The communication grid, a situational model for strategic communications management
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CHALLENGES IN COMMUNICATION

State of the Art and Future Trends

Observations from the Netherlands
Edited by Eric Denig and Anita Weisink

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INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC RELATIONS ASSOCIATION
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Preface

Since 1973, the International Public Relations Association has researched and published a series of critical papers, known and valued throughout the public relations profession as the IPRA Gold Papers. From the inaugural issue, Standards and Ethics on Public Relations, to the most recent, The Evolution of PR Education and the Influence of Globalisation, the demand for quality has been constant. Gold Paper research is always conducted by the most senior-level practitioners in the international public relations arena and the writing is professionally edited and reviewed to ensure the clarity of both thesis and message.

What makes the IPRA Gold Papers extraordinary is that the work accomplished on behalf of the profession is done on an entirely voluntary basis by members of IPRA. The Gold Paper to be launched during the World Congress of Public Relations 2000 is a prime example of the dedication to public relations and to IPRA by some of the leading practitioners in Europe. Entitled Challenges in Communication, Gold Paper 13 contrasts and compares the ways in which public relations has changed its perspective towards state-of-the-art practice and the future of the profession over the past 15 years.

As communications professionals, we all value critical thinking and the importance of articulating the themes and trends in the profession upon which we can build successful strategies. IPRA is especially indebted to the team responsible for producing Gold Paper 13. Not only does IPRA have the opportunity to launch the Gold Paper during the 15th World Congress on Public Relations, more importantly, we have the opportunity to share key concepts and to provoke discussion and debate with public relations colleagues, educators, and students worldwide.

Carolyn Raffa Fazio
IPRA President

Introduction

Fifteen years ago, the International Public Relations Association (IPRA), together with the ‘Vereniging voor Public Relations en Voorlichting’ (at the time the NGPR, now the ‘Beroepsvereniging voor Communicatie’) organised the 10th Public Relations World Congress in Amsterdam. Under the title Between People and Power, more than 1000 practitioners listened to more than 100 speakers and panel members. More important still was the way in which this congress assumed form.

An initial congress book Analysis combined 50 trends into 8 key developments in our field and in society: alienation and resistance / growing complexity / specialisation and superspecialisation / information paradox / information elites / information ‘overflow’ / greater attention to internal communication / need for norms and values. The almost 40 reactions submitted from around the globe were pulled together in a second congress
book entitled Reactions. And this provided the basis for the four day themes of the congress and for the overall report A Geography of Public Relations Trends.

Now, fifteen years later, the hard core of the former Programme Committee of the World Congress, plus a number of new enthusiastic practitioners, has decided on a similar exercise for the 15th Public Relations World Congress in Chicago. Again it deals with our profession: ‘State of the Art’ and ‘Future Trends’, from the perspective of the Netherlands as a member of the European Union. A comparison of our work - which we present here – with the results of 1985 reveals that we have changed in some respects, but not in others. The bridge of our profession still exists between people and power. But the trends are concerned ever less with public relations and ever more with communication.

Eric Denig

1 Communication within the social-cultural context

Frits Spangenberg and Martijn Lampert

1.1 Introduction

Society is changing, and we are changing with it. Technological innovations such as mobile telephony and the Internet have turned the world of communications upside down. The new opportunities in the field of communication have also tightened up the requirements. What the factory director simply used to do by gut feeling and just accepted as what happened, is nowadays a profession that demands the right knowledge and right attitude.

What is not fundamentally changing is human behaviour; down through the years we can see the same patterns recurring in wave patterns. Nevertheless, it is vital for the communications professional to realise the wave movement in which we find ourselves. As a communications specialist, you have to be able to respond to the dominant value patterns of the target group, from this perspective of the Zeitgeist. The Zeitgeist of the past fifty years provides five recognisable periods, each of which broadly dominated for ten years. This is not to say that those values were not present in the period before or subsequently, but their impact was suddenly much stronger in the particular period. The patterns below are highly identifiable for most Western European countries.

The fifties were marked by ‘economic’ thinking and action. In the period after the Second World War, everyone was focused on reconstruction, expectations of the potential for making society were at a high level; concern about the environment was non-existent. Everything looked as if we were working towards a better society, despite the ‘Cold War’.

The sixties can be described as the decade of ideology; we can identify the rise of the protest generation, ever larger groups of the public want to kick over the traces of economic idealism, and there is something other than technology: people revert in part to old principles. It is the period of long discussions, the sit-in or teach-ins. Everyone must be able to have their say and share in decision-making, large companies and above all multinationals are by definition wrong because they pursue profit maximisation. Most companies failed to see this turnaround in norms and values coming and were forced to watch on as highly promising academics explicitly decided against industry for their career.

The seventies show a sharp rise in hedonism: people wanted to enjoy. They bid farewell to the pre-war Calvinist view that pleasure was a sin. Older people still enjoy with some feelings of guilt, young people have less difficulty and consume the welfare state full of conviction.

The eighties appear to be even more egocentric; pragmatism rules the roost. People deal with one another on the basis of principles such as no-nonsense, everything must be straight out. ‘Adaptive navigation’ makes its entrance on a larger scale. Lifetime employment is rejected even at the university, the government and the large multinationals; people are judged by their performances and focus their lives accordingly. What’s in it for me seems to becoming a sort of basic attitude. ‘I’m living my life, I want nice work, but I also have my partner, my family and my hobbies.’

In the nineties, ethical aspects such as ‘purity’, ‘transparency’ and ‘accountability’ are relatively new concepts. It became the decade of the sex scandals, which in the past were concealed by the mantle of love (or a different mantle). Even the President of the United States is brought to his knees in relation to intimacies and his initial denial of them. It is also the period at which a great deal of energy and money is invested in things being made public and accountability.

What’s the relevance of recognising the ‘value wave’? Anyone who has consciously experienced the above periods can also recall cases of communication that were unleashed by the dominant values. The
communications consultant must have a greater awareness than anyone else of social developments and if at all possible anticipate forthcoming value waves.

Although predicting value waves is a theoretical impossibility – ad hoc events with a strong impact cannot be forecast – we would venture to predict a relatively new current which appears to be taking shape in the first decade of the 21st century. We call this current ‘new discipline’, because we observe a sympathy for older values such as respect and decency and a growing awareness that as a member of the public you have rights as well as commitments. Fellow citizens who do not appear to be aware of their commitments must have their attention drawn to them more forcefully. Equality and reciprocity are pursued in all their consequences. We consider it very plausible that the above values in the forthcoming period will feature more strongly in communications consultancy.

The communications expert should preferably identify social developments whilst they are still in progress. An international catalogue of what are termed socio-cultural currents has been drawn up to offer a framework: wave movements in social norms and values that affect the attitudes and human behaviour. The currents have been catalogued on the basis of observation, qualitative and quantitative research and international consultation between the Socioconsult-partner agencies. In principle, a representative sample of some 2,000 individuals is surveyed annually in the participating countries. The method has been validated on a socio-scientific basis and modified year by year to take account of developments in society.

With the help of the socio-cultural currents below, changing motives and needs of segments (in this case groups of people with largely the same norms and values) are closely monitored. The activity of the currents is expressed in trends, change in consumption patterns and in the advisory practice of the communications consultant.

Figure 1: The Socioconsult compass

The following sections briefly describe the segments and the current. The descriptions are not exhaustive: they are intended to provide a total overview.

1.2 Autonomy

Contemporary Western society is characterised by individuality, freedom of choice and a strong need for autonomy. People choose their own goals and take upon themselves the responsibility for the choices they make in their lives. They are also flexible to some extent and capable of finding their own way in contemporary society autonomously. Depending on economic and social circumstances, autonomy can be an incentive for positive change (flexibility, innovation, harmony), as well as a negative change (isolation, anomie). Autonomy finds its expression in the following currents.

Figure 2: Autonomy

DIY way of life: taking control of your own life and making it fulfilling in a fully personal way by means of self-formulated aims and means. People want to decide for themselves how to live and how to die. People are autonomous and self-reflecting in making choices, independent of conventional directives and social conventions.

The power of knowledge: acting according to one’s own thinking and on the basis of one’s own deliberations. People have difficulty in trusting in the expertise of others, and make sure that they themselves have sufficient knowledge and understanding in many areas. People develop various areas of expertise simultaneously. Advice is welcome, but will not be followed blindly.

Achievement: setting yourself challenging goals. People are incited to realise the goals they have set for themselves, and do not stop until they have achieved them. Satisfaction is being derived from the realisation of goals and meeting new challenges. As soon as the goals have been achieved, new challenges are searched for.

Multi-faceted individual: this current implies a breach with conventional, rigid role models. People assume different roles at different occasions, without this becoming a threat to or a reduction of their own personality. People are open to the many different facets of the self, are flexible and feel better at home in a variety of different situations.

Flexibility of sexual roles: accepting differences between the sexes, without attributing so-called sex-specific feelings or behaviour to only one of the two sexes. Men can thus show qualities that are traditionally assigned to the realms of the feminine (care, showing feelings, paying attention to the way you look) and women can show qualities traditionally looked upon as masculine (leadership, rationality, career ambition).

Op-time-alisation: the autonomous person deals with time rationally. People are conscious of the fact that time is scarce and costly and should be dealt with efficiently and methodically. People try to save time paying less attention to less important matters. The philosophy ‘time is money’ is an important incentive behind this current.

1.3 Individual maturing
The more people take control of their own lives, the more conscious they will become of the way they experience life. In the last few decades, immaterial values have begun to play an increasingly important role in everyday life. This is combined with a growing awareness of one’s own feelings and the way in which reality is perceived and interpreted. People are more receptive to both changes in themselves and in their immediate environment. This is expressed in issues such as the perception of time and health and in the position taken up by introception in everyday life. Neo-spirituality, home and family-orientation and the voluntary choice for a more moderate lifestyle fit in with a greater awareness of everyday experiences. Individual maturing is expressed in the currents below.

Figure 3: Individual maturing

Vitality piloting: attaching importance to vitality piloting and taking care of an optimum condition. The need to feel fit, healthy and energetic may be considered as a pro-active response to the challenges of contemporary life. An unhealthy lifestyle is rejected and a healthy, vital lifestyle is propagated.

Savouring time: making a conscious choice to take ample time for matters one considers of real importance. ‘Time is money’ is exchanged for ‘time is life’. People abandon a hectic or hasty lifestyle, slow down and choose for a more conscious and well-balanced existence.

Making magic: in a world, increasingly characterised by efficiency, method and rationality, people develop a new susceptibility to dreams and fantasies. People search for a new kind of magic and romanticism. People influenced by this current are receptive to mysteries and the supernatural.

Intraception: being receptive to other people’s feeling and views. People strike an emphatic attitude towards others. This current concerns the desire to be able to understand other people’s behaviour, irrespective of the fact whether this behaviour is similar to one’s own or not. People consider it important that they are capable of putting themselves into other people’s position and are interested in other people’s motives.

Voluntary simplicity: people deliberately decide to work fewer hours and to earn less as a reaction to a materialistically-oriented consumer society. For these people, status and materialism are less important than immaterial issues, such as leisure time, relationships, spirituality and nature.

Neo-spirituality: seeking new types of spirituality not necessarily related to one particular religion or church. People are searching for new ways of giving meaning to their lives in a secular society and are receptive to other religions, mysticism and the unexplainable. These types of neo-spiritualism are, for example, found in Eastern religions, such as Hinduism or Buddhism, as well as in astrology, introspection and the old Christian mysticism.

1.4 Search for meaning

With the crumbling away of traditional authorities and the disappearing of permanent securities (church, family, the nation state, political ideologies), people are searching for new securities or fall back upon securities from the past. The question about the reason for existence forces itself upon people from a feeling of emptiness and existential insecurity; what should be our priorities in life? This implies a search for new meaning and ethical norms. This may involve a search for meaning on a personal level: everyday activities should be meaningful, but it may also concern a search for meaning on a social level: activities should contribute to a stable, committed and meaningful society.

Figure 4: Search for meaning

Ethics of responsibility: putting the activities of individuals, organisations and companies within an ethical framework. Individuals, as much as companies and organisations, are deemed to take responsibility with regard to social issues. The ethics of responsibility are not defined in terms of an ideology, but in terms of the formation of judgement with regard to concrete behaviour. Ethical entrepreneurship and critical consuming are strongly advocated by people influenced by this current. These people often lean towards balance and social harmony as well.

Community spirit: community spirit stands for strong involvement in society and a feeling of responsibility for the immediate social environment. This involvement is not based on an established new social fabric, but originates from consciously experiencing society as a meaningful structure. People motivated by this current are prepared to be actively engaged in the wellbeing of society and the community.

Techno-progression: The belief in technological progress, taking as its starting point the notion that advancing technological possibilities and the natural environment do not necessarily clash, but can support and enrich each other meaningfully. People inspired by this current are of the opinion that technological development should be given wider space. This current originates from the understanding that nature, milieu and technology are increasingly more difficult to look upon as separate entities and the fact that technological possibilities and applications increasingly encroach upon everyday life.
Sustainability: making use of the environment in a sustainable, purposeful manner. People worry about the damage inflicted upon the earth and consider it important for products to be durable. This current shows that people are genuinely aware of the concept of durability of products and the frugal use of natural resources.

Environmental consciousness: to experience the desire to be actively involved in environmental issues. People show their willingness to pay more for products produced in an environmentally friendly way. Industry should also make use of environmentally friendly production methods. In contrast with the sustainability current, environmental consciousness mainly relates to attitude, rather than to behaviour.

Authenticity: during this period of electronic reproduction and mass consumption, the need increases for matters that are genuine, real, honest and personal and are not associated with imitation and hypocrisy. This current is expressed in the preference for authentic, hand-made products. These products derive their value from their originality, tradition and handicraft.

Adding meaning: searching for new ways of enriching yourself and your life. This current manifests the need to intensely experience day-to-day experiences. People are on the look out for their personally meaningful shaping of life, apart from traditional structures and conventions.

New social fabric

People’s increasing autonomy during the last few decades has gone hand in hand with an essential change in people’s relationships, both among themselves and towards their community. In contrast with previous periods, people no longer feel that they belong to one specific group or category only. The development of new technologies and the advancing globalisation of culture and economy leave their marks on contemporary society. People have developed the capacity of creating and maintaining a widespread and diverse number of contacts and operate in new varieties of social fabric. The traditionally hierarchical structures are increasingly making way for flexible and informal networks. The influence of the changing new social fabric is characteristic of the currents below.

Figure 5: New social fabric

Global village: being aware of some world-wide connection. Experiencing the world as being ever smaller and tighter. There is the feeling of being connected with people from other districts and there is an openness to other cultures and a desire to get to know them. ‘World within reach’.

