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**Author(s):** Luoma-aho, Vilma; Canel, Maria-José; Sanders, Karen

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## **Public sector and political communication**

Authors: Vilma Luoma-aho, Maria-Jose Canel, Karen Sanders

How nations and city states ensure that their citizens get adequate services, infrastructure and safety is, in most parts of the world, a task for the public sector. Also referred to as authority, governmental and public administration organizations, public sector and political organizations exist to work together to serve current public needs as well as to collect from citizens the resources required for this task via taxes and fees, for example. The degree to which a public sector organization serves citizens depends on the societal setting, and the responsibilities of public sector organizations range from providing a wide range of universal services (Nordic Welfare states) to providing some general societal goods based on needs (most countries).

Though each public sector and political organization is a product of its own time and environment, there seem to be certain trends that unite them globally. Such trends include the austerity of the public sector, new and social media, novel forms of citizen activism and engagement as well as greater diverse citizens and audiences fragmentation (Vertovec, 2007; Thomas 2013). The public relations industry-based Edelman Trust Barometer notes that trust in government is globally down (Edelman and Singer 2015, 88-100), but this is no different from other sectors, as also businesses and NGOs are experiencing a global lack of trust. Most citizens globally now feel that the public sector system is not working for them, and we are witnessing a unique emergence of populism and far right movements across the globe (Aalberg et al., 2017).

To battle these challenges, an emerging trend in governments from different countries has been to establish units to allocate functions related to managing their most valuable assets: the intangibles of citizen trust and organizational legitimacy. For instance, there is the Office of Public Engagement created by the Obama administration, and there are similar offices for the federal government of Canada and the government of the United Kingdom. The Edelman Trust Barometer 2017 suggests that to fix the trust challenge, public sector and political organizations must increasingly engage the citizens and address their fears. This means changing from the traditional modes of one-way information provision to listening and

## Public sector and political communication

dialogue (Macnamara 2016), and strengthening the intangible assets that the organizations are built on, such as trust and legitimacy.

For public sector organizations, change is becoming the status quo. Public administrators and public sector employees are learning to deal not only with changes in citizen needs but also with the continuous pressure placed on them to develop, measure, and improve their services and organizations. Citizen engagement and public sector employee engagement are among the recent trends in the context of attempts to make organizations more approachable and citizen friendly. Efficiency remains the key word for public sector change, and many of the “drivers of change in the public sector fit into the NPM tendency to create more effective and efficient public organizations” (Kuipers et al. 2014, 1-20, 15).

This chapter looks at public sector and political communication globally, representing the first of the three societal sectors often differentiated by their functions and type (public, private, NGOs). The public sector and politics deal with governance of public resources for the benefit of society at large, be it in a more or less democratic environment. Both political and public sector organizations have traditionally been blamed for several ills in society including inefficiency, bureaucracy, serving their own needs above others’ and corruption. Despite their central task in society, partly due to the complex setting, short-term election cycles, diverse stakeholders and slightly negative sector reputation, many communication efforts of public and political organizations fail.

Communication is worldwide proving to be vital for public sector organizations as their impact is seldom clearly visible to outsiders (Sanders and Canel 2013). Though communication alone cannot solve the many sector-related challenges, this chapter analyzes public and political communication and reflects how public and political organizations could better utilize communication to improve their functions.

### **Whom do they serve?**

Traditionally public sector organizations and political communication has viewed the citizen as someone mostly passive who needs to be activated for engagement when needed (such as elections, outreaches, community collaboration, campaigns). Whether public sector and political communication serve citizens, voters, beneficiaries, customers or stakeholders has long been debated in the field (Glenny, 2008; Garnett et al., 2008; Gelders and Ihlen, 2010)

Even the use of the word ‘citizen’ is controversial, as many individuals living within national borders do not have citizenship. As the title changes, so do the citizen expectations: the newer roles emphasize exchange. If a certain sum of money is paid (whether through taxes or fees), the quality of the service should be higher (Thijs and Staes 2008). Moreover, as public services continue to be developed and service design becomes more common, citizens become also producers and co-creators in the context of public sector services. As a result, more emphasis is placed on the nature of engagement between citizen and organization (Lay-Hwa Bowden, Luoma-aho, and Naumann 2016, 257--277).

