other concepts linked to the idea of a collective and coherent identity. For example, the ‘Brand platform’ of Karolinska Institutet states:

The Karolinska Institutet’s brand identity consists of mission, values, vision as well as core values. Everybody who works and studies at the Karolinska Institutet has a responsibility to reflect these central positions in their daily work. All communication that happens under the brand of Karolinska Institutet must have the brand identity as its point of departure. (p. 6)

In many cases these lines of argument were framed as a response to complexity. The documents tended to point out that the agencies have to handle a number of divisive conditions, including disparate assignments, incompatible activities, contradictory goals, geographical fragmentation, organizational division, and more. Exhortations for consistency were presented as an explicit attempt to counteract these divergent forces.

Consistency was also translated into the need to create a collective “we”, a sense of belonging, in order to maintain loyalty and engagement, consolidate the agencies’ right to exist, and thereby overcome some of the obstacles of being political organizations. The texts made clear that long-term security was dependent on the agencies’ ability to create a reliable story and give a coherent answer to questions about why they exist and what they can, will or

do achieve. This idea was further translated into a need to establish a strong image and reputation, and to associate the agency 'brand' with certain values. One example is the 'Brand Platform' from Myndigheten för yrkeshögskolan (National Agency for Higher Vocational Education):

Myndigheten för yrkeshögskolan is a relatively young organization. For a young organization it is of vital importance to increase the legitimacy for its operations. To be able to accomplish this it is important to develop a strong brand as this creates possibilities to gain awareness and acceptance for the agency's mission and operation. [...] If Myndigheten för yrkeshögskolan manage to create a strong brand it will thereby create good conditions for increased revenue creation in terms of increased budget. (p. 2)

In the documents, a strong brand was linked to better prospects of success for the agencies, it was presented as a way to be visible and unique. In contrast to the idea of transparency, consistency was advocated from the agency's standpoint, as a way of safeguarding the organization's interests by ensuring that employees and managers communicate and act coherently. However, few agencies presented elaborated descriptions of how this will happen; the benefits of a strong brand were often presented as self-evident. Among other things the brand was used to justify control over activities related to graphic design and public statements.

Graphic elements were said to represent the given agency's mission, vision, culture, and values. In addition, the graphic design manuals within the corpuses reflected the level of detail required when consistency is translated at this micro-level of individual decision-making, in order to ensure the desired outcome of a unique, collective 'we'. They contained instructions on how the agency's logotype ought to be used in different settings (print, digital, showcase, in colour, in black and white etc.) and what typefaces, colours and other graphic elements employees should use when producing material. There were instructions about pictorial language, moods, and what type of people and settings should be included in illustrations. Many of the instructions were specific and detailed, and included templates and

image resources to be used by employees. The emphasis placed on these translations of consistency and its material consequences was clearly expressed in the graphic design manual from Högskolan i Halmstad (Halmstad University College):

An important aspect of our profile is the graphic design. A coherent graphic design makes the university visible in society and increases the impression of professionalism. It takes time to create a profile. We have made extensive progress. By using one logotype we express a distinctive and coherent profile where each part contributes to the reinforcement of our shared identity in a valuable way. Uniformity and coherence are important. The aim is to create recognition and bring about a positive feeling. To be coherent means to stay true and not to do our own variations of the graphic. (n.n.)

The discipline imposed in the service of consistency was justified by the outcomes it was assumed to generate. A consistent graphic design was seen as a representation of a whole and consistent agency and a professional, and successful organization. If communication is high quality (that is, coherent), agencies will increase the possibility of connecting with their target groups in an increasingly competitive environment. Correspondingly, if an agency doesn't manage to produce a consistent graphic design, it risks being perceived as vague and unprofessional, and its communication will have no impact.

