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Performance Reporting

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Abstract

Public organizations account for their performance through making public sector performance information publicly available, both to politicians through performance reporting, and to citizens through rankings, websites, and performance reports. This chapter reviews whether performance reporting makes public organizations more accountable: Do citizens and politicians actually consult and use performance information, and does this information change their decisions and behaviours? The chapter first looks at the use of performance metrics in political decision making, drivers of this use, and differences in use across groups. It subsequently reviews the literature on whether citizens use publicly available performance indicators and rankings to make an informed choice between alternative service providers. The focus is on school and hospital performance data. The chapter ends by discussing implications on equity, power relations, and the internal dynamics of organizations.

Keywords: Performance, accountability, rankings, choice

Performance reporting: what it is and where it comes from

There is a trend to making more and more public sector performance information publicly available, both to politicians through performance reporting, and to citizens through rankings, websites, and performance reports. The assumption is that performance reporting makes public organizations more accountable: Citizens can collectively consult league tables and decide about whether they want to continue using the service. The ultimate punishment for poor performance is an abandonment of the service and a transfer to an alternative provider. Politicians and boards can use performance information to decide about budget allocations, appointments, or emergency measures.

The gradual shift to New Public Management (NPM) from the mid-1980s meant a change in public sector accountability. The introduction of various *ex-post* mechanisms to account for performance supplemented traditional *ex-ante* legal mechanisms. What is generally meant by an accountable public sector in this context is a public sector that is answerable for its performance (Romzek 2000; Hyndman and Anderson 1998). This means that organizations' accounting systems were joined by a series of non-financial reporting systems (Dubnick 2005, 385–6), and that performance was added as a key organizational value. Rather than concentrating on controlling the use of public authority and providing assurance of abiding by rules and values in public spending, accountability mechanisms increasingly came to be seen as mechanisms facilitating improvement of public services (Aucoin and Heintzman 2000; Bovens, Schillemans, and 't Hart 2008). The focus of accountability systems also changed through an increasing importance of external accountability (i.e. to citizens) and a shift from process to output and outcome.

Accountability, or “being called to account for one’s actions” (Mulgan 2000, 570), gradually came to be defined as demonstrating one’s performance. This new approach to account-giving—accountability for performance—required explicit standards of performance (Behn 2001). By defining accountability as being answerable for performance, it would obviously be necessary to produce performance information. Subsequent decades thus saw an increase in performance management systems, often (misleadingly) labeled and branded as accountability systems (Radin 2006). They were not just supposed to work as naming and shaming mechanisms, but through providing information these performance management systems would contribute to a learning process and in this way improve performance (Bovens, Schillemans, and ‘t Hart 2008). An increase in transparency and thus accountability is an important goal in itself and the mere possibility of holding organizations accountable for their actions is considered to be highly valued by the public (Mayne 2007; Werner, and Asch 2005).

What makes accounting for performance different?

The effects of accounting for performance extend beyond the mere provision of information to facilitating a different style of decision-making. Through better performance information, public organizations would learn more about their own performance. Providing politicians and boards with detailed sets of performance metrics, it was thought, would support them in holding public officials, departments, front-line delivery bodies, and autonomous agencies to account, and help them to take better decisions. Furthermore, such information would help to maintain a healthy level of knowledge-based trust between principals and agents (Van de Walle 2010).

Citizens would be able to use performance information to put pressure on public services and politicians and to make better-informed choices when using public

services (Van de Walle and Roberts 2008). In the new “performance management doctrine,” the nature of accountability would be changed, both for the public, by making government actions transparent (external accountability), and for elected officials by reducing information asymmetries (internal accountability) (Moynihan 2008, 10–11, 35). The key mode of such transparency was through making performance information available to policy makers and to the wider public. It was assumed that through these two pressures, from citizens, and from politicians and boards, greater accountability would lead to increased performance (Dubnick 2005).

Whereas traditional accountability about the performance of public services to citizens was mediated through elected bodies (DeLeon 1998), citizen-oriented reforms introduced a direct accountability relationship between (individual) citizens and public services through making performance information publicly available and through introducing complaints mechanisms, ombudsmen, etc. Democratic accountability mediated through elected bodies was partly replaced by direct accountability to users, and by accountability organized by the central government through an elaborate system of targets and monitoring systems (Greener 2009, 51–8). The former shift fits within a broader shift from vertical to horizontal accountability (Bovens 2005). This change also meant that individual civil servants and individual services could now also be called to account.