Local orientation: focusing on the own region and direct social environment. People feel related to the things happening in their own local community. Local orientation is partly the result of the increasing internationalisation and the feeling that the Netherlands are submerged by a globalising world, as a consequence of which people tend to adhere to local achievements and identities.

International orientation: being focused on other countries and the desire to escape from the restrictions of one’s own environment and nationality. People like to be in contact with people from other countries, are interested in international themes and are transcending the boundaries of one’s own language and culture.

Heterarchy: the desire to live and work in a system that has not been organised in a very hierarchical manner and in which influence and responsibilities are shared. Customary authority and responsibilities are rejected. People are accountable and want to work for organisations that listen to and respect their opinions.

Flexible families: being receptive to various types of living together or being single which do not necessarily include marriage and children. The family is no longer considered as the mainstay of society, but as one of the many possible ways of living together, next to single households and living apart together. The roles in these relationships have become more flexible and optional, between partners as well as between parents/guardians and their child(ren).

Fluid networking: making contact with people from various fluid networks relatively easily and fast. Personal contacts are quickly made and need not always be long-lasting. People consider it important to maintain an extensive social network. A lot of time and attention is paid to maintaining the diversity and size of the social network.

1.6 Complexity

Complexity is one of the major characteristics of our current society. Not only are traditional values and securities increasingly replaced by other values and structures, but people are also confronted by a huge supply of products, services, information and possibilities. People have to set their own priorities in this world full of uncertainties and possibilities. People are continuously confronted with uncertainties and try to find their way among them. They are expected to make their own choices and to create some system out of this chaos. The following currents relate to the complexity of contemporary society.

Figure 6: Complexity
Fear of individualisation: this current emphasises the negative side of individualisation and the growing complexity of society. There is a dominant feeling that people are too self-oriented and ignore their immediate environment too much. This current shows that the crumbling away of the social fabric is accompanied by feelings of threat. Aside from an appreciation of the new opportunities and freedoms offered by individualisation, people also feel somewhat threatened by the negative aspects of this individualisation, such as egotism and exclusion.

Adaptive navigation: being oriented towards taking advantage of opportunities and chances offered by the social environment, for the purpose of realising individual goals. People are autonomous and flexible and have skills and capacities at their disposal so as to be able to quickly take advantage of new situations. People manage to deal strategically with the complexity of contemporary life and profit from the opportunities offered without losing sight of a general orientation.

Information maze: people to whom this current applies have difficulties finding their way in a complex society that continuously forces them to fall back upon themselves and to make their own choices. People are confronted with such a load of information that they have difficulties dealing with it in a structured and strategic manner. People to whom this current applies generally have difficulties with dealing with uncertainty and complexity.

Transparency: actively searching for reliable information on matters people are confronted with and about which they want to find out more. People want to have control over their own decisions and want to be independent from companies, experts and organisations. People to whom this current applies are generally critical towards information.

Multicultural interest: being open towards and interested in customs and habits of other cultures and ways of living. People do not only show a multi-cultural interest, but they also actively enrich their own lives by means of these customs and habits.

Time crunch: ‘busy, busy, busy’ is typical of this current. People feel pressurised, during work hours as well as during their leisure time. Under the influence of intensifying obligations and the organisation of work, care, household and leisure, people are increasingly faced with lack of time. People are obliged (or want) to do so many different things that the week is never long enough to have the time to do things at ease, and they feel that they live under constant pressure.

Law & order: the call for a reintroduction of traditional norms and values. This desire for the restoration of these norms and values derives from the feeling that there is hardly any respect for other people in contemporary society anymore, and is mainly the result of a feeling of insecurity. Law & order stands for the need of strong state authority and more severe legislation. People to whom this current applies generally have problems dealing with the uncertainty and complexity of contemporary society.

Tolerance: dealing with culturally divergent groups in society in a flexible and open-minded way. Tolerance refers to the acceptance of non-indigenous people and minorities and the realisation that a country cannot close itself off from the rest of the world. Different customs and conventions are not condemned or rejected, but accepted as they are. People to whom this current applies are of the opinion that people with dissenting views enrich society.

1.7 Hedonism

Hedonism is everywhere in modern society and everyday life. Pleasure and enjoying life have become aims in themselves. People are aware of their individual desires for pleasure and increasingly tend to give in to these desires. Hedonism comes in various shapes, dependent on personal values and the particular context people move around in. In all cases, enjoying the here and now comes first. People feel the need occasionally to escape their humdrum lives and show their need for dreams and fantasies. Hedonism derives from the desire for thrills, sensation and more extreme physical and mental states or kicks. Apart from the sensation-oriented, rough kind of hedonism, hedonism also occurs as a more subtle enrichment of people’s personal lives. In this case, thrills or kicks do not sustain the motive for their behaviour, but the need for self-actualisation and expressing their own personality. Both types of hedonism can exist side by side. The first type, the search for thrills and strong sensations, is reflected in the violence fascination and crude hedonism currents; the aim at enriching personal life is reflected in the discerning hedonism and polysensuality currents. Hedonism is represented everywhere in modern-day society and day-to-day life. Enjoyment and pleasure have become life objectives and stand alone life objectives. People are aware of individual wishes for satisfaction and are increasingly inclined to give way to these desires, without in the process wishing to conform to the rules of others or any moral commitments.

Figure 7: Hedonism
Discerning hedonism: letting go of everyday routine and giving in to moments of enjoyment in whatever way they come. Enjoyment as an essential part of daily life and the experience of the here and now. Pleasure and enjoyment are considered as important and valuable ways of filling one’s personal life.

Crude hedonism: searching for thrills, excitement, sensations and kicks in order to escape from daily routine and boredom. This current concerns the desire for strong and extreme sensations and a craving for risks, adventure and variation.

Violence fascination: being attracted to action and violence. Physical violence is looked upon as interesting and exciting. People find it acceptable that people sometimes take their recourse to violence; violence should not be curbed in advance. This current combines with a preference for action movies and combat sports.

Poly-sensuality: wanting to absorb the world through all your senses and enjoying this intensely. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and feeling complement each other seamlessly. People create a personal and pleasant environment. They wish to surround themselves with beautiful objects and with products that are not only functional, but aesthetic and sensual as well.

Peace at home: enjoying life in the intimacy of the family and enriching private home-life, for instance by inviting people at home, rather than going out with them. People deliberately withdraw into the safety of their own homes and search for protection in their own social environment. Next, this current can be considered as a reaction to a complex, hectic world, continuously in flux.

About the authors
Frits Spangenberg studied social sciences at the University of Amsterdam and worked as a scientific officer at the same university for seven years. In 1984, he set up the market research agency, Motivaction, which grew over a 15-year period into a leading consultancy, focused specifically on social change.

Martijn Lampert studied leisure sciences at Brabant Catholic University and graduated in lifestyle research. Since 1998 he has been working at the Motivaction research agency. As Senior Project Manager he is responsible for developing and applying Socioconsult norms and value study.

2 At the turn of the century
Development of public relations in the Netherlands
Eric Denig

“I believe that communication plays an essential role in bridging the gap between people and institutions in society, irrespective of whether they are commercial enterprises, governments, churches or universities. Information and public relations – as a bridge between people and power – are a challenge to all concerned with them.”

The above quotation comes from the Dutch Prime Minister, when opening the Tenth World Public Relations Congress in Amsterdam in 1985. His words underline the changes that the profession and the professional association have experienced. The profession is explored in 2.6 and 2.7. The professional association is the subject of the other sections.

2.1 Developments in a professional association

The ‘Genootschap voor Openbaar Contact’ (Public Contact Association) was founded in the Netherlands in 1946. The notion that this society had to comprise 17 men indicates a certain elitism. It was not until 1954 that the society became more professional, by being renamed the ‘Nederlands Genootschap voor Public Relations’ (Netherlands Public Relations Association). There were then 40 members. The name changed again almost 25 years later. In 1978, the professional association became ‘NGPR, Vereniging voor Public Relations en Voorlichting’ (Public Relations and Information Association). The reason for the change was the growing influx of practitioners from the governmental arena. They felt greater affinity with ‘information’ than with ‘public relations’.

The number of members, which stood at more than 400 in 1978, continued to rise to around a thousand in the nineties. 1996 saw a further change of direction. The NGPR merged with the ACON (Association for Communication in Netherlands Organisations) and the VBN (Professional Corporate Journalism and Internal Communication Association). The new association was called ‘Beroepsvereniging voor Communicatie’ (Professional Communication Association).

We have come full circle. From ‘public contact’ to ‘public relations’, expanded to include ‘information’ and ultimately changed to two-way ‘communication’. This makes the Dutch Professional Communication Association one of the very few organisations within IPRA not to feature the term ‘public relations’ in its title. A consequence of the specific culture, with the need for organised and expert communication rapidly developing within businesses, organisations and governments.

2.2 Membership profile

The division between men and women has changed markedly over the years, witness the percentage of men at some reference points: (1955) 98%, (1965) 97%, (1975) 96%, (1985) 88%, (1995) 70%, (2000) 59%.

An overview of the changes in 1985 reveals that that year was the turning point for the feminisation of the Association. In 1985, 30% of new members were women.

If we review the situation after 1995 (see Table I), we find that the growth has come to an end. A further striking point is that the influx of new members is attributable more to women than to men. In ten year’s time, the number of male and female members will be the same.

Now let us make a couple of points about the professional sectors. The breakdown within the Association was as follows at the end of the century:

- working in businesses
- working in organisations
- working for governments
- working for consultancies
- working in education/research
- working in government

Finally, it is worth noting that the members are mainly active in what are called specialist groups. They constitute the heart of the Association. There are currently nine specialist groups: Communications Consultants/Corporate Communication/Healthcare/Interactive Communication/Internal Communication/Government Communication/Press Information/Public Affairs. The Corporate Communication and Internal Communication specialist groups in particular have large numbers of members.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Of which women</th>
<th>Of which men</th>
<th>New members</th>
<th>Of which women</th>
<th>Of which men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>1085</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>683</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>1089</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>681</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>1044</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>660</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>1036</td>
<td>399</td>
<td>637</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I  Influx of new members

The age structure shows a clear peak among 40-50 year olds. 3% are below the age of 30, 27% between the age of 30-40, 37% aged 40-50, 26% 50-60 and 7% above the age of 60. More than two-thirds of members have an advanced level of education (senior vocational education or university). Such an educational background is almost the rule for new members (see Table II).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>Senior Vocational</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>Senior Vocational</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>37</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>38</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>41</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<td>1999</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II  Education level of new members

Apart from the Beroepsvereniging voor Communicatie, there are three other professional organisations in the Netherlands. For Government information officers, there is the Vereniging voor Overheidscommunicatie (VVO, Government Information Association), with 944 members. In the consultancy world there are two organisations: PRECOM (13 members) for agencies with minimum sales of NLG 1 million and VPRA (38 members) for agencies with minimum sales of NLG 150,000. Both organisations offer agency membership. At PRECOM this is by invitation only, in view of the nature of an ‘informal and colleague-based platform’.

2.3 Knowledge transfer

Communication training courses are offered at all levels within the Netherlands. Apart from private training institutes, training courses are provided within senior vocational education, along with study options at various universities. The professional association itself plays a separate role. The former NGPR obtained approval from Utrecht University (Social Science Faculty) in 1978 to inaugurate a special chair ‘for education in the theory of public relations’. Dr. Anne van der Meiden held the chair from 1978 to 1994 (emeritus). Unfortunately, it
subsequently proved impossible for the Association to be involved in the appointment of professors in communications.

The professional association has been actively involved in holding examinations for decades. From 1968 to 1983, exams were held for what was termed the Basic Public Relations Diploma; first a few dozen, and then hundreds per annum. Two new diplomas were introduced as from 1983: the NGPR A and the NGPR B diploma. The A diploma enjoyed great popularity, reaching its zenith after ten years with more than 4,500 candidates (30% success rate). Examinations for the B diploma were held only twice; the level of interest was low. In 1995, the Association decided that holding examinations was not among the core responsibilities of a professional organisation and that furthermore the A diploma no longer served as a professional qualification. Exams are now held by third parties.

In 1998, the Beroepsvereniging voor Communicatie took the initiative to develop a body of knowledge for communications management and consultancy. The starting point was not the supply of knowledge available, but the perceived need for knowledge among professionals. The objective of the body of knowledge project was two-fold: to develop new knowledge and to disseminate knowledge for future use and make it accessible. The project team identified three knowledge problems:
- the effectiveness of communication;
- the relationship between communication and organisation;
- communication and information technology.

Various forms of knowledge systems were also reviewed in the project. Collecting articles and books (or abstracts) and collecting relevant addresses, checklists and methods proved to be the best options. Work is now very much in hand to develop a knowledge base, including addresses, cases, studies and literature from at home and abroad.

2.4 National and international contacts

Contacts within the Netherlands are of course primarily focused on organisations that play some part in the communication world. Specifically these are:
- the Vereniging for Overheidscommunicatie (VVO) with whom the Association collaborates, mainly in the field of education;
- the VPRA organisation for Public Relations/Communications Consultants, with whom the Association exchanges information;
- the LACOS National Student Communication Association (previously SVPR), with whom activities are jointly organised,
- the International Press Centre Nieuwspoort, of which many practitioners are members and grants the Association a seat in its General Executive.

International contacts are three-fold:
- European Confederation of Public Relations (CERP), of which the professional association is a member; CERP has set priorities on the basis of a business plan, covering the position of commercial communication, setting up an international body of knowledge, quality aspects of communication and drawing up a European event calendar;
- the Federation of European Industrial Editors Associations (FEIEA), of which the professional association is a member as an organisation in the field of internal communication; activities cover such matters as organising meetings and awards for business journals and social annual reports;
- International Public Relations Association (IPRA), with whom contact is maintained through the National Coordinator.

2.5 Developments after 2000

There has always been a great level of interest in future developments within the sector. This is clearly reflected in the description of trends for the 10th Public Relations World Congress in 1985 (see “Introduction”). The documentary book on fifty years of public relations in the Netherlands (Lagerwey, 1997) also touches on new developments: quality, socialisation and internationalisation are among the key words.

At the end of 1999, the Beroepsvereniging voor Communicatie stood back to consider the position of the Association. The executive identified a broadening and fragmentation of the field. Specialisation would grow, not least through the options afforded by information and communication technology. In the light of this development, it is understandable that professional practitioners will be ever less inclined to bind themselves to institutions. For the Professional Communication Association this means that the linking of demand (from members) and supply (from the Association) increasingly must comply with conditions that are independent of time, place and event.