As traditional mass communication have become increasingly outdated (Castells 2009), public and political organizations are now challenged to reach individual citizens and voters within their cultural bubbles (Sloterdijk 2011). Individual citizen communication bubbles let in the communication that citizens actively choose for themselves, and instead of pre-tailored mass media content, they often consist of streams and feeds that citizens self-select from an array of potential messages. Moreover, as citizens are able to communicate their needs and experiences online in real time and to massive audiences, individual experiences are gaining in importance, and citizens and NGOs as “experience experts” are beginning to overtake traditional forms of authorities. Hence, public and political organizations are no longer the only authorities in the discussions where opinions are formed, but represent merely one voice among others (Tirkkonen and Luoma-aho 2011, 172-174; Luoma-aho and Vos 2010, 315-331).

With these changes in the nature of society and citizens, there is an urgent need for the public sector to shift from a “culture of control” to a citizen-centered culture of engagement (Bourgon 2011, 1-414).

### **What is different for communication in the public sector?**

There are several traits of public sector and political organizations that differ from the operation logic of private businesses and non-governmental organizations (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012, 186-206). First, the environment is political and often contested between differing viewpoints so that its communication is challenged by conflicting aims. Public sector resources are more scarce than private companies’. In addition, public sector structures are more complex, diverse and uncertain about objectives and decision-making criteria (Luoma-aho and Canel 2016), making communication outcomes unpredictable despite clear

## Public sector and political communication

procedures and guidelines. In the public sector there is less market competition, and hence authorities have less room to tailor messages to desired publics. Moreover, public sector organizations are more subject to public scrutiny and required to be transparent and accountable to the different constituencies, making all their communication strategies visible.

Public sector organizations range from purely political institutions with elected, changing leadership to permanent, neutral and order -type public agencies. In line with this book's definition of public relations as strategic communication used for establishing and maintaining symbiotic relationships with diverse, relevant publics,

“public sector communication is strategically planned communication between organizations and their stakeholders, enabling public sector functions, within their specific cultural/political settings, with the purpose of building and maintaining the public good” (Canel and Luoma-aho 2017).

Respectively,

“The field of political communication is concerned with communication and its role in political processes, systems and institutions...[and] is an area of practice and study related to the human activity of communicating about politics.

Politics here is understood as a human activity engaged in by groups where there are diverse interests conciliated by a settled order” (Sanders, 2009, 19).

Both public sector and political communication can be understood to contribute to the quality of democracy and societal resilience (Sanders and Canel, 2013). There is an urgent need for authorities and politicians “to know how to interact with the public” (Thomas 2013, 786-796, 786). The demand for better communication stems from several sources, including citizens' comparisons between the private sector services and public standards of service (Thijs and Staes 2008). Engaging citizens is a central aim of public and political organizations today, and we can see an overall attitude change for organizations from holding power *over* to holding power *with* citizens (Thomas 2013, 786-796). Public sector and political organizations remain fragile if they do not understand the citizens and their new communication needs (Bourgon 2011, 1-414; Bourgon 2009, 309-330).

### **Political or non-political?**

## Public sector and political communication

Not all public sector communication is political in nature. In its broadest sense, the political is irredeemably public in nature and is characterized by action, dialectic and rhetoric directed towards the attainment or conciliation of diverse ends. In a narrower sense, the term political refers to involvement in party politics or politics in general, understood as the process of achieving and then exercising power.