The effects of performance reporting on accountability and decisions

Despite the high-minded rhetoric about accounting for performance, reality is less accommodating. Performance measurement, performance management and performance-based accountability are generally connected in theory, but less so in practice (Thomas and Winnipeg 2007). Process-based accountability continues to dominate practice. One reason for this failure is that “accountability for results is

possible only where goals are clear, and accountability for process is possible only where there is general agreement as to which processes are the most (or the only) appropriate ones—the ‘best practices’, in management vernacular” (DeLeon 1998, 546). This is less than straightforward in a policy context. Accountability is often used as a solution to all sorts of organizational problems, and the link between performance information and accountability has become highly embedded in organizational rhetoric (Dubnick 2005). The real question is: do these accountability mechanisms work (Bovens, Schillemans, and ‘t Hart 2008), and does publishing of performance information lead to more accountability and hence better performance?

In this chapter we mainly concentrate on two accountability relations mainly affected by an increased availability of performance information: accountability to citizens by making performance information publicly available and accounting to politicians by providing them with performance metrics about the organization. Both topics are receiving increasing attention in the literature (Van Dooren and Van de Walle 2008). Providing politicians and citizens with more performance information has been the answer to improving accountability, but do these two groups actually use performance information in taking decisions?

Is performance information used in political decision making?

Politicians wanting to control large and complex public services need easily accessible information to take decisions. This desire for more and better information in the policy and budgeting cycle has found expression in various initiatives, all based on very rational approaches to policy-making and budgeting (Thomas and Winnipeg 2007). In order to improve public accountability, many public organizations produce considerable amounts of performance information. Such provision of information fits well within the principal-agent logic whereby the agent is requested to provide

information that helps the principal to steer the agent and make the agent accountable. Principals, in a public sector context mainly politicians, are thus assumed to use the available performance information to hold the agent accountable. Without such performance information, an information deficit and information asymmetry prevent the politicians from exercising control. Surprisingly, studies analyzing whether politicians actually use such performance information are relatively scarce (Pollitt 2006), and we have only recently seen an increase in empirical research into the topic.

Evidence for the limited use of performance information

The link between performance measurement and decision making and between performance metrics and accountability is often assumed. Researchers, however, are very skeptical about the usefulness of performance indicators (Askim 2009; Laegreid, Roness, and Rubecksen 2006). Academic interest in the “use” of (performance) information has so far been rather limited (Pollitt 2006, 41). Much of the evidence on whether the information coming from performance measurement is actually used in decision-making is anecdotal (De Lancer Julnes, and Holzer 2001), and opinion on whether performance measurement actually matters for decisions is divided (Ho 2005, 18; Askim 2009).

We have seen a growing number of studies of how politicians use performance information (Ho 2005; Bogt 2004; Johnsen 2005; Brun and Siegel 2006). A common finding in this research is that politicians often do not value the performance information. Pollitt focused on the use of performance reports by end-users, and the evidence he reviewed “suggests that evaluation and performance reports and audits are seldom highly valued by politicians or citizens” (Pollitt 2006, 38). Aldermen in the Netherlands use performance information infrequently, and do not always see much value in the available information (Bogt 2004). Pollitt reviewed evidence that

indicated that Auditor General's reports in Canada were not read in their entirety by Canadian Members of Parliament (MPs) and that performance information is not really used in budgeting decisions in the US (Pollitt 2006). In decision-making, political considerations and performance information are used (Heinrich 1999), but we know little about their respective weight, and about the contextual factors that influence this selection.

Yet, before discarding performance information because it is not used by politicians anyway, we need to recognize that most studies focused on instrumental use. Politicians may not pick up performance reports, "read them carefully and then set out directly to apply their findings to the reformulation of policy or the better management of programmes" (Pollitt 2006, 49), but this does not mean performance information is not used at all. Politicians use various ways to collect information, and the use of information may be less formalized than what the existence of performance reports or league tables suggests. Decision-makers often find little use in performance indicators and instead prefer to rely on personal interactions with civil servants (Bogt 2004). Politicians normally engage in "problemistic search" and seek out supplementing sources of information, rather than just relying on one predefined set of information (Cyert and March 1963).