There is also a growing demand for explicit knowledge; the numerous specialisms are without exception under high pressure to deliver quality and results. The areas covered by each specialisation in the field appear to be ever increasing; simply mastering a skill will suffice ever less. For example, some understanding is required of the organisational issue that leads to a specialism being brought into play. A trend can be detected for horizontal
specialisation being accompanied by a vertical integration of organisation, management and communication aspects.

It is clear that the increased demand for knowledge arises from developments within and outside the field. On the one hand there is a growing need for physical contacts with ‘peer groups’, but there is also a need for contacts that can be activated remotely and through the intermediary of electronics. We can see a duality arising here between high-touch and high-tech, which probably could be served more from a platform facility than from a conventional organisation. The Association’s provisional conclusion is that this will develop as a knowledge platform with two components: on the one hand the smoothly operating specialist groups, and on the other the body of knowledge which is currently being developed. The two components are linked, which means that there is both a physical and a virtual infrastructure for knowledge development and transfer.

2.6 Profile of the communication profession

The results of a monitor on communications management and consultants were published in 1999 under the responsibility of the Beroepsvereniging voor Communicatie (Van Ruler, 1999). The intention is to repeat this monitor every three years and if possible expand it. Communications management and the agency sector were both investigated. The relationship between supply and demand in the consultancy world was also reviewed and some striking developments were identified regarding feminisation of the field.

As regards the specialised communication function within organisations (communications management), 60% have a separate department where communication activities are coordinated. In only 22% of them do they cover all forms of communication (internal, external and marketing communication). The department generally enjoys a high position within the organisation, but only half of them are managed by an official focused on communication.

The average official responsible for communication is a 43-year-old man, with a high level of education, but not a specific one. The person responsible for communication who also has an appropriate job title (the ‘genuine’ communications manager) is a 34-year-old, a women with a higher level of education, and often specifically trained.

A cautious estimate of the size of the population group within organisations reveals that there are at least 15,000 people who are responsible for communication tasks. There are on average six communications officials in each organisation. More than half of those responsible for communication have a structural budget. These budgets vary markedly, with an average of NLG 2.8 million for marketing communication, and NLG 0.8 million for external and internal communication. If there is simply a total budget, the size falls to an average of NLG 660,000. Structural budgets for communication within organisations are collectively estimated at NLG 5 billion within the Netherlands, according to cautious estimates.

Within the agency sector the concept of ‘communication’ is preferred as the designation of activities. One third (33%) opt for this; other options are advertising (17%), public relations (14%) and ‘creative’ (14%). This is an average of one-man agencies and the larger agencies. More than two thirds of agencies in the Netherlands are one-man operations.

The estimated turnover of the agency sector is NLG 17.5 billion and estimated agency sales NLG 9 billion, in other words significantly more than the structural budgets of the organisation. The highest sales are generated in the agencies that define themselves as marketing communication agencies; these agencies are frequently registered with the Chamber of Commerce under the heading ‘advertising’. Average agency sales are NLG 2.9 million, but almost half of them have sales up to NLG 0.3 million.

Fee income of a minimum of NLG 150,000 per consultant is charged in the Netherlands to be viable. On this basis, 46% of the larger agencies and 65% of the one-man agencies are not viable. In other words, the agency sector is not a financially healthy sector. What is true is that the larger the agency, the more profitable it is. But the critical lower limit isn’t reached until you have 7 staff or more.

A recent agency survey found that fee income per employee was between NLG 153,000 and NLG 262,000 among the top ten in the Netherlands. In general, NLG 200,000 is seen as a good target figure. With total fee income of NLG 92 million, the average of the top ten comes out at NLG 9 million per agency.

The agency sector employs some 25,000 people, whose average age is 37. The average agency consultant has enjoyed a high level of education: 68% has education at university or senior vocational level. Almost a quarter have had specific communication training. The younger generation has undergone such training in significantly larger numbers than the older generation.

Demand and supply constitute an interesting aspect of this study. Those responsible for communication within organisations expect support in operational duties (design, marketing communication, generating copy) and in the education field (training in communication skills). The top five among the agencies reveal that they mainly offer copy generation, creation and concept development, but also public relations and marketing communication. Supply and demand thus do agree to a certain extent. Both parties also agree that the added value of contracting in an agency lies in the additional capacity (59%) and the expertise that is lacking in house (56%).

Finally, the survey reveals a further striking development, which is the feminisation of the field. The distribution is 54% men/46% women among organisations and 53% men/47% women among agencies. When it comes to training and courses, the proportion of women has been at between 70 and 80% for some years now, whilst there are also increasing numbers of women with children who continue to work. This factor alone will feminise the
field. There is more, however. If communication is seen as a specialist position in the organisation, it is more likely to be filled by women than men. Communication as a coherent package is managed and shaped by women in particular.

Other studies (including Van Ruler, 1996) have shown that women earn significantly less than their male colleagues in the communication field. There is a rule of thumb which says that the more a profession is exercised by women than by men, the lower its standing and remuneration (Sullerot, 1979 and others). This is confirmed by the study described here. If the person responsible for communication is a woman, she will be relatively lower in the organisation. There is therefore also a down side to the feminisation of the field.

2.7 Conclusion

Communication in the Netherlands operates from a specific context which is determined by our national identity. Democratic thinking in the Netherlands has not only led to public relations and information merging, but also to the development of two-way communication processes. The efforts to achieve openness and consensus are connected with what is known as the polder model, in which all the parties work towards effectiveness and equilibrium. Communication is, however, also determined by the role of the press and the impact of public opinion. The profession is most explicitly experienced in a social context. At the same time, the field attempts to provide a sound answer to socio-cultural developments, as described in Chapter 1.

At the turn of the century, it is clear that involvement in society is occupying a central position in the communication field. A position which also has an international dimension to it. Liability and responsibility in communication do not stop at national borders.

2.8 Bibliography


About the author

After obtaining a diploma in engineering at Wageningen Agricultural University in 1954, Eric Denig worked for 33 years in government (Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Foreign Affairs), and for 5 years as Senior Public Affairs Consultant at an international agency. Since 1992 he has worked via Denig Consultancy for a limited number of clients in the Netherlands and abroad. Apart from his membership of various national and international professional organisations, Eric Denig is an Honorary member of the NGPR, Honorary Vice President of the CERP and IPRA Council member. He is chairman of the Stichting Platform Beeldvorming Nederland. He also regularly publishes on aspects of communications and was editor of A Geography of Public Relations Trends (Nijhoff, 1985). He also penned the books Macht en informatie (Staatsuitgeverij, 1977) and Imago van Holland (Coutinho, 1991).

3 Cultivating networks

Aspects of international communication

Hubert Wisse and Lex Schoevers

3.1 Introduction

There are various ways of establishing international communication. Imagine, you’re a Dutch PR agency and your Dutch client wants to enter foreign markets and enlists your support. That would appear to be an open-and-shut case. As against that, a foreign company may bring in your communications expertise for his launch on the Dutch market. You will then be communicating with Dutch target groups, but there are clearly international aspects to that communication. Finally, there may actually be a global account, if a client asks your agency for support in several countries/markets simultaneously. With or without central management control.

The Netherlands has always had good professional PR agencies. In the sixties and seventies, Dutch agencies already had a good experience of what international PR ought to be like. With the clear Anglo-Saxon roots in the field, it is no surprise that communication as a branch of sports in Europe first caught on in the United Kingdom. Democracy and an open spirit are pre-requisites for flourishing communication. And that is why the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands embraced PR after the United Kingdom. The Dutch are ideally made for international communication. They move easily internationally, often play a non-threatening and mediating role and are masters of their languages.
PR increasingly has to deal with internationalisation. Naturally, at the very level of clients operating internationally and PR consultancies operating internationally, approaching the market in different structures. Over and above this, governments are also frequently seeking to profile themselves in other countries, for example by entering into trade links or attracting investors. Furthermore, the world has become a complex global village as a result of the development of ICT and the growth of the Internet in particular. As a result, communication soon becomes international. The ability to penetrate the complexity of the global village does, however, demand some understanding of what people in the world have in common, but also increasingly what separates people.

As a local agency cannot serve a single client with communication at more than one place at the same time, international networks have come about. Practising international communication, let alone managing it, is impossible without a network. In global terms, two structures of PR networks can be identified. On the one hand there are the groups where all agencies are owned by one and the same holding company, and on the other networks in which independent agencies have come together. There is also a third network and that is the client’s communication network.

### 3.2 Bringing in an international network

Why does a company operating internationally bring in a PR agency or network operating internationally and what does the client expect of this agency or network?

As the reputation of a company becomes exposed in several parts of the world to the image that employees, local residents, shareholders, customers, governments and social groups hold of it, it becomes more important to monitor the reputation everywhere. In practice it is found quite frequently that the PR department of many multinational companies in the country/markets where they operate is undermanned. It is frequently a problem for companies to find the right people everywhere in the world. Knowledge of local markets is therefore contracted in. Furthermore, clients are increasingly seeking to regionalise their global communication. The message is the same everywhere, but the presentation differs by market and/or culture. That’s why companies are increasingly looking for professional support from PR agencies with knowledge of specific services, specific sectors and specific markets. They are looking for integrated solutions, with the consultancy able to offer several services over several markets.

The challenge to company and agency alike is to be able to think ‘globally’, whilst you are only physically present at a single point. First and foremost this requires a PR consultant to be clearly international in his approach. An agency that operates internationally employs people with international experience. Clients explicitly ask for it. Thinking globally also demands an international attitude on the part of the PR consultancy – quite apart from the experience. As it so happens that people are not born with international knowledge and experience, training, education, internship and international exchange of consultants within a group or network are vital. It enhances the quality and consistency of the network. It is precisely that consistency that clients need most. At the same time, inconsistency of service is the largest stumbling block to clients in international PR. Why does a company operating internationally bring in a PR agency or network operating internationally and what does the client expect of this agency or network?

The groups and networks have become ever larger and increasing numbers of independent agencies are also seeking international cooperation. The groups that have the benefit of clearly operating as a single local brand have many clients among the top of the Fortune 500 companies. These are the large multinationals who have to be constantly alert around the world to protecting their image. Protecting the brand is priority number one. Large groups such as Hill & Knowlton are able to present a clearly visible identical own brand world wide. With their centrally managed form of organisation they are identifiable to the multinational who wants an overview and
manageability, even if the world is becoming ever so complex. A network like Worldcom Public Relations for example is attracting a great many technology-oriented clients in practice. These companies are used to operating very flexibly and like to choose such a flexible communication network.

The way in which the companies organise their international PR themselves differs markedly. The majority of the multinationals have organised their communication geographically, a minority by division or a mix of the two. Management from the companies is therefore very different and is dictated by its own organisational structure. According to one model, it is the head office that determines the message, whilst another talks of two-way communication with common decisions in which unit or head office both have a voice. With the ‘head office decides’ method the messages are probably more consistent, but there is less flexibility to respond to regional and cultural differences. The reverse will apply with the ‘local units have some say’ method.

There is a parallel here with the groups and independent networks of PR agencies. With the independent networks, the network is built bottom up by autonomous partners on the basis of local-market knowledge. Every agency is its own boss and there should first be a consensus on the question of which control can be handled centrally, before it can actually be put in place. With the groups, central control goes without saying. That makes it easier to work in accordance with global standards – an important instrument in efforts to achieve consistency of service. The groups therefore claim that they are rapidly able to organise and mobilise the expertise required for a client thanks to central knowledge systems. The networks in turn function with assembled task forces with the specialism required, but the knowledge of those specialisms mainly came about because the partners had been collaborating for years and know one another’s strengths well. The knowledge therefore exists among the people themselves and by definition is not accommodated in a knowledge system. A global knowledge system or working in accordance with standards can only come about in a network after the partners have consented. But whether independent or owned: to create a strong network, the network must ultimately prevail above individual or regional interest.

Groups and networks alike have a clearly different image. The positioning of the two types of network vis a vis the market has a part to play here.

Partners in independent networks emphasise the benefit that international clients get to deal with senior people throughout the world who know their own home market inside out and as entrepreneurs are accustomed to looking after themselves and delivering results. The independent agencies claim a different benefit in their network links: price. As a result of the absence of a heavily manned head office, the overheads of an independent network are significantly lower, and that benefits the tariffs for the client.

Owned groups claim that they invest in improving cost efficiency and work on knowledge systems and international standards that span the network. Groups and networks alike have the same final objective, however. And that is the aforementioned endeavour to achieve global consistency of service and genuine global account management. The groups will have to get there by listening more to local noises. The networks will have to work on cost efficiency via central structures. Ultimately, both the groups and the networks will develop towards a form of international cooperation in which the mutual differences that have arisen from their original ownership structures become ever smaller. Groups and networks converge so to speak into a form and method in which both profit from both cost efficiency and a global organisation as the strength of the local focus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agencies in the Netherlands form part of an international group or affiliated to an international network.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bikker Communicatie Groep bv</td>
</tr>
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<td>Winkelman &amp; Van Hessen</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brodeur Schoep &amp; van der Toorn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Van Sluis Communicatie bv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bennis Porter Novelli</td>
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<td>Hill &amp; Knowlton</td>
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<td>Burson-Marsteller</td>
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</table>
Globalisation, the creation of an internal European market and the growth of the Internet are bringing about the internationalisation of companies and the agencies that provide them with communications advice. Few sectors of industry have felt the impact of globalisation so dramatically as the communications sector. How do you manage communication in an ever more rapid and complex network economy? The ever-expanding Internet and the possible applications which appear virtually endless have not only accelerated globalisation, they also offer the tools for communicating world wide and managing communication around the world. That makes communication the essence of a new economy. Or as Internet guru Kevin Kelly puts it: Communication is not only a sector of the economy. Communication is the economy.

What sort of consequences do all these developments have for the future of international PR networks. A discussion about the cultivation of networks with two Dutch exponents of an owned and an independent network: Lex Schoevers, Executive Vice president of Hill and Knowlton International, and Hubert Wisse, Director of Wisse Kommunikatie/Worldcom The Netherlands and board member of Worldcom Europe

HW: “You first have to look at what international communication actually represents nowadays. In a small country like the Netherlands, communication soon becomes international. On the other hand, you can also wonder whether communication within the European Union is international. When you’re then talking about bridging language and cultural difference it isn’t, but when you are talking about the delivery of services from one member state to another it certainly is international. Look, on the one hand you have the tendency towards a de-Dutchification of companies and on the other regionalisation. Internationalisation goes hand in hand with regionalisation.”