Consistency translated into the context of organizational communication followed the same logic. The documents often translated consistency as repetition. Repetitive messages were described as more memorable, avoided confusion, increased recognition, distinctiveness and professionalism, and were therefore more persuasive. When it came to decision-making and position-taking, the documents showed that consistency was translated as an ability to uphold a consistent line of reasoning regarding agencies' own activities, as well as about politically-sensitive issues. Even if the agencies were at arms-length from the political centre, many of them showed awareness of the significance their activities and statements might have for their political principals, and of the consequences a misstep might have for the organization. In the short term, inconsistency presented a risk of being inefficient, but in the long run the costs were potentially much higher: the loss of both autonomy and the right to

exist. An example is “This is what we do in Tillväxtverket – to gain coherent and efficient communication” produced by Tillväxtverket (Agency for Economic and Regional Growth).

Statements in external media

[O]nly the director general, or the person the director general assigns, makes statements in the name of Tillväxtverket regarding Tillväxtverket’s operations in general and on matters which may have consequences for how we are perceived.

Why?

It is important for us to always use the same message when we communicate. The director general, or the person the director general assigns, is the one who knows best what our overall message is. Wrong statements can have serious consequences for us as a public agency. (p. 2)

Tensions

Transparency and consistency were clearly present in the agencies’ documents. In the following we will focus on the second research question and the tensions that emerge as a result of their coexistence. Our analysis of the ideas’ translations revealed five tensions relating to the orientation and purpose of communication, the roles of organizational actors, the identities of stakeholders, and the role of the media.

Civic/politics/market. Transparency was driven by an orientation for civic communication. Employee status as citizens, the organizational and individual responsibility to recognize others’ interests, and a collective obligation to communicate, all underpinned the translated practices, attitudes, and norms that we found in the documents. Consistency, on the other hand, was translated with reference to two different motives. One was the agencies’ ambition to create and maintain autonomy and control over their own decisions and activities and avoid being circumvented by their principals or other actors in the political system. The other was a market orientation, underpinned by assumptions that employees and agencies were engaged in a competitive market for attention, legitimacy, and funding. In both cases consistency was a disciplinary influence, generating the need for agencies to promote their own visibility and reputation to ensure survival.

Public interest/private interest. Translations of transparency framed the fundamental purpose of communication as an exercise in the public interest, where the act of communicating was framed as a contribution to the circulation of information necessary in a democratic environment. Translations of consistency prioritized activities that were driven by private interests, insofar as agency reputation, legitimacy, and survival in a political and (in some cases) commercialized market were the desired outcomes.

Civil servant/employee. Transparency, as translated in the documents, encouraged a professional orientation on the part of employees when they acted to fulfill their role as a service provider within the agency. Employee agency was acknowledged, and individuals were given the power to make decisions about how and what to communicate based on the interests of their audiences and of society. Translations of consistency emphasized the role of employee, where individual actions were expected to be executed in line with the interests of the agency, to which the employee unequivocally belonged. The professional identity was subsumed in the collective term 'we', so that unity was imposed not only through the actions promoted in the document, but also through the construction of collective membership where individual and organizational interests are aligned.

Citizen/stakeholders. Both ideas invoked the importance of external actors to the agencies, but their identities were translated very differently. Transparency positioned external actors as citizens or their representatives (e.g., journalists). This positioning justified their demands on the agency in terms of both day-to-day service provision and less common demands for information. Citizenship blurs the boundaries between the agencies and their external context because it creates a connection between them and agency staff (who are also framed as citizens) and also reinforces the public service purpose of the agency itself by emphasizing its societal role. Translations of consistency differed in that the figure of the service user disappeared, to be replaced by a largely implicit notion of audiences. Audiences

were both a scarce resource (the agencies must compete for their attention) and a disciplinary influence on practice (agencies must communicate their mission, identity and messages consistently over time to audiences, to secure legitimacy).