The political nature of public sector organizations can be seen as a continuum ranging from political to non-political communication. In the extreme political communication end of the continuum, communication is related to clearly set political aims that change as the politicians change. In the non-political neutral and order type organizations- end of the continuum, communication is about maintaining the public good that only partly reflect the political changes and trends. Most public sector organizations, however, represent something in between the two extreme ends, as most often the leadership of the organizations may be political but much of the personnel permanent. Figure 1 displays the continuum.

*Figure 1 The political - non-political continuum of public sector communication.*

<b>Political communication</b>	<b>Partially both</b>	<b>Non-political communication</b>
Guided by political aims	Guided by political, administrative and civic aims	Guided by administrative aims
Depending on election cycles	Depending on set policies which may be disrupted by election cycles	Depending on established policies
Campaign like, short-term	Short to mid-term	Continuous, long-term
For/against -dichotomy strong	For/against -dichotomy mixed with other logics	For/against dichotomy weak
Role of individual leaders emphasized	Common good and leaders emphasized	Common good emphasized
Example: political parties	Example: municipalities	Example: regulators

### **Trust in politicians, trust in authorities**

Despite the fact that citizens can elect their own politicians, there is some Nordic evidence that supports that citizens find it easier to trust the non-elected authorities of public sector organizations and institutions than the politicians (Kumlin and Rothstein 2005, 339-365; Rothstein and Stolle 2008, 441-459+502). Trust has to do with a willingness to grant somebody a discretionary margin to do something. It is a “leap of faith” in which the irreducible uncertainty and vulnerability are suspended (Van de Walle and Six, 2014: 4). Trust in the public sector has been defined as “The willingness, within the context of

uncertainty, to grant discretion to the other party (an organization, a leader, a citizen, and so forth) in the use of public resources for the provision of public services, from which a certain compliance, or at least a reduction in the desire to control, emerges” (Canel and Luoma-aho, in press). Of course a key question is what trust is built upon. For instance, Scammell understands that, in what refers to trust in politics, it derives from politicians’ competence and probity which are perceived as such, clear conceptions of their accountability and responsibility, effective expectations management, an understanding of citizens’ needs and perceptions and the promotion of citizens’ efficacy and participation which requires responsiveness of politicians to citizens’ concerns (see Scammell, 2014). What creates trust in politicians and authorities, how to look at the object (is it trust in government? In public administration? In public services?), and the role that communication might play in building trust are issues that feature high on the research agenda.

### **Citizens are from Venus, public authorities and politicians are from Mars?**

Like weather on the planet Venus, the citizens adapt to societal and technological changes quicker than organizations and institutions, which is apparent in the public sector and political communication literature. To the extent that public sector organizations and public services are principally led by politicians within an increasingly mediated environment, political communication research helps to address different political constraints on public sector communication. Some scholars try to establish boundaries between political/propaganda communication and the more apolitical/nonpartisan communication undertaken by civil servants when providing public services (Glenny 2008, 152-168; Gelders and Ihlen 2010, 59-62).

Looking at the communication undertaken by civil servants in Australia, Glenny (2008) takes what she calls a “bureaucracy perspective” to distinguish communication activities that serve the purpose of governing of the nation from those which promote a political party and/or politician in order to win electoral support. A related issue is that of how citizens ought to be included in public sector communication. In relation to this question, an analysis by Heinze, Schneider, and Ferie (2013) of the use of direct communication instruments by German governments, in which they note that most research centers on the exchange between mass media and government without systematically including citizens, also contains a call for a form of communication that helps to foster a greater proximity to citizens.

## Public sector and political communication

Sanders & Canel conclude that while political communication research has quite rightly highlighted the political purposes of government communication, concepts offered by other research disciplines complement this view by suggesting avenues of study directed at what they see as the *civic* purposes of government communication: “Building long-term relationships, mutual understanding and citizen engagement become part of what is understood to be government communication and understanding how they are helped and hindered then becomes part of the research agenda” (Canel and Sanders, 2014: 101). The assessment of public sector performance differs from the assessment of private sector goods and services. In the public sector, assessments need to include, in addition to the operational objective of “doing things right,” the more existential and often-political question of “doing the right things” (Thijs and Staes 2008, 9). The communication between authorities, politicians and citizens online is not without challenges. Lack of common viewpoints as well as the legal constraints that guide all authority communication online were noted as challenges to interaction (Tirkkonen and Luoma-Aho 2014, 192-204).

