Setting the research agenda for governmental communication

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Summary

The Research Group for Governmental Communication has carried out a trend study of governmental communication within The Netherlands (1). Research topics were: the major tasks for communication, current issues, profiling the communication department, and policy plans for communication. Another study focused on quality control as a management function for the communication department (2). A tool was developed to measure the communication quality of governmental organisations.

Looking back on the results of both studies we asked ourselves the question: How can the academic field pursue the research of communication practice in governmental organisations and then support this field with results? The article focuses on governmental communication in The Netherlands, but the results might also be interesting for researchers and communication experts in governmental communication in other countries. The author argues that the priorities in the research agenda within the field of governmental communication should include: monitoring methods, quality control and accountability.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, communication is an important function of governmental organisations. In order to establish mutual interaction with citizens, Governmental Organisations should be transparent, accessible and responsive (3). The core competencies of communication experts are: consistently confronting Government organisations with the perspective of the outside world; and rendering significant information because information often needs to be adapted in order to be useful to the outside world (4).

The aim of the Chair Governmental Communication of the Faculty of Communication and Journalism, of the Utrecht University of Professional Education, is to contribute towards the development of governmental communication in close co-operation with practitioners in the field. For this purpose, research is carried out by a group of researchers. In this article we will reflect on the results of two studies.

The trend study describes the main tasks and current issues within governmental communication in 2004. The study was implemented in close co-operation with a group of representatives from various public organisations.

In the quality control study, an instrument was designed to help governmental organisations to communicate more effectively with citizens. This was inspired by the Kaplan and Norton's 'balanced scorecard' (5) and the European Foundation for Quality Control (6). In a previous publication (7), this tool was described in detail to enable communication experts to utilise it within their own organisation. The instrument does not only focus on the activities of communication departments, but also on all communication within governmental organisations. It helps communication experts increase the value of consultancy within their organisation.

Both studies focus on the management of communication for governmental organisations. How does communication contribute towards the organisational goals? Which topics currently receive much attention? How is communication organised? How are priorities set? No other recent studies with a similar scope were available about governmental communication in The Netherlands.
By reflecting on the main results of both studies we hope to detect areas for future research.

In the Netherlands for many years, governmental organizations have been working on renewing their administration with the purpose of getting closer to citizens and further improve its functionality. People are quite happy with the direct contact with governmental organisations, however, the overall assessment is not high (8). Confidence in politics is low (9). There is a small group of people who feel allied to the government. A larger group does not feel this quite so strongly and a smaller group is indifferent (10). Many citizens prefer to pass policy management over to the elected authorities and if they have a problem then they known where to find them (11). On a local level people are more positive about the government than on a national level (12).

2. The trend study of governmental communication

The trend study of governmental communication was for the first time carried out at the beginning of 2004. It was the result of consultations with representatives of the Government/ Ministries, District councils and Local councils, as well as District Water Boards. The trend study will be implemented every two years, to enable a comparison with previous results.

Methodology

The trend study was implemented by means of a survey. The survey had different versions for four organisational categories (i.e. the Government/ Ministries, District Councils, Local Councils, and District Water Boards). Also, within each governmental organisation three functional categories were distinghuished (Political Directors e.g. the Ministers or Mayors , Departmental Policy Managers e.g. the top manager, Communication Managers e.g. the head of the department of communication). In these categories all 1626 people were asked to fill in questionnaire and 695 people responded. The survey consisted of questions about the budget for communication, developments, competences needed by communication experts, a series of statements about governmental communication, and background information of the respondent and organisation. The text below highlights the general impression extracted from the results.