LS: “Over a ten-year period Europe has become a factor of importance and that while everyone during the eighties was predicting that Asia and the Japanese management model would come to predominate. The Asia crisis brought that to a grinding halt, however, and the Internet is changing competitive relationships worldwide. Look, the globalisation that came about in the eighties will simply continue to further develop, but in fact that globalisation has proved to be more an Americanisation of the world economy. That is simply a result of the fact that the Americans have the best franchise formulae. They establish strong brands around the world. And if you want to be globally strong as a PR network, you need a strong base. And that is to be found in America, because the Americans set the tone. So you can’t just focus on the Netherlands, that’s a very parochial approach, although there are analysts who expect the first decade of the 21st century to become the Dutch Decade. Our polder model allegedly will become the driving force in the international arena.”

HW: “Worldcom has also opted to set up its head office and secretariat in the United States. With 48 branches in the US, we are strongly represented there as an independent network. Nevertheless, it is not the case that you develop an international network so as to be able to offer the same thing around the world. Strong franchise formulae, ok, but I do not believe there is something like the McDonaldisation of public relations.”

LS: “No, that simply won’t wash. It is not for nothing that McDonalds specially introduced the McKroket for the Dutch market. The real problem that globalisation entails to my mind is not the benefit of the economies of scale, but the benefit that you achieve by managing and coordinating knowledge information – regardless of your size. New digital technologies such as e-mail, Intranets and the like allow you to be large and small at the same time, because it is interconnected. How do you manage knowledge worldwide? That’s the key to the success of networking.”

HW: “The future of groups and networks lies in the endeavour to actually be able to operate on a world scale. And a network is more than a collection of points on a world map. This means that you must be able to work
international as effectively as you do nationally and be able to offer the same consistent level of service. The sharing of knowledge, for example via company-Intranet and other knowledge management systems is vital here, for there is no lack of knowledge in the network, but rather a lack of access to that knowledge.”

LS: “Certainly and sharing knowledge worldwide about best practices, for example, is somewhat different from attempting to use the same marketing methods everywhere in the world because consumers are increasingly resembling one another. It is precisely the regional differences between consumers that are interesting for communication. The fact is that with a group such as Hill & Knowlton operating worldwide, you only have a generally global account in 15% of all cases, where you service a customer throughout the world through centralised control. Being able to offer the same service globally without any gaps, that’s where things will have to go in the future.”

HW: “If you really are wanting to provide consistent service in your network, all agencies and regions in the network must be equally good. That means for example that it is more logical to invest in weaker regions and agencies than in stronger ones, because it is precisely by strengthening the weak links that you increase the strength of the total network. Apart from investing in knowledge management, investing in the network also implies investing in people in the network.”

LS: “But that starts by pooling knowledge in the network. And that means providing internal training and education. And ultimately, all those investments in people are all focused to create communications professionals who really do think and work in a global manner. The success of a network is determined by the quality of the local agencies, in other words: being locally strong is a balance between international standards and local market situations. For in international PR work, it is primarily the softer issues that raise obstacles, such as lack of knowledge of other cultures if you have to work beyond your own boundaries. I myself couldn’t get by without people who do not have international experience. With internationalisation and international networks, a new type of communications expert is called for. And I would also venture to claim that the Dutch can do that better than others. Our country has by nature a small home market and as a trading nation a view naturally focused on other countries. The Dutch therefore have the innate flexibility to deal with several countries and cultures. I do not believe there is any better basis for nourishing international communication.”

About the authors

Hubert Wisse was born in Indonesia in 1941. After working for various engineering consultancies as from 1966, it was his view that industry needed specialised professionals for public relations and corporate communications. In 1972, he started work as Public Relations advisor. After working for various clients for ten years, he set up Wisse Kommunikatie in 1982. As from 1990, he worked on international projects as a partner in the international Worldcom Public Relations network. He has been active for six years as a Board Member of the European region and within the Group board. He is also national coordinator for the Netherlands for the IPRA.

Lex Schoevers is Board Chairman of Hill and Knowlton Nederland B.V. He is also Executive Vice President of Hill and Knowlton International and Chairman of Hill and Knowlton Benelux. Apart from his responsibility for the H&K offices in Amsterdam and Brussels, he is a member of the European Management Team of Hill and Knowlton Europe. He also fulfils the role of Country Manager for the WPP Group (including O&M, Ogilvy One, JWT, Research Int., Conquest and EWA) in the Netherlands. As from 1988 he has represented Dutch public relations consultancies in ICO, the international umbrella organisation for the public relations agency sector. From 1994 to 1996, he was chairman of ICO. Before entering the service of Hill and Knowlton in 1981, he was Managing Director at Carl Byoir & Associates in Amsterdam for six years.

4 Moral models in public relations

Ethical challenges in communications management

Anne van der Meiden

4.1 Introduction

At a discussion evening for young managers on ethical problems in business, I challenged them to describe a single concrete moral problem that they came up against in their practice and could not satisfactorily resolve. We would then attempt together to find the common themes running through those problems and concentrate our discussion on them. Some of them looked around slightly surprised and claimed that they weren’t aware of any ethical problems. They abided by the rules. The others requested them to stay with it, as there was evidently a lot to learn from them. A whole set of concrete dilemmas were then brought out and after half an hour we identified three main themes: in every case it was clearly a question of credibility, openness and responsibility.

Credibility proved to be linked to reliability: for example, employees read in the newspaper about the salary increase that management had awarded themselves and on the same day, a strict internal missive appeared saying that there would have to be a sharp eye on costs. Or: the institution attracts funds, but the reservoir of money for projects becomes ever larger. You have to keep asking for money, otherwise you disappear from the publicity. Various examples of dual morality and doublespeak were put forward: two sets of criteria on
appointments, holding back information, manipulating annual reports, applying for subsidies for projects which can easily pay for themselves.

The second issue was openness. One example: a manager is found to have allowed personal interests to weigh more heavily in the balance than company interests. There is a closing of ranks at the top, all questions relating to the matter are waived aside. Or: internally there is an embargo on corporate errors.

Finally responsibility. There is an irritating culture of blame in the organisation: that’s where the guilty person is. Who can be challenged on what? And: an annoying smooth-tongued culture of apology. Mistakes are too readily accepted.

In short: it turned into a lively evening of frustration and rancour and a lot of hilarity. And in the background the unavoidable truth: every individual moral conviction could at any time conflict with the moral codes of the company required at that moment, the sector in which the company works, the morals of the day and the immediate social environment.

4.2 Public relations and ethics

Discussion of ethical questions has always been limited in the world of public relations, both in terms of depth and scale. There are clear reasons for this. Practitioners of public relations or communications management as a rule are busy sorting problems, plans, campaigns and strategies. They come up against ethics (sometimes) on the verge along their paths like traffic signs, but not as theoretical concepts that challenge them. Ethical discussion that I experienced over the years in the CERP or IPRA always revolved around questions of demarcation: how far can we go? How can we avoid being caught? How can we conceal that problem? Where are the social boundaries to acceptability? How are our interests best served? How can we display our social responsibility? (Van der Meiden and Fauconnier, 321 et. seq.).

There is little sign of a more subdued reflection on the moral nature of action in public relations itself, its positioning within business ethics or the moral equipment of the communications manager. Nor is there virtually anything to be found regarding the movement of boundaries and norms and values in the trade press or congress programmes. All the more so in society!

Is it perhaps typically Dutch to put (or wish to put) ethical questions so explicitly? I don’t think so. The globalisation of the world via the international communication systems, by business networks, by scientific traffic and by the global networks of professional organisations make it impossible for ethical discussions to be isolated in a single country. Naturally, it is true that cultures differ clearly in their approach to core ethical problems. To put it another way: in one country, the need to raise the moral discussion early in decision-making processes is less polite than in another country. Even today one encounters in practice moral discussion being placed at the end of a process and then usually along the lines of: Will this cause any harm? What’s the risk of being caught? Will moral negative aspects be assigned to our image? Practice has taught me that this line of thinking is still often present among Dutch managers as well. You have to cover yourself against moral attacks. What will your defence tactics then be? How can we make something acceptable in public opinion when it clearly raises moral issues?

To put it another way: morality by no means figures first and foremost and is certainly not the deciding factor in determining policy or practical action. Every reason therefore to look at the state of the art in ethics, as we see them incorporated into public relations or communications management.

We put a few questions: which moral (under-)currents and options affect decision- making and decision-making processes of institutions and companies in our era. To put it in popular terms: what does one allow by way of moral participation, by which norms and values one is guided and what does it mean for the practice of public relations.

4.3 Ethics and morals

We occasionally use the terms ethics and morals interchangeably in practice. Actually, you can’t really do that. We would do well to save the concept of ethics for two things. First of all ethics stands for the theory, the scientific discipline concerned with human action and which looks at what people clearly consider good or bad, right and wrong. But ethics can also mean: a set of norms and values, to which a professional group for example adheres. You can for example refer to the ethics of advertising, estate agents and doctors. The latter is approximately the same as what we call morals, a series of codes, written down or otherwise. Morals have everything to do with what our values and norms prescribe for us in practical terms. Those values are studied and formulated by the discipline of ethics. There is therefore the ethics of public relations and by that we mean a description of what sort of basic norms and values are at play in the field. These norms and values in the field refer almost always to the quality of relationships. If one advises a company, some way or other it is always a question of relationships to be maintained. That maintenance inevitably conceals moral decisions: what is good and what is wrong in our relationship? What is in our enlightened self-interest? The moral package of public relation thus covers a listing of the collective applications of those norms and values in various relationships applied in practice. Etiquette is something very different, a word that is readily associated with ethics as a sort of ‘small brother of ethics’. Etiquette is a collective term for practical rules of politeness in human transactions. This covers the agreements mutually considered desirable, the daily greeting, the lifestyle, the way they are manifest in the relationships and care in language and image.

4.4 Crisis in morals?
The claim is frequently heard: norms and values are on the decline. ‘Morals’ (Sitte, habits, customs) are being eroded. An old Roman adage read: o tempora, o mores! (o times, o morals). This reproach of decline has always existed. The elderly are frequently inclined to identify ‘loose’ morals among the young. Sometimes they’re right, sometimes not. Usually their verdicts are not based on morals of the past. Times distort memories and experiences.

What is meant precisely when it is claimed that norms and values are being eroded? A number of things:
- people are no longer paying heed to ethical injunctions and centuries-old rules of behaviour, that always applied and will apply and which are external in origin;
- the entire system of civil liberal morals is collapsing as a result of greed and hedonism;
- people are paying ever less attention to one another and more frequently placing self-interest above the interests of others;
- the influence of the churches and governments on moral behaviour is weakening. A gap has come about between theory and life. What struck me during the discussion with the managers was that many of the middle representatives among their ranks openly admitted that they were able to draw ever fewer guidelines for day-to-day activities from their own faith (to which they had remained loyal). They had become ‘do-it-yourself merchants’ in matters of morality. In general, people preferred to set the boundaries themselves, space was sacrosanct and sanctions were dismissed as old fashioned, and what is more people were more prepared to compromise and deal.
- there was less questioning of what was allowed in principle (in faith, law and environment), and greater heed was paid to the risk of being caught. That brought a glossing-over of desirable behaviour closer home (all in the same boat).

And so we could go on with the list of complaints. There really is decadence, a dropping or falling away from norms, according to this reasoning. The problem can also be formulated in a wider and historically more understandable context. The history of morals, in other words every day ethical practice, reveals waves and trends. Furthermore, there are sometimes hiatuses and paradoxical developments. However gradually Victorian morals grew, and that included business, it came to an abrupt end when the first World War devastated Europe. What our parents and grandparents considered normal, in other words in accordance with the norms of the day, formulated by God or society, was desacralised at a rapid pace, deprived of its holiness and cut off from external routes. The troughs of the hesitation lie in amongst all the trend waves. If we describe the peaks of certainties in morals as fundamentalists, the troughs are the domains of uncertainty, pluraliformity, the broadness of post-modernist thinking. We currently find ourselves in that valley of paradoxes. In the past, sons stood up against their fathers when it came to morally responsible behaviour, now the fathers are sometimes opposed to themselves, because the speed of circulation of moral concepts is sometimes so great. All this served to make a discussion of ethical aspects of communications management laborious and confusing. I therefore can do little more than put forward a few models of ethical thinking, which I encounter on the basis of my own experience in my consultancy practice in public relations. The number of requests for advice on moral questions has been rising recently and the demand for second opinions on reports put forward by consultancies when it comes to questions of moral matters, (Van der Meiden, 1994, passim) is rising at the same pace. In this paper, I attempt to demarcate a number of ethical points of departure that I regularly encounter from my own research and consultancy experience. They may well differ, but there are several overlaps and interfaces.

4.5 Seven ethical thinking models for practical morals

The restoration model
The calls for a return to the old moral sense, the time of certainty, clarity and right paths, can be heard everywhere. Often with a decided doggedness. As if it would be possible to return to old models! A call for strong enforcement of the rules, more severe penalties, etc. is understandable, given the rising criminality and violence. The tone in which these demands are made, however, often resembles bar talk. In discussions with businessmen, I often hear violent outrage about what is going wrong morally in society. People then point their right index finger all around. If I then attempt to indicate that their own company is directly or indirectly participating in that decadence, for example, often unwillingly, caught up in fraudulent proceedings, testing out the boundaries of environmental laws or applying purchasing practices which are difficult to penetrate, this is dismissed with the claim: that’s a different field. In other words: everything that is threatening must be morally converted. La morale des autres! The old values created safety and security, the excessive freedoms are corrupting morals, apart from the much greater freedoms that are demanded for doing unlimited business. As Alex Dumas defines it: morals are what you demand of others. This line of thinking reflects the old tensions in liberal moral thinking: one is very concerned with the general interest and general welfare, but one’s own world of moral decision-making must remain very broad. Verstraeten and Gerwen give examples of this line of thinking in their study of ethical business (1994, 12-30). In the first phases of the development of organisational ethics, particularly in the United States, there are some nice examples of businessmen who are very particular when it comes to general morals, but who use different antennae for picking up signals in business dealings. The calls for return to the old norms and values often implies a sort of lip service, a cheap, slogan-like moral appeal, which the advocates themselves cannot deliver in actual business practice.

Experiential ethics
The term ‘piece-meal ethics’ or moral plausibility thinking is often used for this model of moral thinking. The line of reasoning is as follows: as it is extraordinary difficult in day-to-day practice to take ethical decisions
along fixed lines in an ever-changing context, ethical decisions must be described and argued case by case. The underpinning for a decision is then documented by individual situation. After a series of decisions, an attempt is made to identify the guiding theme in the decision-making. This method is applied here and there in hospitals by physicians who have to take morally charged decisions under ever-changing circumstances. The method is also applicable to industry, provided one is prepared to jointly evaluate after a series of decisions. A sort of ‘moris prudence’ is established in bits and pieces. My experience with this method has taught me that people display a high measure of willingness to rationally and emotionally substantiate their decisions, and are less stringent in their verdicts on the actions of others.