One of the most extensive initiatives to study the use of performance information by local politicians can be found in Norway, where several authors have studied this phenomenon as part of a large-scale project (Askim 2009; Johnsen 2005). Johnsen (2005) studied the use of non-mandatory performance measurement in political institutions in Norwegian local government. Askim (2009; 2008) studied local politicians' use of performance information in Norway, with a focus on these politicians' needs and abilities. Some of his findings were "that use of performance

information increases with a politician's rank within the polity; that the politicians with the highest education make the least use of performance information; that polity size has a positive effect on use; and that different factors matter in distinct ways in different phases of policymaking.”

Differences in performance information use

Performance information is more embedded in some sectors than in others, and also the use of performance information in decision-making differs between policy sectors, partly because of a longer data-use tradition, or because of the different nature of evidence in these fields (Askim 2005). Van Dooren (2004) found similar differences across policy domains in the use of indicators in a study of parliamentary questions in the Belgian Parliament. In an encompassing study in Switzerland, Frey and Widmer (2011) found that performance information was used to varying degrees between different and within single policy fields. In a study among local councilors in Norway, use of performance information seemed to be especially relevant for councilors within the sectors of elderly care, administrative affairs and education (Askim 2007). Others found large differences in patterns of use of performance information depending on organizational culture (Moynihan 2005, 204) and country (Pollitt et al. 2010). This is in line with more general studies on the use of evidence in policy making (Davies, Nutley, and Smith 2000, 3; Nutley and Webb 2000, 14).

A second set of explanations focuses on the skills and resources required to use performance information. The complexity of performance information and the costs involved in using and understanding it can pose a barrier for politicians. Pollitt suggested that to politicians, speed and to-the-point information are most useful, whereas the trend in performance evaluation seems to be an increasing complexity of information. As a result, performance evaluation remains the domain of experts and

managers, and not politicians—or citizens (Pollitt 2006). Availability of time may also explain differences between national research findings (Askim 2009). In their study of the influence of performance information on legislative reforms in Switzerland, Frey and Widmer (2011) found that the use of information is positively associated with the strength of the performance information, as measured by the information's credibility, certainty and consistency.

The effect of performance information on accountability

A surprising finding from these studies is that the availability of performance information changes information asymmetries, but not always in the expected direction. Rather than seeing parliaments get a stronger role in the political game through the increased possibilities for holding the government to account, parliaments actually appear to lose out in the information war. Johnson and Talbot (2007) looked at the extent to which the UK parliament is able to use performance information to hold the government to account, and found that “On balance it would seem that it is parliament rather than the executive which is currently most challenged by the PSA and other performance policy reports.” (2007, 130). Marnoch (2010) found similar effects among Scottish MPs, where the executive was also seen to have a monopoly on policy information, because “Political issues have become more difficult to conceptualize and are consequently increasingly positioned beyond the policy competence of parliamentarians operating outside of government with its knowledge-handling capacities.” (2010, 2). In an earlier study he already stated that MPs often use performance information in an act of self-positioning, for instance by challenging the integrity of the performance information. Additionally, parliamentarians “generally fail to develop a sufficiently sophisticated appreciation of what performance means in order to hold government to account.” (2010, 22).

There are differences in how politicians use performance information.

Marnoch looked at health committees in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales and found that the political position of the health committee members influences their use of performance information. In the Scottish case, committee members who belonged to the parties in government and who were promoted to the ministerial office had used performance information less often than their colleagues (Marnoch 2010). These findings imply that those politicians closest to the center of power and the executive, use less performance information and that use of formal performance information is higher among those politicians suffering the most from information asymmetries. Askim (2009), on the other hand, found that in Norwegian municipalities, politicians closer to the apex of power used more performance information. From an accountability perspective, one would expect backbenchers to compensate for the information asymmetry by using large amounts of performance information, yet Askim found that it was frontbenchers in municipal councils who made more use of performance information. An exception was the mayor, who used far less performance information. Councilors using more performance information also had much contact with citizens and municipal employees, thereby further increasing information asymmetry. Possible explanations for this finding could be either that backbenchers are unaware of the information asymmetry, that the costs for them to retrieve performance information are too high, or that they just feel they don't need performance information as much as frontbenchers do. Finally, Askim also found that higher-educated and more experienced councilors appear to use less performance information than their colleagues.