Involvement and trust

In the 2004 survey, one of the open questions asked what the most important communication task was within their own organisation. Several classifiable comments were frequently mentioned. The first referred to the increase in citizens' involvement. Under this fell comments such as furthering participation, interactive policy development, offering transparency, better information provision and strengthening the Government's relationship with citizens. The second frequently mentioned classification is related to digital communication. Under this came qualifications such as e-government, expanding the Internet and intranet, continued website development, electronic transactions and dealing with customers. In addition to these two cases, other forthcoming replies appeared that related to the position of the Government, such as Government positioning and confidence in the Government, clearly defining the importance of the Government for Society, and visualizing results. The last frequently mentioned classification referred to the professionalism of communication. Respondents reported about the set up and actualising of a communication policy plan and also talked about incorporating communication in the heart of the policy. The questionnaire also allowed space to comment upon the role of communication in defined projects. Related to this communication within organisational changes was mentioned, such as mergers and quality operations.

Another open question asked about the most important development for the profession of governmental communication in 2004. Hereby again emerged; digital communication, interactive policy forming, offering transparency, and strengthening the relationship between the Government and the citizen. Managers often left this question unanswered.

Current issues

In 2002, the commission report 'Future Government Communication' under the chairmanship of Wallage (13) mentioned a number of target objectives for government communication. The trend study investigated what the current situation is regarding these points.

The respondents named the most important objective for Government communication to be; 'to make Government business transparent', followed by 'achieving interaction with the outside world', then 'realising a policy foundation' and lastly 'ensuring a positive image'. The respondents indicated that the comprehensibility of external output for those for whom it is intended, still left much to be desired.

A pro-active media policy receives a lot of approval, but 24-hour accessibility for journalists is still only the norm within the Ministries and not in Districts or Councils. People are striving to incorporate communication into the heart of the policy, but this is still being insufficiently realised in many places. The same applies for making greater efforts in reaching difficult to access target groups. Research often isn't an integral part of the communication activities. Crisis communication receives a lot of attention from Governmental organisations, but Councils still find this wanting.

Profiling the Communication Department

The question regarding the profiling of the communication department indicated that there was room for improvement. Less than half of the respondents found that political directors have a good image of the added value of the communication profession. With regard to the directors themselves, almost half said that the communication department ensured that internally people knew what communication had to offer.

The results of this survey show that when economizing, communication was often spared in 2004. The communication budget for 2003 (apart from personnel) had remained the same in almost half of the cases when compared with the previous year; it had increased in 45 % and decreased in 9% of the cases. The communication formation showed a slight rise in many cases in 2003, but on average a stabilisation was expected for 2004. A centralisation of communication knowledge can be seen within many government organisations.

According to the respondents, the important skills that a senior communication expert must possess are: contact skills, analytical ability and vision. Political Directors, Departmental Policy Managers, Communication Experts agreed on this point. The ability to put oneself in someone else's position was found more important by Political Directors and Departmental Policy Managers then by Communication Managers, and the importance of this was ranked especially high among respondents of the Government/ Ministries.
With regard to job specific knowledge, the respondents considered knowledge of the target groups to be the most important, closely followed by knowledge of the political environment and consultancy skills. There were some small differences among the categories, however. Political Directors prioritised knowledge of the political environment and of the target groups, whereas Departmental Policy Managers and Communication Managers prioritised consultancy skills and knowledge of the target group.
The respondents clearly did not rate research for gaining knowledge about the target group, because knowledge of communication research scored low among all categories of respondents.

51% of Communication Managers were women, but this was often much less within the Ministries than within other government organisations. The age group was generally around 43-54 years. Only 40% of Communication Managers studied communication studies at University or at a University of professional education. Of the departmental communication heads, 49% did another study and 11% did not study at university level. 65% were members of a professional communication society.

<u>Policy plans for communication</u>

In the trend study, Government organisations were asked about their most recent communication policy plan. 44 plans were received from which a diverse image emerged. The plans ranged from between 6 to 56 pages. Many different classifications and concepts were used for summarizing activities. The subjects frequently mentioned in the communication plans were: interactive policy, new media and city promotion. In addition but less frequent were: monitoring public reaction and communication to the heart of the policy. The latter topic refers to involving communication experts earlier in the policy circle, not just to make decisions known but also to stimulate a responsive organisation and participative policy making.