**Sorry ethics**

This phenomenon, also called apology ethics, occurs for example if higher business interests are promoted by morally-politically charged apologies for a particular behaviour by one country towards another. A concrete example: if a Prince or Prime Minister visits a country, accompanied by a trade mission, it is appreciated if he or she offers public apologies to the host country for actions by the visiting country in the (distant) past. Examples are the fairly recent visit by Queen Beatrix to Indonesia (offering excuses for the deeds of the Netherlands during the two police actions after the Second World War), Clinton’s visit to Africa (apologies for the fact that so many people from Africa were sold as slaves to America). If the apology is accepted, the way is paved for better negotiations. The actual intention of being sorry is not so much genuine sorrow at what once happened in the past, but a PR type ‘opening up’ for better business. We are dealing here more with a form of etiquette, cordial dealings, than with a form of authentic ethical action. The fact is that reprehensible actions call for sanctions but that does not apply in these situations. Sorry ethics are also spinning off into easy slogans in ordinary social transactions. No longer do you need to have any regret in order to say sorry. The calls themselves take the place. This is quite definitely a degeneration of authentic morals.

**Camouflage ethics**

Numerous companies attempt to place friendly yellow filters in front of their image by such means as donations and major sponsoring activities. Well-known examples are the Benetton ads and the Body Shop practices. In themselves, one can scarcely condemn the linking of actions for good purposes to familiarity with a name, but there is a great danger that this social hedonism evokes a suggestion that we are dealing here with a company with a great sense of social responsibility. The image is that of virtue, which the company would gladly have us believe. The company ‘is upright’. The discussion becomes interesting if we attempt to apply an extra dimension or integration into the marketing mix via the techniques of social marketing. Charity then equates to effective public relations. It ‘pays off’. Increasingly, we can observe companies looking for human interest projects, with which they would like to associate their name. Provided this does not happen on an excessive scale, there is little objection morally speaking. If it is not being done to throw camouflage nets over wrong actions. At the time, the example of the setting-up of the Ford foundation was often described as a camouflage action to cover or gloss over Ford’s dubious social actions.

**Situational ethics**

Not to be confused with experiential ethics! In situational ethics, it is theoretically impossible to proceed from fixed norms that are applicable in all situations. Situational ethics are based on the principle that norms are multi-applicable, but in a way which means there need not be any congruence between moral decisions in various areas of life. A successful businessman who maintains high standards in his business dealings need not apply them automatically in his marital life or keep to traffic regulations. Nor is that possible, for it is the situation that decides which norms and values are applied legitimately. One can even differ in application by client. Consider what that means for public relations, as an instrument of management for strategic maintenance of relationships: one can act morally in a different manner towards one client compared to another. The supply of information to shareholders may look morally different from that to the staff or the press. Every morally charged decision is unique for each individual client. Comparisons, as referred to in experiential ethics, are not fruitful. One example: ‘Orders are orders’ can never apply equally and simultaneously in all situations. Situations may grant dispensation from certain commitments.

**Double moral standards**

This concept is closely related to the previous model, but there is one essential difference. In situational ethics there is often a careful weighing-up, based on a creed or attitude. This need not be the case with double moral standards, for the areas of life in which the morals have to be applied are separate. A religious businessman cannot possibly act fully on a Monday in the manner prescribed to him by the Sunday commandments. He can attempt to transfer something of the mentality of those commandments, but competition and economic interest prevent him acting in a rectilinear manner. That’s a fact. He respects one domain with its required moral injunctions, but also asks respect for the fact that in day-to-day practice he sometimes can’t act other than he does. ‘If I don’t, the competitors will do it. If I pay higher prices for raw materials, my profit will disappear, I keep to the commandments, but I can’t possibly comply with the speed limit. I’m against war, but the arms industry is a very important employer. We are a Christian company and don’t work on Sundays. We have found a Muslim who mans our service line on Sundays’. I therefore apply different groups of standards in various domains and you get accustomed to that, a conscientious businessman once told me. There is nothing against a mission statement, which sets out the main moral principles of the company’s actions, but the reality of life often demands different routes to be travelled.
Responsibility ethics

This form of ethics is a plausible variant on some of the models described above. The key word says it all: wanting to and being able to render account for action is what decides the moral content of those actions. I make choices in my work, sometimes I regret it later, but I can justify them (Merks, 26).

Is my reply or decision always the same and can it be reduced to the same principles? Not that. Sometimes I have to give and take and deviate, but I also have a story to tell. I don’t have a story where there are decided errors, extremes (such as option schemes that make the managers extremely rich), wrong additives to products or unacceptably high expense declarations. That is not to say that I can avoid everything that goes wrong, but it is my aim. If I can’t justify it, I have to refuse or leave. It goes without saying that these responsibility ethics often display the sympathetic face of a sort of embarrassment ethics: I don’t always have the answer and I say so quite openly. The ethics of embarrassment.

4.5 Considerations and conclusions

1. The basic principles of the sociological description of Durkheim’s morals still apply to a significant extent. The society that generates morals. Norms and values are social facts, which regulate society so to speak. People look for their own pattern within those norms and values. (Goddijn, 7-20). They enter into commitments, rules and make agreements. These agreements make people into moral beings. That all sounds very well, but society has become slightly more complex since Durkheim’s publication (1917). The fact is that the regulations have become multi-interpretable. We can describe commitments and desirabilities, lay them down in codes, but that says little about the power of action to give direction. There is a further factor to add. The complexity of modern society means that companies and major service institutions are becoming increasingly interwoven with society. As Verstraeten and Gerwen put it: the company is not a purely technical instrument, a black box, no longer private property (1994, 23). Society is part of the company when the company breathes through the lungs of society. And that includes the moral lungs. For communications managers, the question is whether they fulfill the role of beating hearts in this breathing in and out. In other words: does the communications manager have a guardian or watchdog function in the organisation? Is he or she in the first instance the person who raises the warning finger and calls: You can’t sell that? And is he or she saying that on the grounds of principle or pragmatism?

The confusion surrounding morality is clearly caused in part by the fact that large groups of people still think in terms of commitment-ethical, deontological norms and values. In those norms, they sense a control system which comes at them externally and monitors them. This may be a controlling God, but equally a controlling society, a legal machinery or a social collective disapproval. Other probably equally large groups place the original strength of morals more in the accessibility of the objectives we all desire, teleological morals. In public relations I come up against the latter principles more frequently than the former. This need not mean that the later are more principled than the former. It can be claimed very much as a matter of principle that the application of norms and values must be driven by the ideal to be achieved or by the solution to a particular problem. The objective never justifies the means, but it does guide them.

If institutions and companies are facing moral dilemmas, I notice that they accord higher moral priorities to the objective to be achieved than to the moral aspects of the instruments designed to lead to that objective. That is a pragmatic interpretation of morals. In public relations it is often more a question of what is feasible, the compromise, the attainable and the practical, than the principles, the permitted and the defensible.

2. The discussion of the ethics of public relations is considerably livelier among modern-day students and young managers than ten or fifteen years ago. One can detect a welcome openness and an eagerness to discuss the problems with one another. That is a major gain.

At the start of the annual series of lectures on ethics and public relations, I have pulled off the same trick every year. I asked the assembly of several hundred students to answer the question of what they would do as professional consultants if a large and internationally famous brothel were to ring them and ask them to provide permanent consultancy, for a considerable fee. When the hands were raised, I could count the same 50-50% split year in year out, again between male and female students. The arguments in favour were always the same: business is business, morally speaking I am reasonably high-minded, so I can make a better job than a colleague who is morally less well equipped. I am not providing public relations for a product, but for an organisation. Through my efforts I ensure that the business acquires a good name and that compels the company to maintain the product at a high level. The opponents were always equally clear: Immoral behaviour is taboo, so don’t talk about it and certainly don’t promote it. I was able to perform the same trick with the question of whether they would want to or be able to advise a large cigarette manufacturer. The same ratios, the same arguments. By which I simply want to say that we still drink from different moral sources. And that’s where the up-and-coming managers at the start of this paper find themselves. Or was my question ethically justified?

4.6 Bibliography


About the author
Anne van der Meiden (1929) graduated in 1972 in the philosophy of ethics with a thesis on ‘the Ethics on propaganda’ (Mensen Winnen, 1972). Over a 20-year career, he has held various positions in information, publicity and public relations. Between 1973 and 1987 he lectured in mass communication and public relations at Utrecht University. He lectured (part-time) at the same university as extraordinary professor of Public Relations from 1978 to 1994. As from 1994, he was advising organisations and companies in particular on PR issues. An important part of his day-to-day work lies in research and giving lectures. He is also translating the Bible into the Twente language (a Dutch dialect).

5 Integration, interaction and accessibility
Developments in government communication

Agnes Gomis

5.1 Introduction
Recent decades have witnessed a movement within government communication away from sender-oriented information to more two-sided communication. This development followed in the wake of administrative and social changes in Dutch society. Changes that have led to a different positioning of the Dutch government and thus to a different role for government communication and the way it is shaped. Apart from administrative and social changes, the digital information era has also left its mark on the government and on government communication. Greater and more rapid accessibility of government information, and an increasing shift away from sender-driven to demand-driven information is the consequence.

The expectation is that these developments and changes will also continue in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Dutch society is characterised by (cultural) pluriformity, contemporary individualism, a collection of sub interests and ever-changing social structures. Nevertheless, beyond post-modernism, there is a need for solidarity, tolerance and compassion, for a bridge between freedom and equality and between rights and commitments. The search for a new foundation in this global village has started. There is a multi-dimensional reality with a growing demand for direction from the government. In the process, tight government control is no longer appropriate. What is required is a government strategy that is a mixture between individualism and collectivism. A control which in the Netherlands is known by the term of the ‘polder model’ and internationally has acquired the label of ‘the third way’. A government which sets out the frameworks and facilitates processes, which normalises in certain fields, but which primarily promotes and supports social discussion and involvement.

5.2 Integration, interaction and accessibility

In this complex context, the government has to develop and implement its policy. One-sided information from the sender’s perspective is a thing of the past. The government is increasingly seeking policy solutions in interaction with the public and companies. The implementation of legislation and regulations is becoming a matter of tailored solutions. In the new millennium, communication is being used ever more as an integral element of policy and organisational change. As an integral management instrument, communication must contribute to changes in structure and culture.

As already observed, solutions to social problems are increasingly searched for in interaction with what is known as stakeholders. This is on the assumption that the knowledge and experience of the public and companies involved can be better utilized; it will broaden the base for decisions and enhance the effectiveness of policy. Communication has become an essential element of the policy formulation and implementation process, and therefore acquires significance as a process instrument.

A third development is the ongoing tendency to move away from sender-driven information to receiver-oriented communication. As a result, government communication is acquiring a demand-oriented dimension. General policy strategies require tailored solutions delivered to (groups of) citizens and companies on account of the growing pluriformity. Information technology is creating ever more scope for a tailored approach and one-to-one communication is coming within reach. Communication as a modern instrument of information in the digital and plural form society.

5.3 Commission ‘Future of Government Communication’
In the spring of 2000, the Dutch government set up an independent commission (Wallage Commission). Its terms of reference are to produce recommendations on the future and significance of government communication as a policy, management, process and information instrument, including the organisational and financial consequences. On the basis of the results, the Commission will formulate their view of government communication for the next 10 years and give recommendations on effective and efficient government communication. Apart from the approach by individual departments, attention will probably also be paid to interdepartmental cooperation and to the common infrastructure in the field of government communication. The expectation is that the recommendations will also affect the position, function and duties of the communication officer within the government. It is also certain that the Commission will produce recommendations on the funding required. If the government wishes to be able to exercise its communication function amidst the media violence of the digital age, amidst a large number of other information suppliers, it must have sufficient financial resources. The recommendations from the Commission are expected mid-2001.

5.4 From information to communication

It can be deduced from the above that government communication has developed apace since World War II (1945). This pace is unlikely to slow down in the years ahead. In fact, government communication is in a permanent state of development. This confronts the discipline of communication within the government time and again with new questions and challenges. Developments and changes of recent years are described in the following, to provide a good understanding of the nature, scale and scope of current government communication. Three main themes are used to provide this description: information on policy, information/communication as policy (instrument) and communication in policy.

Key tasks of government communication

The reasons for industry to communicate are evident: to make clear what a company stands for and to ‘market’ products and services. The situation with the government is slightly more complex. The reasons are very diverse and are influenced by the ever-changing position of government in society. In principle, government communication must contribute to advancing democratic administration. Depending upon the phase of the policy process, government communication is focused on marking new developments, setting an agenda, informing, convincing/persuading, consulting and/or participating. The main parameter is the openness and accessibility of government information.

Information on policy

With the negative experiences of German propaganda still in our minds, the conclusion was reached after World War II that the government should make its policy known. This was mainly done via the channel of the press. The government provided information to journalists and they ensured that this information was made known to readers and listeners. Influencing by the government was minimal and the informer was mainly a press officer, who understood journalism and in many cases was a former journalist himself. Public information pur sang. Even today, a significant proportion of government information in the Netherlands takes shape via press information. A major difference with the fifties and sixties is that press information not only acts more as a conduit of actual information to the press, but has itself become a player in the forum of supply of and demand for government information. The key collaborators (and sometimes antagonists) in this case are journalists, lobbyists, interest groupings, etc.

In the seventies, information acquired a further dimension. In a report on public and being public, which led to the Open Government Act, it was asserted that the public was entitled to information and that the government had a duty to supply information (directly). This was designed to bring about a more equal relationship between government and public, allowing for a direct discussion with and influence on the government. The public participation procedure made its entrance during this period, for example in the field of land use planning. There were also some discussions with a broad cross section of society, nuclear energy being one example. Developments which can be summarised under the heading of ‘participating information’.

The coming into force of the Open Government Act also marked the start of what is termed public-service information. The government information official was given the task of explaining, providing information on and interpreting policy and policy measures. Influencing knowledge was the main communication objective in this period. At first, the press information officer assumed responsibility for this new task, and later specialised public information officers were added. One important characteristic of this form of information is that it confines itself to government policy approved by parliament. The result was that information was positioned at the end of the policy process as ‘the vehicle of the policy product’.