Do citizens use performance information?

Performance reporting is also directed at citizens. Accounting for performance towards citizens is closely related to what is generally labeled the choice agenda, and more recently the personalization agenda. Well-informed and benefit-maximizing citizens are searching for ways to consume public services that correspond to their wishes. They will thus choose between a variety of services offered by an equally large variety of public, non-profit and private organizations, and change supplier when these services underperform. Publicly available performance indicators assist citizens in making informed choices (Le Grand 2007, 84). Through publishing performance indicators in easily accessible formats and platforms, public services give account of their performance. We will argue in this chapter, as we have done earlier, that such an approach presupposes that citizens actually use such performance information, and that this information plays a central role in citizens' choice behavior.

Public sector reforms, especially from the early 1990s on, gave citizens more say in public services. Early changes concentrated mainly on giving citizens more voice as customers, through allowing them to file complaints or to go to an ombudsman. Greater transparency facilitated such voice, and the publication of performance metrics was just one of the expressions of such increased transparency. A second set of innovations focused on giving citizens more choice, ultimately allowing them to exercise their exit option (Paul 1992; Meijer and Schillemans 2009; Besley and Ghatak 2003). Here as well, performance information was regarded as a central requirement for such exit to be able to function. It was assumed that citizens, after consulting various performance metrics, would choose between a range of public, non-profit and private service providers (Van de Walle and Roberts 2008; Le Grand 2007). We have thus seen a sharp increase in publicly available performance information. This information is not limited to annual reports or publicly available

performance reports. Rankings and league tables have also become a common feature, especially in the health and education sectors, but also elsewhere. Quite often, such performance information is not created by the organizations themselves, but supplied through various mediators, such as interests groups, consumer associations, or news media.

While generally regarded as a logical next step in NPM-style reforms of public services, few reflected about the assumptions of human behavior behind the voice and choice agenda (Clarke et al. 2007). The assumed mechanism behind making performance information available to citizens was that citizens are autonomous decision-makers (Le Grand 2007) and would 1) actually consult performance information before making a decision on which school, hospital, or social service provider to use, and 2) would use this information to change their behavior. Because the phenomenon of publishing performance information in a format that is easy to use for citizens is relatively new, the evidence about whether it is actually used is limited. In this section we provide an overview of recent findings in two sectors. Schools and hospitals are two types of institutions with which many citizens have direct experience. They deliver services in an area where citizens expect high quality, and choice is also relatively easy in these sectors.

Accountability through publishing school performance data

Education is one of the public services where a substantial amount of performance information is publicly available, at different levels, from kindergartens to primary and secondary schools to higher education and universities. This information includes a variety of data, generally available at the level of individual schools and universities, and often offered to the public through a system of rankings and league tables. It includes national test results, research output, university application success rates, etc.

This information is offered to inform parents or students in order to facilitate them in making a conscious and well-informed choice of institution. It also assists voice processes by making it easier for parents to see how well their child's school is doing. It is generally assumed that parents and students do use this information, and there is indeed substantial evidence that additional information—that is, new information that actually contributes to citizens' knowledge about the quality of an educational institution—does have an effect on the choice that is made. For this effect to occur however, it is important that this information can easily be retrieved and interpreted. By readily presenting this type of information parents were thought to be relieved of the necessity to perform an extensive search in order to compare schools, and thus face much lower decision-making costs (Hastings and Weinstein 2008). At the same time, schools are being forced to perform well if they do not want to be shamed publicly and lose pupils.

Despite the emphasis that has been placed on school performance, though, other factors have been found to be at least equally important in choice behavior, notably distance to the school (Hastings and Weinstein 2008). The additional costs on choice imposed by distance appear not to outweigh school quality as indicated by indicators. One study, in which school quality information was published in a national newspaper (and, subsequently, in several regional newspapers as well) found that students did use quality information, but that they were willing to travel no more than an additional 200 meters to attend a better performing school (Koning and Wiel 2010). Similar studies have focused on the effects of university league tables on university choice (Gunn and Hill 2008).