Media as the fourth estate/media as a promotional channel. The focus on citizenship in the translations of transparency led to a clear role for the media as both a civic communication channel, through which important information for citizens could be disseminated, as well as a fourth estate ‘watchdog’ with whom the citizen-employee was entitled (and legally obliged) to interact. In the more market-oriented translation of consistency, the media’s information channel function was retained, but it was instrumentalized in the context of competitive markets for attention, rather than civic obligation. Media coverage in this context was commonly described as a means to secure visibility, reinforce a coherent image and message, and thereby protect reputation.

Managing tensions

Our third research question asks - *What approaches do the agencies use to manage and alleviate these tensions?* The documents showed that few agencies make the tensions between the two ideas explicit, although some disclaimers made clear that nothing written in the document negated employees’ constitutional right to provide information. In most cases however, the documents showed that organizations deploy a variety of methods to manage the tensions.

Firewalling One common strategy was to construct separate contexts for activities underpinned by the ideas of transparency and consistency by representing them in separate documents, in different sections of the same document or by highlighting obvious differences in activities mobilized by the different ideas. These ‘firewalls’ (Thacher & Rein, 2004) meant that communication activities mobilized by the different ideas, with different aims and goals, could co-exist in the same overall strategy (Oldenhof et al., 2014). Each translation had its

own context in which it made sense and retained its legitimacy (Van Leeuwen, 2008; Zilber, 2009), and this enabled local modifications of the general ideas (Røvik, 2008). The most obvious examples were the extensive and detailed instructions agencies provided for maintaining coherent self-representations, including logotypes, visuals and graphic design, as well as other forms of expressive communication. By making use of the stabilizing function of routines and their abilities to create structure and make things foreseeable, and by actively promoting the repetition of locally-adapted activities, the agencies aimed to embed the execution of consistency into everyday practices (Fredriksson, 2014; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

Compromising. Firewalling was possible when there were extensive differences between the contexts in which transparency and consistency were mobilized. However, when the two ideas were translated in the same context, firewalling lost its applicability and the agencies had to make use of other strategies. One example was the agencies' interactions with journalists and media. On the one hand, media has constitutional support for its right to ask for and receive information in order to conduct its fourth estate role, activities associated with obvious risks for the agencies. The obligation to be open may reveal inconsistencies and could damage reputation. On the other hand, the findings show that media was perceived as one of the most important channels through which agencies created and maintained their reputation, which was best achieved by being consistent.

One way the agencies tried to manage this tension was to change how openness was justified using strategies that made the most of the labile ambiguity of 'openness' in practice (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2015). Rather than something performed in the interest of others, it was expressed as a means for the organization to safeguard its own interests. By being open, and responsive to others' needs for information, the agencies expected to increase the possibility of being "perceived" as supportive, and thereby trustworthy and legitimate. The

‘Media manual’ from Sveriges Domstolar (The National Courts Administration) provides an example:

In the meeting with media the image of Sveriges Domstolar is shaped.

When we encounter journalists with openness, plan our communication, take our own initiatives and consider the conditions for the mass media we actively affect the image and trust of Sveriges Domstolar. [...] The advantages with strategic media activities are many. (n.n.)

A similar shift in focus – from legal demands to organizational interests – was also evident when agencies instructed their employees to be open even in the face of criticism, setbacks or poor results. Openness was then coupled with responsiveness and framed as a means to reduce the effects of failures. Its link to reputation meant that the potential role conflict employees might feel was overcome. Employees and managers should stand up for the decisions they (or the agency) have made, be prepared to explain the reasons behind those decisions, take responsibility for failures or negative consequences or, more generally, be open about both strengths as well as weaknesses. Arbetsförmedlingen (Sweden's Public Employment Agency), provides an example in their ‘Policy for contacts with mass media’:

Take initiative actively

Arbetsförmedlingen can affect the way the mass media portray an issue. Therefore we should use our own initiatives for publicity. It is a strength to be the first to interpret good examples from our operations as well as results that are poorer than expected, or mistakes that may be criticized. Media activity gives an image of a vital and present organization. (p. 8)