Some plans described the communication vision and gave a very basic explanation about what communication can offer and how it is being applied. Other plans specifically gave an outline of the communication policy's direction, the changing environment and priorities. This depended upon the development phase of the communication within the organisation.
Some plans mentioned a long list of basic activities that were all important, whilst other plans assumed such a basis and specifically described the key points, setting priorities. Seldom did the plans provide a retrospective look at a previous period and never systematically showed what was achieved. Frequently, previously insufficiently defined resolutions were formulated and there were few measurement results available for the communication. Due to this, there was no systematic quality improvement visible over the years.
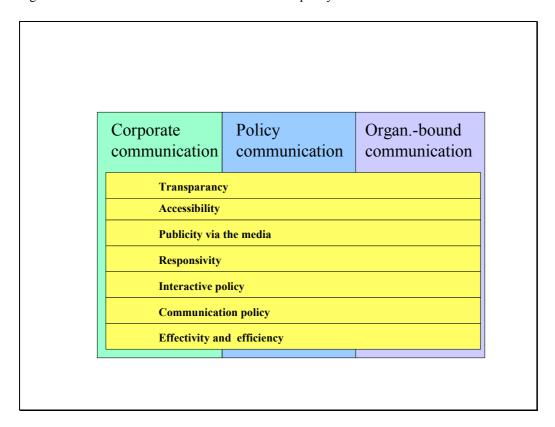
Within the communication plans, it appears that there is ground to be won within the area of communication research. A perception monitor has been developed within the Government and effect measurements are being carried out on key themes. Other governmental organisations are performing a yearly general satisfaction measurement for the organisation as a whole, which is predominantly about being customer friendly and service oriented. Sometimes there are panel discussions or incidental image research, but often there are no effect measurements of communication with citizens and no measurements of internal communication within personnel.

3. The quality control study

In 2003, the Research Group Governmental Communication developed an instrument to measure and improve the communication quality of Governmental organisations and Councils in specific. The development of this tool was done in close co-operation with communication experts from various Councils. After publishing the instrument, the implementation of the instrument was monitored. The governmental organisations were very interested in the method. The publication was reprinted thrice and an instruction manual was made available.

The method aims at introducing a complete quality cycle for the department of communication. It can also be simply used for a discussion with the communication team and for a one-time quick scan to measure communication quality. In the meantime, many Local Councils have used the developed method. However, although the one-time quick scan has been applied in many places since 2003, there are hardly any examples of a structural quality cycle yet.

Figure: The three communication functions and the quality dimensions in the instrument

Corporate communication	Policy communication	Organ.-bound communication
Transparancy		
Accessibility		
Publicity via the media		
Responsivity		
Interactive policy		
Communication policy		
Effectivity and efficiency		

The figure shows the structure of the instrument designed. The core of the instrument consists of a series of quality indicators for each of the three communication functions: corporate, policy and organisation related communication (14). Corporate communication supports the presentation of the organisation as a whole. Policy communication can be divided as follows:
- communication *regarding* policy items: making public and explaining policy;
- communication *as* a policy: chief or supporting instrument alongside regulating and facilitating in order to realise policy goals (e.g. promoting environmentally friendly behaviour);
- communication *for* policy: the development of policy together with citizens and/or organisations via interactive policy making;
- communication *in* policy: integral approach of all policy products for community service (e.g. clear language in laws and regulations).

Organisation-bound communication supports the internal processes and focuses upon the continuity of the governmental organisation. This includes: internal communication, labour market communication and crisis communication.

These indicators were co-ordinated to the same seven dimensions of quality for every function, i.e. transparency, accessibility, publicity via the media, responsiveness, interactive policy, communication policy, and effectiveness & efficiency. By doing this, the measurement gives an overall score as well as totals per communication function and dimension. This makes the interpretation of the results easier and stimulates improvement. Each indicator is evaluated on a five-point scale (15).