Accountability through publishing hospital performance data

Another area which has seen a sharp increase in publicly available performance information is healthcare. Just as was the case with education, the effects of publishing performance information on choice behavior are mixed. Some studies show a clear effect on patient choice. One such example is about consumers' choice of fertility clinics in the United States. The study found a clear relationship between the publication of clinics' performance information and the choice by consumers of certain clinics (Bundorf et al. 2009).

In other sectors, the effects of public performance metrics on patients' choice seem to be more limited or even absent. Reviews of previous studies on the effects of quality information on consumer choice of both health plans and health care providers in the US found modest but significant effects (Harris and Buntin 2008; Kolstad and Chernew 2009). Jin and Sorensen (2006) correct for the effects of prior known information on patients' decision-making, and find that quality rankings can have a significant additional influence on health plan choice. The number of patients actually using such information, however, was relatively low in the latter study. In German hospitals, although the measured effects were relatively small, the publication of performance information did result in changes in patients' choices: hospitals with above average quality turn out to be chosen more often than worse scoring hospitals, and worse scoring hospitals are populated mostly by patients living in the direct vicinity of that hospital (Sauerland and Wübker 2008). What's more, hospitals making their performance information public also receive more inquiries from prospective clients. Analysis of the effects of performance information on choice needs though to take availability of alternatives into account. Patients do not necessarily pick the hospital closest to their residence (see Le Grand (2007, 101) for an overview of

evidence), yet Stevenson (2006) looked at nursing homes and found the absence of choice to be a factor limiting the effect of publishing performance information.

In contrast to the German study on hospital choice mentioned above, a similar study in the Netherlands found that patients do not seem to use quality information for choosing their hospital. Lako and Rosenau (2009) found that most Dutch patients rely on their General Practitioners' (GP) advice when picking a hospital, instead. Of 31 percent of patients that did choose their hospital in this study, 14 percent indicated that the hospital's reputation was the main reason for this, and the hospital's location was also found to be an important factor in decision-making. Reputation and other peoples' opinions of health care institutions appear to be an important factor in making decisions, putting published performance information well behind GPs' and acquaintances' opinions as a factor determining patient choice (Lako and Rosenau 2009). Patients have indicated that they had more confidence in their GPs than in formal rankings, especially if they knew their GPs well (Harris and Buntin 2008; Marshall et al. 2000).

Accounting for performance: taking stock

Did accounting for performance deliver what it promised?

Performance information takes a central role in public sector reforms. From a principal-agent perspective it is seen as a tool to assist politicians and boards in holding public service managers (and the government) to account. Towards citizens, performance information is presented as a tool assisting them in making informed choices between public services and in holding public sector workers and politicians accountable.

The review of the literature revealed overall a relatively limited role for performance information. At best, performance information was just one of many

elements influencing decisions, and its importance should not be overestimated. Further evidence showed inequalities in the use of performance information, suggesting that increasing the availability of performance information in order to improve accountability relations is not a neutral tool. Yet, the evidence is relatively mixed. In the case of politicians' use of performance information, some studies suggest that performance information helps some politicians to correct for their relative information deficit. Yet other studies suggested that an increased availability of performance information may in fact lead to a widening gap between those who are informed and those who aren't. In this case, performance information does little to change accountability processes, yet probably only reinforces existing processes.

Evidence is also mixed on the effects of making performance information available to citizens on their ability and willingness to make informed choices. Even though critics have suggested that making performance information publicly available will mainly benefit highly-educated citizens, the effects do not seem to be that straightforward. Rather, there appear to be important differences between types of public services, and the situation within which choices need to be made. Even though the added value of performance information in citizens' choice behavior has generally been assumed in public service reforms, there are relatively few studies about how citizens actually choose public service providers. If there is one thing that clearly emerges from the literature, then it should be that the importance of performance information is relatively limited in this choice process.