Ranking. By positioning openness as a means of controlling reputation, agencies could overcome tensions by linking communication activities to *both* openness *and* consistency, as in the ‘Instruction for media activities’ from Tullverket (The Swedish Customs):

Tullverket is to be perceived as an efficient, modern and open public agency. The goal of Tullverket’s contacts with media is to make the results, operations, role and mission in society visible. The agency’s contact with media is to create a coherent and correct image of Tullverket and our operations. The major aim of our media activities is to provide correct and coherent information in the right time. (n.n.)

The two ideas were linked such that openness became a means of protecting reputation and the civic purpose of communication was much less visible. Instead, the tendency to control communication, which consistency requires, emerged strongly as a structuring influence on communication practice. The agencies are legally required to give openness precedence over consistency, but the data showed that once formal requirements are met, the agencies acted to reduce the potential risks of being transparent and prioritized their ambition to maintain consistency (Byrkjeflot, 2015; Christensen et al., 2008). In other words, they adopted a ranking strategy (Arman et al., 2014) that tended to privilege consistency over transparency. Openness, for example, was controlled through agencies allocating roles and responsibilities for making statements and talking about different issues, distinguishing between civil servants, senior managers, communication managers, and the director general. This strategy repositioned the reader of the document (Hardy, Palmer, & Phillips, 2000) - instead of a civil servant (s)he is addressed as an organizational member.

Another example of ranking was in the detail associated with the translations of the two ideas. Even when translations of transparency were given precedence over consistency, the translations tended to be compromises (Røvik, 2008), referring to specific situations and rarely elaborating on implementation. The wider legal context provided an external, but generic, reference point that legitimized the idea of transparency and provided guidance for employees to understand their role (Bozeman, 2008; Erkkilä, 2012). Details that could open up challenges to its meaning were omitted (Zilber, 2002) or, alternatively, its meaning was limited to reactive activities where the provision of information only takes place after direct questions. Accordingly transparency remained a rather abstract governing idea in terms of the agencies' day-to-day operations. In contrast, consistency was translated through detailed and locally adapted instructions (Røvik, 2008) about practices and processes relating to a wide range of organizational activities including self-presentation, branding, reputation

management, internal communications, and media relations. Such instructions routinize (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) how the individual acts when (s)he encounters journalists or other audiences as an organizational member. Employees were advised to only answer questions related to their expertise. They were not authorized to communicate about the agencies' standpoints on different issues, or to "represent" their agency. They were advised to prepare their answers to journalists' questions, or seek advice from the communication department if they were unsure about how to respond. There were also frequent instructions about feedback: if an employee had been in contact with a journalist, they were advised to inform the communication department about such encounters. These extensive details reflect consistency's normative power as a widely-distributed idea that defines well-functioning organizations and aligns with the NPM imperatives that now structure public sector activity in Sweden.

Ranking also appeared when the documents discussed the negative impact of neglecting the ideas in communication. The translations of transparency into various forms of openness were set against the backdrop of the agencies' legal obligations, but their presentation in the texts tended to dissolve the distinction between public and organizational benefits (Erkkilä, 2012). As a consequence, the organizational outcomes of *not* being open tended to be overlooked, because the possibility was not entertained in the texts. In contrast, the negative consequences of being *inconsistent* were spelt out, reinforcing its importance as an idea that is indispensable to effective functioning. In the context of public sector reforms and where organizational autonomy is regularly renegotiated (Jacobsson et al., 2015), consistency *outranked* transparency because it was linked to survival and growth. Transparency was necessary to realize the agencies' civic obligations, but the latter did not take priority over consistency's emphasis on professionalization, efficiency, and control,

which were presented as more urgent imperatives for communication practice (Erkkilä, 2012).