Although public participation and social discussion give the appearance of two-sidedness, the practice was a different matter. The government determined what was at stake in the discussion and usually the result was already fixed. Driven by its own visions and ideas, the government attempted to win over public groups and to convince them that it was right. In actual fact, one-sidedness still held sway.

Information/communication as policy (instrument)

Discussion of the significance and function of government communication broke loose with full ferocity in the eighties. The government focused increasingly on agenda setting and consciousness, for example the acid rain
Information officers were also involved at an earlier stage of the policy process for the policy product to be developed and in the composition of the mix of policy instruments. The policy cycle was divided into four: recognition and identification of the policy problem, formulation of policy solutions, implementation of policy and regulation and the management phase. The communication contribution in each of the phases was determined. The major plus point in this period was that administration, policy and communication had to get together and that communication was integrated into the policy process. A further point to note is that the expectation of the effects of the communication instrument, particularly among politicians and policy makers, were often pitched too high when it came to actually influencing behaviour. Experience soon showed that use of communication as a means of influencing behaviour only had some effect if the instrument was backed up by (statutory) measures, provisions or subsidies. Nor was this development at play in all policy sectors, but was mainly confined to sectors focused on socially justified and/or healthy behaviour (health, environment, traffic).

A further development in this period was that the government was no longer a monopolist, but increasingly had to coordinate and collaborate with other actors and intermediaries operating in a particular policy field. The main reason for this was that the feasibility and ease of implementation of policy proposals could be assessed and that the expertise of specific actors could be brought into play. The idea persisted, that greater involvement in the shaping of policy would lead to greater acceptance of the ultimate policy product. The communications specialist, particularly in central government, was given a further responsibility, namely to organise and manage communication. Not just his or her ‘own’ communication, but also communication of and with the other actors. Striking is that the other actors usually saw an automatic pioneering and coordination role for central government, naturally accompanied by the expectation that central government was responsible for the manpower and financial resources required.

Communication in policy
At local level in particular, but soon also at provincial and central level, the phenomenon of interactive policy combination arrived in the first half of the nineties. The shaping of policy in interaction with public groupings and other interested players. A base of support and acceptance were the key words here. Consultation and dialogue with public groupings did not always provide the required level of support, as the issue at stake for policy development was mainly determined by the government. With interactive policy processes, more so than in the past, there was an equal contribution. To give shape to this equal contribution, it soon became clear that communication was a critical success factor in projects and processes of this type. Experience shows that interactive processes stand or fall by good communication support, in terms of content and process alike, and in the area of methods, techniques and means of information transfer.

Experience showed that genuine involvement only comes about if social problems and policy proposals have consequences for one’s own living or working environment, for example a rail track or road through one’s own back yard or the quality of life of one’s own district or neighbourhood. This implies that interaction with the public and companies can more readily be achieved at local government level as at this level policy measures by definition affect the living and working environment more directly.

Local government often also has greater scope for converting ideas and suggestions into concrete measures as a result of the much smaller scale. One important question that the government must therefore ask itself is in which cases involvement and interaction are desirable and possible, and how they should be shaped. The fact is that the government must be prepared and capable of seriously converting the ideas and contributions from public groupings into new or modified policy. ‘Genuine’ two way traffic will be difficult in a number of areas of government policy, where policy is required ‘collectively and/or socially’. For example policy where individuals or groups do not have any direct (immediate) interest, but which (in due course) does affect the personal arena. For example, changes to speed limits, the imposition of environmental taxes or more stringent action against crime. Experience showed that involvement only comes about if social problems and policy proposals have consequences for one’s own living or working environment, for example a rail track or road through one’s own back yard or the quality of life of one’s own district or neighbourhood. This implies that interaction with the public and companies can more readily be achieved at local government level as at this level policy measures by definition affect the living and working environment more directly.

Government communication confined to accepted policy?
One of the principles in Dutch government communication is that the government must refrain from influencing the public and companies in an unduly active way. Until then, this point of departure has translated into the principle that for example mass media campaigns may only be conducted if parliament has approved the policy or the measure. Policy that has not yet been approved can be communicated via the traditional press information channel.

This principle is currently under discussion. As policy is increasingly coming about in interaction with (groups of) the public or companies, these public groupings are automatically involved at an earlier phase of this policy. The rise of information and communication technology also makes the policy process transparent and accessible to public groupings at an earlier stage. Voices can increasingly be heard that these developments can actually enhance democratic administration and that the act of deployment of government communication must be
encouraged at an early stage of policy development. The Commission ‘Future of Government Communication’ (see also 5.3) is also likely to include this discussion in its study.

5.5 Government Communicator: strategist or implementor?

Depending upon the nature and phase of the policy process, the policy objectives to be achieved, the subject of policy and the target groups involved, government communication will focus on flagging, setting an agenda, informing, convincing/persuading, consulting and/or participating. Reaching or involving target groups, in other words having contact, is an essential parameter here: no communication without contact. Contact does not come about on it’s own. There is a range of methods, means, media channels and intermediaries that can be used to establish this contact. Here too, the government communicator is confronted by ongoing and rapid developments. In the media landscape, in the channels by which resources and media are distributed, the methods and techniques used and in the intermediaries with whom one can collaborate. The old familiar toolbox is constantly being shaken up and constantly demands change and expansion.

But it is not only the toolbox that is subject to change. The task and function of the government communicator will change. Whilst in the developments up to the nineties it was mainly changes that could be identified in the discipline of communication itself. When it comes to the deployment of communication in interactive policy, communication must be viewed in an integrated manner from organisation and policy processes alike. Cooperation with other disciplines such as organisation and administration science are obvious candidates. One important question is which role and position the government communicator can and must have to be a good (discussion) partner and consultant in the process of more far-reaching integration between policy, administration, organisation and communication. The key question is therefore what the government communicator must focus on in the years ahead. Is the emphasis to be on providing recommendations at strategic level, from the angle that communication is an integrated part of policy and organisational processes. Or should it focus on providing adequate support to the delivery of communication? Probably, the answer will be that he must focus on both. But then the question is whether these activities can be reconciled within a single person and whether there will be more far reaching specialisation within the discipline of communication.

Han Heemskerk identifies elsewhere in this collection (see chapter 10) a shift in the areas of operation of the communications profession. The priorities he has identified and the profile he outlines apply equally to the communications professional working within the government. In addition, having some understanding of political and social relations and the strong measure of target-group orientation are vital for a government communicator.

5.6 Coherent vision

As previously observed, the search for new foundations in the global village has been launched. A search where the government is again asked to give direction, not on the basis of tight central control but from a government regime between individualism and collectivism. The assumption is that an interactive way of shaping policy can contribute to this innovation. Such innovation does, however, require a broader vision at corporate governmental level. The need for a corporate vision has already been identified in industry; multinationals in particular deal carefully with positioning at corporate level, coherence and communication. A strategic vision at group, business and product level is required in the current open and rapidly changing market. A vision of identity and direction gives position and direction to your own organisation, but also creates clarity for consumers and other client groups. A clear corporate (communication) vision also gives direction to the thinking and actions of personnel. This is essential in a highly educated and networking society. As against that, a corporate vision offers the opportunity for profiling and positioning.

The latter would appear less appropriate for the government, but the opposite is true. The demand for the provision of frameworks demands clear positioning and profiling by the government. What is actually entailed is that the government has a vision of its role in society, of the proposed changes, of norms and values and the way in which the public, companies and institutions are involved in policy processes. Although the ingredients for a corporate government (communication) vision are present in ample abundance (coalition agreement, budgets, policy memoranda), the attempts to shape it in practice only succeed piecemeal. The awareness that a coherent policy vision is important, particularly where themes such as violence, health care, education, traffic and the environment are concerned, does exist, but the departmental parochialism and sectoral thinking and approach are often barriers to genuine cooperation. More concretely, the government also has its own direct self-interest in a clear profiling and positioning on the current tight labour market. Potential employees have to be convinced that the government is an attractive employer which offers interesting job content and good opportunities for development. A vision on the function, organisation and methods of the government is indispensable in this process.

5.7 En route to a communicative government

Although there is by no means always a coherent vision, the way is cautiously being paved towards a more open, transparent and interactive style of administration, where the communicative function is becoming ever
more important. The involvement of the public and companies in social changes enjoys high priority, along with the establishment of a base of support for policy, where new forms of consultation have to be given a chance. The fact that information and communication technology can play an important role here is recognised, but for the moment doesn’t get beyond making government information accessible with new technologies. Having access to government information, tailored to target groups or otherwise, is just one of the conditions of being able to grow into a communicative government.

Apart from a number of more political and administrative parameters, such as reliability and credibility towards society, restricting the volume of legislation and regulation, making choices with supporting reasons in shaping and designing policy processes and their evaluation, a number of parameters can be indicated from government communication which in due course will determine whether the ideal of the communicative government can be brought closer. The most important are summarised below.

Working towards an open, transparent and interactive organisation culture
If politics and government are serious about administrative overhaul, administrators and (senior) management will have to set a good example, chart a consistent course and provide direction in order to bring about the necessary changes within the government organisation. Changing structures and cultures requires staying power and demands that civil servants are explicitly directed, coached and challenged to adopt a different method and approach. In the field of corporate and internal communication in particular the government communicator can make a contribution to influencing the corporate culture.

Developing a vision of accessible government
All too frequently the concept of accessible government is shaped from the sender’s perspective. If the information is made available in an accessible manner with the aid of the latest communication techniques, it soon appears as if the government has put its house in order. However, such a limited vision does not serve to make the government any more accessible. A different definition of the concept of accessibility is a listening government, which is accessible and has an eye/ear to questions, wishes, ideas, suggestions and complaints from individuals and groups within society. Technological developments are making it possible for a stronger emphasis to be placed on interactive and personal government communication which allows for better and more direct contact than can be achieved by mass-media government communication. The switch from sender-driven to recipient- and demand-driven government communication can be given a boost. For example, call centre technology allows for efficient, personal, two-way communication, while retaining and strengthening content quality. The Internet is also enhancing the accessibility of the government. A growing number of users can in the first instance collect information at the time they desire and, if required, request further information. This may be done by requesting information material or putting an additional question, making a suggestion or voicing a complaint via e-mail. In due course, it will even be possible to organise government service transactions via the Internet. In some countries, such as Canada and the United States, the first findings with these approaches are being learnt.

Making better use of communication research
Communication research, provided it comes to be a structural part of the organisational and communication philosophy, can contribute to a communicative government in all fields of government communication. Alongside the traditional forms of communication research, such as pre testing communication resources, performing reader surveys and conducting exploratory research, monitor research is becoming ever more important. The ability to structurally track the deployment of the Intranet and the Internet and the impact on internal and external government communication alike is necessary for timely adjustments and being able to take organisational decisions on the direction to pursue. Monitoring social problems and issues that are on the agenda in Dutch society is also a good way of listening to what the public and companies experience as social problems. At the same time, it gives administrators and policy makers information to allow them to anticipate and respond to wishes and needs from society. Government communicators can benefit by being better able to tailor the communication to the experiential world of the public and companies. Structural studies of scope and effect of mass media communication activities, for example via tracking research, is needed to arrive at an ever better mix of resources and media, which is optimally tailored to target, target group and message. This research also provides a picture of the budgets required for effective mass media communication activities and makes it clear to Parliament and population alike whether government funds are being spent effectively. Apart from these examples of more applied communication research, fundamental research remains vital. It is sensible not only to shape this type of research from the communication discipline, but where possible to link it to research and other disciplines such as management, organisational and information theory. This can further enhance the integration of policy organisation and communication.

Work on further integration between communication, organisation and policy
Communication has stood on the sidelines for a long time, but has been moving towards the heart of matters since the nineties. Particularly with the introduction of interactive policy processes, thus becoming an integral part of the policy process. It is an illusion to assume that a single communications consultant is able to bring about this process of integration. Communications people, policy makers and managers must learn to speak one another’s language and learn one another’s discipline. With targeted introduction, training and coaching programmes, and training in communication skills, administrators and policy makers can be made more communicative. The government communicator can play an active part here and must increasingly grow into a ‘communications editor’.


5.8 In conclusion

Developments in government communication are proceeding rapidly, sometimes too rapidly. Consideration of the significance and contribution of government communication and of the duties and function of the communicator often suffers. In setting up the Future of Government Communication Commission, the government has recognised the importance of government communication as an integral part of government organisation and as an instrument for enhancing democratic administration. The expectation is that the Commission will give a fresh boost to the further professionalisation of government communication.

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6 Lobbying in the Netherlands
Public affairs in a European context

Ben Pauw

6.1 Introduction

Lobbying as a professional form of political influencing of policy in the Netherlands has only become a normal and accepted phenomenon over the past two decades. If an interested party – company, sector organisation, non-profit institution, social organisation or government organisation – wants to achieve something in politics or with the higher levels of government, he initiates a lobby. Lobbying is a form of representing interests and (therefore) influencing policy at those places where laws and regulations are made, taxes levied or subsidies provided, undesired developments (may be) checked and desired objectives achieved. Lobbying occurs at all levels. Globally, across Europe, nationally, regionally and locally. And usually, the higher the level on which one is focusing, the greater the inclination to involve professionals.

Government and parliament have the task of regulating the general interest and safeguarding it. The protection and security of its citizens is an example, along with fostering a healthy economy which generates work and employment, and concern for nature and the environment, so that later generations can also reap the benefits. The choice of the general interest also demands that choices be made between objective groups and resources. For example, the choice of the environment on the one hand places commitment on those who are at risk of encroaching upon the environment, but at the same time provides others with the opportunity to earn money by such means as environmental consultancy, environmental-friendly production and recycling. And for example this means that opting to liberalise the petrol market is a drain on the established oil companies who have to ‘sell’ a proportion of their permits and an opportunity for new players in the petrol market.

Opting for the general interest therefore often entails opting against another specific interest. This explains and justifies the strong development of the professional lobby in the recent past in the Netherlands. Now, in the year 2000, several dozen independent lobbyists are advising their clients on how to deal with politics as what is often the decisive factor. In addition, several hundred officials are working as public affairs managers and lobbyists in the permanent employment of industry and the non-profit sector and, recently, among numerous governmental bodies (mainly the lower tiers). Furthermore, several thousand officials are working at interest organisations – lobby organisations sui generis-, such as sector associations, trade unions, patient organisations and the like, known as the social central ground.

Whilst it is only in the past few decades that lobbying has become a permanent feature of political policy preparation and formulation, this is not to say that it was unknown before that period. The fact is that the Netherlands has always been a society with a highly organised social central ground, both in the semi-public and private sector. And – probably partly as a result – the Netherlands has long had a strong tradition in which the government and political circles sought advice from numerous social and private players. That was and remains the case.