The expression “public sector communication” has to date seldom been used, and until 1992 no book had dealt specifically with the topic by that name (Graber 1992). Overall, the longest list of works falls under the term “government communication.” Under the level of “government,” few studies refer to government information management or to government public relations, and there is also only one term (“government reputation”) that deals specifically with intangible assets. All sources agree however, that engaging citizens will provide several benefits for public sector and political organizations.

### **Toward more engaging public sector and political communication**

Citizen engagement has emerged as the new trend for public sector organizations, as citizens demand that public sector organizations should be more responsive to their needs and demands (Thijs and Staes 2008, 8). Engagement as a “vehicle for co-production, co-creation and co-innovation of public goods” (Bourgon 2009, 309-330, 230) is the current ideal for most public sector organizations globally. There are clear advantages to engagement, as it has been proven to foster citizenship values, enhance accountability, improve trust in government, maintain legitimacy, and help to achieve better decisions and to build consensus (Yang and Pandey 2011; see also Coursey, Yang, and Pandey 2011; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). However, there is also a negative side to engagement: governmental citizen

## Public sector and political communication

involvement efforts are costly; involving citizens is not always associated with a better quality of services; citizens are not equally interested and qualified to take part in public deliberation (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). Serving a diverse public is a challenge for many public sector organizations (Thomas 2013, 786-796). As service design becomes more popular in the business sector (Whicher and Cawood 2013), citizens are starting to expect a similar level of service delivery from public sector organizations, challenging the previously often one-way consultation style of public sector communication.

The successes of the alleged post-truth politics of the Brexit and Donald Trump 2016 presidential campaign, together with Teresa May's failure to win a majority in the 2017 UK election took most political communication experts by surprise. Shortly after Hillary Clinton's defeat, the Democrat political communication guru, Stanley Greenberg, wrote an article titled "Why did pollsters like me fail to predict Trump's victory?" (*The Guardian*, 16 November, 2016). In an analysis of the British Conservative Party's 2017 campaign, a distinguished British journalist wrote about the communication failure of the communicators (Parris, 2017) whose simplistic campaign tactics could not disguise the shortcomings of their political clients.

These examples demonstrate the difficulty of considering political communication engagement of citizens without thinking about by what means citizens are engaged and for what purpose. Trump's tweets, with their mixture of forthrightness, irreverence or downright rudeness, have certainly engaged media and public attention but it could be argued that they are also contributing to a coarsening of public discourse. More engaging political communication should perhaps be considered in the context of how it promotes a number of connected outcomes including the participation, effective learning, emotional investment (the sense that politics and issues matter) and increased sense of efficacy (the feeling that I matter) of citizens.

## Conclusions

Public sector and political communication play a vital role in global settings as they enable both the success and failure of nations in the society full of communication. In undertaking the endeavor of moving from a culture of control to a culture of dialogue, of shifting the attitude of holding power *over* to holding power *with* citizens, certainly communication can be of help. Joint efforts of scholars and practitioners are required to address the challenges

ahead, among which, the following can be mentioned. At a theory level, research is needed to better understand what a fruitful interaction is, and to explore the role communication plays in building intangible value that can enable both social and economic growth in society. In more practical terms, research is needed to find the structures and processes that help citizen engagement actually happens: how should citizens' feedback be searched, received, processed and responded to? How can listening be built in to the political and public sector processes? The ultimate issue is how communication can help bringing trust and legitimacy to the core of governance of public and political organizations globally and enable a better dialogue between citizen and organizations that govern them.

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