Conclusions, implications and suggestions for future research

Organizational institutionalism has provided extensive knowledge about the mechanisms at play when organizations align their activities, decisions, and communication to institutional pressures. With notions such as legitimacy and rationalized myths, isomorphism, and logics, scholars have been able to explain the force institutions exercise vis-à-vis organizations and how organizations, in their quests for social acceptance, demonstrate a great deal of conformity (Greenwood et al., 2017). The adaptation is not unconditional however, and as we get closer to organizations and their doings it becomes evident that institutions in many instances are less dominant than suggested.

In this paper we have shown how ideas of transparency and consistency gain attention in organizations and how the localized specifics of Swedish government agencies intervene when the ideas are translated. It is evident that the organizations actively negotiate, question, and transform the meanings and implications of both transparency and consistency. These translations underpin the activities and processes that influence how the agencies represent what, when, and how to communicate, how they allocate responsibility for different types of communication, and how they frame their instructions to create and maintain control over communication. The results are less foreseeable than an institutional approach would suggest (cf. Lammers, 2011) and also show that the translations are a source of tensions and contestations. The two ideas, each of them promoting legitimate problems and solutions, are evidently at odds, not only with each other but also with other ideas.

The results of our study indicate that contradictions and discrepancies in how organizations enact communication are not necessarily the result of incapacity or lack of understanding. Rather, the agencies manage to sustain the two ideas as co-existing yet

conflicting influences on their communication. They opt for predictability to increase the possibility of achieving sought-after results, and in this context they make use of several different approaches, among which ranking, firewalling, and compromising are particularly prominent. Each of them helps the agencies to sustain the relevance of the two ideas and to produce localized frameworks for their communication. Accordingly, organizations play an important role in the creation and production of combinations, transformations, and hybridizations of ideas about communication.

At the same time, it is evident that the agencies are dependent on resources available in their institutional contexts where both transparency and consistency are cherished as self-evident and sought-after qualities of organizations' communication. The leeway for solutions is therefore limited, and our results show that the organizations studied here have an urge to incorporate both ideas in their communication programmes, even if doing so creates tensions and controversies.

For research on organizational communication, our study opens up avenues for further analyses of the interactions between institutions, organizations and communication. Among other things it is relevant to study the significance of sectoral configurations, how they interact with organizations' translations of communication ideas, and how they generate tensions that must be resolved (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2016). Sectoral belonging raises questions about the differences organizations encounter when they act in public sectors (as in our study), in markets or in civil society, as well as about the consequences such differences have for the selection of ideas, processes of translation, how tensions emerge as a result, and actors' motivations to accept the way those tensions are managed by engaging with prescribed practices. Ethnographic research could also explore how organizations and their members encounter and deal with heterogeneous ideas in everyday practice, as well as how different professional groups reflect and act upon different ideas, thereby introducing

diversity into the motives, representations and understandings of communication (Pache & Santos, 2013). Such questions apply not only to ideas about communication per se (such as transparency and consistency), but also to the ways actors interact with ideas underpinning other organizational activities, domains and professions when they are about to communicate (cf. Pallas et al., 2016).

Practical Implications

The results we present here have managerial implications in at least two ways. One is related to the lack of a fundamental hierarchy between transparency and consistency and the recurring need for negations and re-interpretations. Managers can make arrangements that ease the tensions and at least temporarily make them less significant, but they can't unravel them. Irrespective of the approach managers utilize, they must always be prepared to handle issues emanating from the two ideas' divergences. So rather than trying to solve the problem (once and for all) and encounter disappointments and frustrations, managers need to develop an understanding and readiness for reoccurring situations where the two ideas are at play. A second implication is related to the characteristics of ideas as bundles of assumptions. As such they connect not only mindsets regarding communication but also other aspects of organizational life. A central message from our study therefore is that initiatives taken to include management ideas such as transparency and consistency in an organization's repertoire have ambiguous consequences that are not always obvious, and need to be reflected upon.

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