In other words, lobbying has always been with us. Only in a different form, along different lines and with different resources from today. Official advisory bodies to the government have been deprived of representatives of interest groups, the social central ground has very much changed in composition and
individual interested players have become aware of the opportunities that lobbying offers for one’s ‘own business’.

The development of the European Union and growing European regulation has very much fostered lobbying over the past 10 to 15 years. Not just in Brussels as the ‘capital’ of the EU, but also in ‘The Hague’, the capital of government in the Netherlands.

It falls beyond the scope of a single chapter to provide a comprehensive ‘state of the art’ of lobbying and then from the European perspective to boot. A choice has therefore been made for a limited number of issues which, from the Netherlands’ perspective, merit special attention in the transition period from the twentieth to the twenty first century. We will look at the following topics in turn:

the formation of concepts and determining the place in the disciplines of commercial services;
the profile of the lobbyist;
coalition formation and coalition management;
the impact of ICT on the lobbying process;
the introduction of codes of conduct;
the European dimension.

6.2 Public relations and public affairs, formation of concepts and determining position

Anyone who hoped that one could enter the twenty first century with clarity and agreement on determining the position of public affairs (PA) and public relations (PR) will be disappointed. After ongoing disputes in recent decades, the philosophers’ stone has not been found even now. Some people are of the opinion that PR and PA are two separate disciplines, which by definition are not compatible. It is therefore assumed that PR is concerned with publicity and PA conversely with informal contacts, i.e. with privacy.

It is all too easy to approach the two disciplines exclusively from this distinction and to give them totally separate places. PR is defined here as ‘the systematic advancement of mutual understanding between the organisation and its public groups’. And PA as ‘the systematic promotion of mutual understanding between an organisation and its politico-administrative and social environment’. In this sense PA is considered part of PR. Rather than looking for apparent conflicts, it is more interesting to look at common ground between PR and PA. Increasingly, the concept is being replaced in popular usage by communication. Many of the former PR agencies have been renamed ‘communication consultancies’ in recent years. They are concerned with communication in the sense of the one-sided communication of messages and statements to and the two-way exchange of ideas with the relevant internal and external target groups. Communication naturally is not an objective in itself, but a means for example of creating an image, involving people or establishing a level of support. Communication is also enacted with governments and politicians. Communication is then a means by which the transmitter brings the government and political circles’ attention to its interests and asks that they be taken into account in policy-forming and political decision-making.

PA policy and management stand alongside communication. From this perspective, PA policy can be defined as ‘handling the social and political themes’ that are the subject of the communication. PA management is managing that process. The political and social themes in their own way determine the expectation and wishes that exist in society. If a company makes a serious attempt to take those expectations and wishes into account, we speak of ‘socially responsible business’. In other words, ‘socially responsible business’ is also inextricably bound up with communication and thus with PA policy and PA management.

That leaves the concept of lobbying. Lobbying can best be described as the full range of activities designed to influence government policy and politics via communication on a specific theme. To put it another way: the actual process of representing political interest.

In summary, communication constitutes the binding element between PR and PA. Public affairs concerns itself with political and social themes within communication, while PA management ensures that the PA process proceeds satisfactorily. Lobbying is the actual representation of interests and influencing of policy among the government and political circles. Viewed in this light, PA, lobbying and socially responsible entrepreneurship are increasingly seen as organic functions within the corporate communication function within companies and organisations. This is confirmed in the research by De Lange, De lobbyist: wat weten wij eigenlijk van het beroep, (The lobbyist; what do we actually know about his occupation), published in 1997, in which the thesis that PA is a (sub-)discipline in the broad spectrum of communication is broadly supported. The frequent references to communication/PR/journalism as a desirable area of study for lobbyists can be seen as confirmation of this.

6.3 Profile of the lobbyist

There has long been a thick mist hanging round those working in the field of PA and lobbying. It was noted in 6.1 that there are ‘many types of’ lobbyists. Knowledge of the professional lobbyist was confined to this observation.

The first targeted research was carried out in the Netherlands in 1997 (De Lange). Whilst the structure of the study was limited and the results must be treated with due caution, this doesn’t alter the fact that for the first
time some understanding was gained of the backgrounds and profile to the Dutch lobbyist. Some results will serve to illustrate this.

Personality characteristics, wide experience in the field and in politics and in networks established prove to be more important than educational background. There is no specific training for the job, and where specific courses have been followed, they are mainly PR in orientation. The majority of lobbyists (90%) have, however, enjoyed higher education, 65% of them attending university.

More than 1/3 of Dutch lobbyists worked in the field of communication/marketing/PR/journalism prior to that period, 19% for the government itself or in politics and 17% in the field of commerce/marketing/management. In the Netherlands, lobbyists generally work high within the hierarchy of the organisation.

The respondents themselves consider communication and personal skills the most important elements in their functioning and quote experience as the best teacher. They spend most time on the following: implementing PA strategy, advising on policy and strategy and producing communication resources. These results do not come as any surprise, they simply confirm the image that already exists from practice.

The following trends can be identified both from research and from our own observations and practice:

- the importance of PA and lobbying will continue to rise in the years ahead, not just in general terms, but also across the spectrum; government organisations in particular will attempt to rapidly make good their backlog in this field;

- lobbyists will both be more highly educated and more frequently have studied a subject in the field of communication/PR/journalism and preferably have experience of government and in politics.

These trends also tie in with the views of external experts who criticise the professionalism of lobbyists. For example, it emerges from the book that appeared at the end of 1998 Lobbyen in Nederland; professie en profijt (Lobbying in the Netherlands; profession and profit) (Van Schendelen and Pauw), that lobbying is increasingly a profession which boils down to professional skills or professionalism. “But that professionalism is a scarce commodity”, it is claimed. Marjet van Zuylen, Parliamentary Labour Party Member, describes the work of Dutch lobbyists as “not very professional” in the professional magazine Communicatie of October 1995. She describes the lobby culture in the Netherlands as “poorly developed”. There is a lack of professionalism and the selection of lobbyists is weak. She cites the following as absolutely weak points: the often poorly selected timing; the mutual competition which often counts for more than common interests; the lack of knowledge of parliament and political feeling.

Finally, a comment on the way in which lobbyists are organised. Or a better way to put it is: not organised. In so far as they are organised, arrangements are informal and highly fragmented. The official Beroepsvereniging voor Communicatie (Professional Association for Communication) does admittedly have a separate ‘Public Affairs’ section, but at times it appears to be dominated by independent communications consultants, who generally concern themselves with (executive) communication activities. There are also four informal circles:

1. The King Willem I circle for people from industry;
2. The King Willem II circle for PA officials in government and non-profit organisations;
3. The King Willem III circle for sector lobbyists;
4. The King Willem IV circle for young, highly promising lobbyists.

Admission to membership is based on cooperation and selection, with restrictive criteria playing a major part, such as one representative per type of company or organisation. The most recent organisation is the virtual club known as ‘PAP’, a Public Affairs Platform for PA officials from all parts of society.

It has to be said that these highly fragmented and not very professionally organised interest clubs for lobbyists as an interest group do not provide a sound basis for activities initiated and managed by the interest group to improve the professionalism of lobbyists in the Netherlands.

6.4 ICT and lobbying

Instruments which have long been tried and tested are usually deployed in lobbying. Research among civil servants and politicians (see Van Schendelen and Pauw, 1998; Bennis, Van Schendelen and Pauw, 1990) reveals that it is the personal interview, the personal letter, the informal contact that score highly in terms of effectiveness. This contrasts for example with submitting a petition or a demonstration in front of the parliament building.

Recent years have seen ICT applications and in particular the Internet take flight in personal and business communication. The Internet as a virtually infinite source of global information. And e-mail as a high-speed electronic courier, who can deliver a document of 1 or 100 pages to varying numbers of target groups within a matter of seconds.
What is clear is that these new techniques will also assume their position in the range of resources called upon by lobbyists in their work. The question is only the extent to which they will do so and when things reach this stage.

ICT and the Internet as a source of information and documentation from the government and parliament have meanwhile become commonplace. Numerous official websites and databases with government information are already in use and their number grows daily. The government and parliament rightly see it as their task to inform society as widely as possible about their doings, their intentions and agendas and reports on meetings. Not only is that their solemn duty as representatives elected by the people and as servers of the people, but they also regard it as an indispensable tool in reducing the growing gap between them and society.

Government decisions, policy documents, parliamentary proceedings, reports and agendas. All these elements are available to outsiders by the Internet immediately when they are ready. And when one then considers that until recently all that information was only available by post and then with some delay. Often one or several weeks passed before lobbyists and other interested parties had these documents in their hands in printed form. Only lobbyists who had a passe-partout to the parliament building or had other ‘inroads’ were able to get hold of them earlier, a time saving which in some cases represented a major advantage over rivals.

The new world opened up via the Internet enables the lobbyist to significantly accelerate and improve his informing function for clients. Professional lobbyists, who – rightly – regard systematic and intensive monitoring of the relevant environment as an indispensable part of their work start their working day nowadays not just by reading the morning newspaper but also by looking at the websites of the ministries, parliament and the other parties involved in the lobby dossier. Speed is not only a gain, but also simultaneously a broader range spanning several ‘news sources’. The risk of important documents, events or moments being missed is thus reduced. This allows for a rapid and satisfactory response and action to be undertaken in response to new developments.

Lobbyists can use the Internet not only to collect knowledge and information and monitor relevant developments, but also as a virtual courier, delivering their letters, notes and position papers at the speed of light to the e-mail addresses of politicians, civil servants and other players. That is a gain, in so far as the addressees constantly monitor their e-mail, or arrange for it to be monitored. What is certain is that the physical letter box is emptied daily, even if just to remove the newspaper. Whether the same is happening with the mail boat is uncertain, and one shouldn’t be too trusting in that respect. This makes the use of e-mail as an instrument of lobbying still highly uncertain; the paper letter and note therefore continues to offer the greater security.

Meanwhile there are colleagues who already dream of a much more far-reaching application of ICT and Internet in lobbying. Examples in America constitute the basis for the hope or expectation that this ‘American dream’ can also become reality in Europe. For example, the Public Electronic Network (PEN) in Santa Monica, California is quoted as the first interactive public city computer network which enables citizens to communicate electronically with their political decision-makers. After an electronic lobby (teledemocracy), the municipal executive set aside an extra amount for the homeless. And under pressure from a political protest campaign by e-mail lobby by Chinese students in America, the Chinese government was compelled to modify its policy against a particularly oppressive bill. In the Netherlands, Delft is the source of the first electronic lobbying campaign, where thousands of signatures were recently collected by electronic means for a particular route for the High-Speed rail link, and submitted to parliament in the form of a virtual petition.

These examples were also quoted in an article on the website of the aforementioned virtual Public Affairs Platform of young lobbyists in the Netherlands (www.publicaffairs.nl).

The question is, however, whether virtual lobbying instruments of this type will win out in terms of effectiveness over the aforementioned more successful traditional means. The fact is that even an electronic petition remains a petition and can be seen as a virtual demonstration without the physical presence of demonstrators in front of the parliament building. And it is precisely petitions and demonstrations that fail to score particularly highly in general. Furthermore, virtual lobbying instruments can never replace the personal aspect, which in view of the high scores achieved by a personal discussion or an informal contact proves to be so important in lobbying.

6.5 Collective representation of interests and formation of coalitions

It has already been stated: the Netherlands is a highly organised nation. It has several thousand foundations and associations, which set out to represent a particular interest. In his book Politiek en bedrijfsleven (Politics and Industry) which appeared in 1995, Van Schendelen arrives at the following classification of interest organisations in the Netherlands:

- umbrella organisations that represent industry such as VNO-NCW and MKB Nederland;
- sector business organisations such as AVBB and FME;
- sector organisations such as the Centraal Brouwerij Kantoor and the Nederlandse Vereniging van Bakkerijbedrijven;
- agricultural organisations and professional associations, such as the Bond van Nederlandse Architecten, the Orde van Organisatieadviseurs and the Nederlandse Orde van Advocaaten;
- professional associations such as the Orde van Organisatieadviseurs and the Nederlandse Orde van Advocaten.
what are known as ‘public interest groups’ such as the Consumers Association, nature and environmental organisations, associations of the elderly and women’s organisations;
the associations of government bodies such as the IPO (the Association of Provinces) and the VNG (Association of Netherlands Municipalities).

Over and above this, we have the public-law industrial organisations, and advisory councils to the government such as the Socio-Economic Council and the Housing, Land-use Planning and Environmental Council. Their significance as interest organisations on a statutory basis has, however, fallen dramatically over the past decade. The public-law organisations lost significance following a re-organisation and concentration of forces and a dramatic thinning of duties and responsibilities; the advisory councils as a result of the fact that their number was reduced to one recommendation per ministry and representative interest organisations no longer have any place there.

Prior to the breaking down of religious barriers between them in the early 70s, the majority of these interest organisations were organised along politico-ideological lines and they had close links with the associated political party. The ending of political demarcation virtually closed off these ‘highways of power and influence’ as they were termed. Most interest groups organised among religious or politico-ideological lines lost that basis and thus their natural association with a single particular political current. By extension from this, the pressure groups moved away from their traditional, marked-out paths and are acting more and more as calculating organisations, which decide on the basis of purely strategic considerations how they can best represent the interests of their members from case to case. This has had major consequences for the central social field.

Where in the past this was in the nature of a playing field where the lines were fixed for a long period and where usually a predictable match was played, it has changed into a country where several flowers bloom. Many flowers are nipped in the bud and some flourish.

Another new development are the ad hoc coalitions of what until recently were inconceivable combinations of varying umbrella organisations, sector or industry organisations, businesses, public interest groups and governments in specific lobbies. To give some recent examples: the lobby against pay as you drive, in which VNO-NCW, the Chambers of Commerce of the Cities in the Randstad, the Royal Netherlands Motoring Association, AVBB and the Netherlands Employer’s Association joined forces in a formal collaborative venture; the lobby to improve and expand the A4 highway from Amsterdam to Antwerp, in which VNO-NCW, Chambers of Commerce, the provinces of North Holland, South Holland and North Brabant and the City Councils of Amsterdam, The Hague and Rotterdam, joined forces.

The parties involved list two important characteristics for this type of ad hoc coalition; they are temporary and they have a clearly defined purpose.

In addition, two forms of widespread coalitions can be identified: a light and a heavy form. In the former, one confines oneself to informal coordination and alignment of lobbying activities among the participating organisations. In the second, formal agreements are made and there is a joint approach to the external world.