The effect of new accountability mechanisms on equity

Critics of the choice agenda and the related provision of choice-facilitating performance information have repeatedly pointed at the fact that making evidence-based choices is difficult and therefore likely to privilege well-educated citizens and

citizens in higher socio-economic classes. Choice has been described by its critics as a *middle class obsession*, even though the evidence on choice behavior does not seem to confirm this conviction (Le Grand 2007). Studies do indeed show mixed effects of choice on disadvantaged groups. Koning and Wiel (2010) looked at the effects of publishing school quality data on school choice, and found no differences in responses to performance information between socio-economic groups. Many studies on school choice reveal that it is travel time to school rather than the performance information provided that determines choice. Publishing performance information to facilitate choice therefore only influences choice if there is ample choice of high quality schooling in the neighborhood (Hastings and Weinstein 2008). If no such choice is available, it is likely to be only those parents with more resources who will make a deliberate decision to move their children further afield.

There is a similar debate in relation to hospital choice. Here, the main argument is that health information might be too complicated to assist citizens in making informed choices, and that therefore it will mainly be well-educated citizens who use such information. In settings where most service users are young, wealthy and more highly educated, and the services not acute, such as fertility clinics, there is a clear effect of publicly available performance information on clinic choice (Bundorf et al. 2009). A review of patient choice in the National Health Service (NHS) found that citizens with higher education were more likely to use performance information in choosing a health care provider (Fotaki et al. 2008). In a Dutch study, higher-educated patients did not indicate considering their GP's advice as important as other, less-educated patients, which indicates different approaches by different subgroups. However, quality information was not mentioned as a factor of influence on their choice and, in addition, findings no longer proved significant after multivariate

analysis (Lako and Rosenau 2009). Other studies find that higher education probably does increase both the response of patients to quality information and the awareness of such information in general. Apart from education, other factors also lead to differences in the use of performance information in making choices. Some studies found that females and ethnic minorities value health care quality information more (Harris and Buntin 2008; Kolstad and Chernew 2009). In contrast, Schneider and Epstein (1998) in their study on the influence of cardiac surgery performance information on cardiac patients' hospital choice found that men seemed somewhat more likely to be aware of hospital performance rankings than women. Their findings furthermore strongly suggested factors such as age, level of education and health status as influencing such awareness. Length of sickness period and income level also seemed to play a role here.

Internal effects of accounting for performance

Public managers and public organizations change their behaviors to anticipate external reactions to their published performance outcomes. The performance management literature is divided about whether performance information and performance measurement actually lead to better quality services, and has given considerable attention to dysfunctional effects (Werner and Asch 2005; Smith 1995). Such dysfunctional effects range from excessive attention for what is easily measurable, over a fixation on targets and indicators, to outright gaming. In the latter, public organizations deliberately underperform in order to avoid higher targets in a subsequent year.

A result is that performance metrics may crowd out other processes of priority setting in organizations. Such metrics have also become increasingly important in the evaluation of personnel. A failure to achieve (internally or externally) defined targets

is then a reason to deny promotion or to terminate employment. Success in achieving targets brands one as a good manager and greatly facilitates job transfers.

Measuring performance is by definition a conservative undertaking. Good measurement systems and well-functioning performance accountability systems only operate in stable environments with a great deal of standardization (Meijer 2005). Diverging from the norm or standard is risky for an organization, because it results in lower performance—as measured by the standard. While performance reporting may indeed increase accountability and stimulate organizations to improve, it may at the same time stifle more far-reaching innovation and stimulate risk avoidance through strong homogenizing tendencies. While the logic behind the introduction of performance reporting systems suggested more democratic types of accountability systems where individual users would be able to hold organizations to account, this standardization seems to suggest a shift of power to the standard-setters. These can be central government, professional bodies, consumer organizations, or news media. Within organizations, this may mean a greater importance for management and organizations' technostructures, to the detriment of the power of professionals. A related effect is that accountability requirements have been found to be very bureaucratic and resource-consuming (Gregory 2003). Finally, the easy availability of a wide range of performance metrics may facilitate attack politics, where performance information is not in the first place used for accountability or improvement purposes, but to launch attacks on organizations or persons through a selective use of data (Flinders 2011). Performance information is then not used to make a balanced assessment but only to support pre-existing structures and attitudes. Yet the question remains whether this really is a departure from other forms of accountability, or only a change in the arguments and tools.

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