Method

The development of the communication quality meter occurred during contact with the professional world. The instrument appeared to correspond with the needs of people in practice and subsequently the concept was discussed further with the Councillors. When it appeared that there was much interest in the results in practice but that some people had difficulty in applying the instrument, a manual was also created. A pilot study of a large Council was carried out and workshops were given in which communication experts from government organisations took part. Furthermore, advice was given about the application to several Local Councils.

<u>Practical experience</u>

The experiences indicated that professionals were aware of the 'communication quality' subject, but in practice they felt there was a lack of time to apply it. People associated quality care with time-consuming bureaucratic procedures. They were surprised to learn that this method could stimulate a team to provide more quality with little time and bureaucracy. Quality care is a cycle in which priorities are regularly set for communication as a whole, with the effort being evaluated thereafter. Entry into the cycle has been kept low in order to tempt as many people as possible to begin. The objectives can be set a little higher for each completed cycle at a later stage.

In this way, various small Local Councils began a qualitative application. The instrument offers professionals a framework to think about quality criteria and priorities. An overview of the criteria was available on posters and people placed stickers where they think more attention is needed. During team discussions, different points of view were revealed. Such an assessment only requires one or two half-days and can provide much inspiration.

Many medium-sized Councils had a preference for a more quantitative approach. Communication consultants completed a quick scan and the results were used as the starting point for team discussions about the priorities for the coming period. These applications can be carried out within one or two weeks and don't cost much time. Often, in addition to the communication department, someone from the Personnel department, a general manager or a controller participated in the discussions. Individual Political Directors and Sector Managers were also asked to complete a quick scan and accordingly their answers were compared with the results from the communication team. This often gave reactions such as: "I didn't have such a clear and broad image of the communication business".

Several Councils carried out a more thorough audit by holding interviews and collecting available documentary evidence. On this basis, 2 auditors (experienced communication experts) determined the results per indicator and the totals were then calculated and discussed with the team. A thorough audit usually takes several weeks. The results can be compared with a previous year or with a previously determined objective. In the case of a merged Council, both communication departments intended to do a quick scan and compare the results in order to retain everyone's positive points within the collaboration.

Dutch Councils nowadays have some experience with quality control, although a quality circle that repeats measurements and sets new objectives regularly is not yet custom. To find out weather the situation is different from other European countries a pilot research was done by students, which consisted of 15 respondents in various European countries. They asked communication experts of Councils for their opinion about quality control (16). This was a small scale survey, so more research is certainly needed. The results showed that the communication experts endorsed the importance of quality control but they considered the possibility of applying this in the short term as being very small. Accordingly, awareness of the importance of quality control is not enough. The application of the method must be made easily accessible.

4. In conclusion

Communication departments try to incorporate their activities into the organisation in various ways. The content management of communication means that the communication expertise should be directed in such a way that the organisation derives as much added value as possible (17). Communication management means paying attention to quality and increasing the added value of communication within an organisation. The key questions are: Are we (within the total budget available for communication) carrying out the right activities? And are we doing them well? The first question refers to setting priorities and making choices. The second question is about the results and the criteria accordingly used.

In order to achieve this, communication management must be regularly evaluated. Positive results can be retained, whilst new priorities can be determined at the same time. This requires a quality cycle. It is not enough to measure the quality of a separate activity; the whole of the communication activities and projects also needs to be taken into account.

The 2004 trend study shows that topics like the involvement of citizens and trust are still very important for governmental communication. The transparency of governmental policies and activities

must be improved. Communication experts need to have knowledge of the target groups and the political environment. This calls for ***monitoring methods***.

In addition, professionalizing the communication function is often mentioned: communication to the heart of the policy. Communication policy plans are stated as a means to minute the choices in the communication policy. The added value of communication for the organisation must be clarified. This means paying attention to **accountability**.

The further development of accountability methods does not only depend on academic studies. Much can be done in practice too. The quality control study shows that communication experts are interested in accountability, but the time to reflect upon the communication policy is lacking. The method developed may facilitate quality care. Governmental organisations are invited to experiment in practice with a quality cycle for communication management.

Notes

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