The developments outlined above have had consequences for the pressure on the political market, where ever more different interests are raised by ever more players. One cannot predict how far these developments will continue, nor what rules of play they may lead to on the political market. If the pressure further increases, some ordering of the market would appear virtually unavoidable. Calls for such ordering can increasingly be heard. For example the Prime Minister has proposed restrictive rules on contacts between civil servants with social parties and the presidium of the Lower House has for some time now been discussing measures to protect Members of Parliament against excessive numbers and excessively pushy representatives of interests and lobbies.

Organisations representing interests and lobbyists can respond to this in two ways:
- By imposing the necessary self-restriction on the political market on themselves and as far as possible opting for lobbying instruments that cause least trouble to civil servants and politicians;
- By organising their interests in a professional association of lobbyists and within that arriving at a certain form of self-regulation, in collaboration with the Council of Secretaries General and the presidium of the Lower House.

6.6 European perspective

Some of the themes dealt with above are specifically ‘Dutch’. It should not be deduced from this, however, that the political lobby is determined along strictly national lines and is enacted exclusively within national frameworks. To do so would be to fail to see the globalisation and Europeanisation of society that have occurred in numerous areas and the impact of which has not yet been fully felt.

The EU increasingly provides the framework within which national legislation and regulation is enacted and from which opportunities and threats present themselves. Numerous European directives set out regulations that member states have to translate into national legislation. European recommendations admittedly do not lay down binding regulations on member states, but they do provide a clear and desired direction. Numerous areas of policy are meanwhile controlled by a European framework. Examples are: competition, consumer policy,
public health, social security and pensions. The free movement of persons, goods and services has led to harmonisation of regulation and policy between EU member states.

This means that Brussels and Strasbourg have become ever more important centres of policy in decision-making. The time is now past where lobbyists in the Netherlands could do their work with a purely national focus. They must constantly be aware of the European dimension to the matters with which they concern themselves. European rules may touch upon specifically Dutch interests, as well as specifically sectoral interests in all member states. The absence of European rules may also affect both types of interest. In both the former and the latter case, the influencing of policy or agenda-setting may be necessary or desirable. But does that mean that interest groups and lobbies acting at national level have lost their right to exist? Such a claim is as misplaced as the assertion that national governments and parliaments no longer have any significance. The contrary is therefore true.

The European Union is not something suspended in space, but is in association of European countries. Together they determine European policy. Naturally, they will keep sight of their own national interests in the process, either by critically reviewing the plans of the European Commission or by taking initiatives themselves in Brussels. This means that Brussels policy of individual governments may be influenced by national interest groups. Not just where a specifically national issue is at stake, but equally where a European sectoral interest is at stake. In both cases, support from as many other member states as possible is of course necessary. Support that must be gained. By lobbying the government itself and/or by lobbying interest groups organised along European lines who are able to direct their national associations of members and encourage them to set government in their own country on the right track.

What does this mean for national interest organisations and lobbyists?
First of all, they must not only follow the ‘domestic’ policy of their government and assess it as to its interest, but also European policy and the policy of the European Parliament. And secondly, they must go in search of a place in the European network with representations in all the member states. This of course means that their colleagues in other member states will attempt to make use of their support in other cases.

Once European regulation has come about, scope remains for interest groups and lobbyists to provide some direction at national level. Most European directives still have to be translated into national law. In that translation process, it is usually found that there is space available for countries to place their own emphasis or to take account of specific circumstances by individual country. Here, too, it remains possible to influence policy.

In short, much decision-making and regulation has moved from the national level of member states to the European arena. Countries’ own governments do not go there with an open mind, but if things are right they are jointly inspired by messages that they have acquired via their national interest groups and lobbyists. Influencing policy at European level may also be organised in the European capital cities. And lobbying remains possible in implementing European rules on a national scale.

Meanwhile interest organisations and PA officers are busy modifying their PA strategy, the organisational design and their approach to the change in balance between the EU and member states. International companies have already brought their national PA organisations and activities into a coherent European framework with several representatives in the major capitals. Most national sector and industry organisations and social organisations have also organised themselves among European lines and in that manner safe-guarded the European dimension to their interests. And many national PA agencies are busy making the move by seeking to join up with European or global PA networks.

6.7 In conclusion

The above article has reviewed a number of current topics in the field of PA and lobbying. Topics in which special developments have occurred in recent years and where the results generally have not yet fully crystallised. And topics which will undoubtedly continue to concern us in the years ahead. The definition of concepts surrounding PR and PA will remain a point of discussion for the time being. However, the point of continuing this discussion remains dubious.

The number of lobbyists will continue to rise in the Netherlands in the years ahead. In terms of profile, lobbyists will both be more highly qualified and more frequently have studied in the field of communication/PR/journalism and preferably have experience of government and political life. More stringent requirements will be set for their professionalism. As a result of the variety and the speed with which information is becoming available, the work of the lobbyist could broaden and deepen. It remains the question, however, whether e-mail and the Internet will replace traditional tools of lobbying, where personal contact is still deemed the most effective. Interest organisations have extricated themselves in recent years from their traditional ideological partners in politics and media. They will come to behave as much more calculating representatives of interests, with opportunistic formation of coalitions becoming more frequent. In the light of the globalisation and Europeanisation, national lobbyists must direct their attention much more towards ‘Brussels’. This is without prejudice to the fact that ample scope for influence remains at the level of member states.
7 Increasing effectiveness of managing strategic issues affecting a firm’s reputation*

Cees van Riel and Frans van den Bosch

7.1 Introduction

From a managerial point of view, a key question is how companies can become more effective in dealing with strategic issues affecting their reputation. Academic literature provides a variety of contributions that explain and predict decision making of corporate management and their external opponents in crisis situations. Building on these contributions stemming from different disciplines such as public relations, strategy and marketing, we suggest an integrative framework (see Figure 1) analyzing both strategic issues characteristics and the characteristics of management and organizational and communication processes determining corporate response to strategic issues and a firm’s reputation. Based on this framework we suggest ten propositions as depicted in Table 1. These propositions deal partly with characteristics of the strategy issues and partly with firm specific characteristics. Next, these propositions will be illustrated with key events and developments in the Brent Spar case, dealing with the controversial proposal of the Royal Dutch/Shell Group to sink an oil storage and loading station into the sea. This case illustrates how analytical frame works can help both managers and researchers to gain more insight into the factors that may determine decisions.

Figure 1

regarding whether to use buffering (defensive approach) or bridging (two-way symmetric communication) strategies in comparable future cases.

7.2 Theoretical background

Table 1 summarizes relevant academic publications in ten ‘propositions’, providing explanations for managerial decisions of actors directly involved in comparable situations as in the Brent Spar case.
Table 1: Propositions explaining corporate responses to strategic issues

1. External stakeholders will react more negatively on corporate statements if (1) the crisis is unusual, (2) avoidable, (3) there is no clarity in decision making, (4) perceived unfairness in decision making and a low degree of caretaking for (future) victims, (Brockner et al, 1990).

2. Media coverage will be higher if an issue (1) is promoted by actors with a high degree of source credibility, (2) provides attractive pictures for television and newspaper use (Galtung, 1965; McCombs, 1979, Wember, 1976, Neulle-Neuman, 1977).


4. The propensity to buffer can be explained by ‘organizational size’ and the ‘importance of resources’ controlled by a firm; a collaborative attitude of a firm's top management is the most important determinant of bridging strategies (Meznar and Nigh, 1995).

5. The organization's tendency to follow a bridging strategy will occur if (1) the developments in the business environment are perceived as threatening by the firm's dominant coalition, (2) the communication managers are part of the firm's dominant coalition, and (3) the organization culture is characterized by participative decision-making (Grunig, 1992, Dutton and Jackson, 1987).

6. Underestimation of issues impacting commercial processes of a firm negatively, can be explained by distortion of acquired and processed information by the dominant coalition within an organization (Larson and King, 1996, Bettis and Prahalat, 1995, Sinkula, 1994.)

7. Firms with an open attitude towards external stakeholders will be led by managers with backgrounds in output functions (like marketing, research and product development), who have longer tenure and have spent more years in the organization, prior to the attainment of their current position, than their counterparts in less open firms (Thomas and Simerly, 1994).

8. Outsiders (external stakeholders) socially construct shared views based on universal criteria of how to assess and compare target organization outputs. Insiders (ie, managers) have less appreciation for this broader range of expectations. They assess the process details that must be managed to deliver the output the outsiders desire (Dunbar and Ahlstrom, 1995).

9. Commitments to insiders' views at the exclusion of outsiders' views are associated with assertions of unique insider knowledge of practice that outsiders do not appreciate and denials that such knowledge and contributions can be assessed adequately in terms of universal effectiveness, efficiency, and fairness measures (Dunbar and Ahlstrom, 1995).

10. Effectiveness of corporate responses depends highly on consistency in communication, both within the firm and between internal and external messages (Grunig, 1992, Van Riel, 1995).

6.3 Brent Spar case

When in 1991 the oil storage and loading station Brent Spar was decommissioned by Shell Expo (a joint venture between Shell and Exxon), an extensive investigation was initiated by many companies, in order to find alternative solutions for removal. The final conclusion was clear: after the cleaning and removal of as much of the waste and loose materials as possible, sinking the Brent Spar in the ocean was the safest, cheapest, and least environmentally damaging method of removal.

Greenpeace, the environmental activist's organization, decided after lengthy internal discussions to attack Shell's decision to sink Brent Spar. According to Greenpeace, the Brent Spar contained more than 100 tons of oil sediment and over 30 tons of low level radioactive deposits, and it asserted that this mixture of poisonous, non-degradable chemicals and heavy metals would be a serious threat to the sea environment. Further, Greenpeace suggested that the sinking of the Brent Spar into the ocean would establish a precedent for the other 416 fixed oil platforms in the North Sea, and that the permission by the British government to sink the Brent Spar in the sea, had been given on the basis of limited and one-sided information.

Greenpeace's thesis that dumping the Brent Spar would establish a precedent was rejected by Shell. The granted permit clearly indicated that sinking in case of the Brent Spar was the best option, but that all other cases need to be judged separately. According to Shell, the Brent Spar was difficult to dismantle. Greenpeace did not believe Shell's statements and decided to start public actions aimed at altering Shell's decision. Following the lead of other environmental interest groups, it called upon consumers to boycott Shell's products. ‘You do not throw anything into the sea’ became the general feeling, and rational arguments for sinking the Brent Spar into the sea no longer mattered.

In June 1995, the campaign escalated against Shell's Brent Spar plan, due particularly after prominent politicians publicly admitted that they were avoiding Shell stations. The interventions of well-known politicians increased media attention enormously. When Greenpeace decided to place an emotionally-loaded advertisement with the slogan ‘The sea is not a garbage can’, Shell chose for an ‘advocacy’ advertisement, but again did so with an insiders' view. The company placed a full-page advertisement in all main Dutch newspapers. A survey revealed this effort had little success in changing the views of Dutch citizens. A substantial decrease of sales in Germany forced the company to place an advertisement in German newspapers as well with a heading “Wir werden uns ändern” (We will change).
Decision not to sink the Brent Spar

Shell's top management was confronted with increasing internal controversies. In line with company policy, Shell UK, as an ‘autonomous’ Shell company, was in charge regarding the decisions to be made about the Brent Spar. Shells' top managers outside Great Britain started to be openly concerned about sinking the Brent Spar. These internal controversies made it extremely difficult for top management to justify the original plan to the public. These controversies between Shell UK on the one hand and the German, Dutch and Scandinavian country companies on the other hand, increased the pressure within Shell against sinking the Brent Spar. On June 20, 1995, Shell's Group top management decided not to sink the Brent Spar, but take it apart on land. After this decision Shell UK asked a well-known verification organization to conduct some independent research regarding the contents of the former oil storage and loading station. This research indicated that the Brent Spar possessed far less poisonous material than suggested by Greenpeace. Greenpeace was prepared to admit this and to offer its apologies in public to Shell at the beginning of September 1995.

Since the decision not to sink was made, remarkable changes in strategy, or at least contrasting with the direct past, can be observed regarding Shell. Shell changed its communication style completely from purely buffering towards bridging. Shell's CEO Mr Herkströter publicly admitted that the company had to increase the communication efforts, both internally and externally, and had to place a new emphasis on listening and exchanging views (Herkströter, 1996).

7.3 Illustrating the propositions with the Brent Spar case

In this section we will confront the briefly described Brent Spar case with our proposed framework and propositions. The figures in brackets refer to the propositions in Table 1.

(1) All four statements seem to be applicable in the Brent Spar case. Sinking an oil rig is unusual, in the eyes of the public, the sinking of it is avoidable (and preferable), there is a perceived low degree of caretaking for the future environment (you don't throw anything into the sea) and there is no clarity in decision making.

(2, 3) Proposition 2 states that the media coverage will be higher if the issue is promoted by a credible source and the issue is attractive for television use. In the case of the Brent Spar, Greenpeace is a credible source: it has no commercial interest in this case. The issue is also easy to visualize (a professional television studio was installed by Greenpeace at the Brent Spar) resulting in high media coverage. The role of a third party in Proposition 3, in this case prominent politicians, escalated the intensity of the conflict: it was no longer a conflict between two parties and Shell came under enormous pressure.

(4) Size and the importance of the resources controlled by a firm are two important determinants for explaining the choice of a buffering strategy. In this case Shell, as one of the largest global operating companies, with one of the most important products in the Western economy, has a strong propensity to a buffering strategy. The impact of the changed attitude of top management will be discussed below.

(5) If the developments in the business environment are perceived as threatening by the firm's dominant coalition, the organization is inclined to follow a bridging strategy. In the Brent Spar case the pressure from outside became so intense that the managers of different Shell corporations no longer agreed with the decision to sink the Brent Spar. Over time the pressure was perceived as threatening by the dominant coalition of the Shell Group. Consequently, the decision not to sink was taken.

(6, 8 and 9) The underestimation (through ‘denial’) of the negative impact of a strategic issue is due to the commitment to the insiders' views (they have detailed information) at the exclusion of the outsiders' view (who only have a ‘universal view’). As a consequence, there is often (unintentional) denial of what comes ‘from the outside’. Shell was committed to their insiders' view and could not really listen to outsiders' views. Afterwards, Shell's CEO Mr Herkströter publicly admitted that the company had to place new emphasis on listening and exchanging views: “What appeared to be the best opinion in the UK was not acceptable elsewhere”.

(7) The majority of Shell's management has a functional background in ‘input’ functions (finance, technology); as a consequence the dominant communication at the beginning of the conflict appeared to be buffering oriented.

(10) Public controversies between Shell's country management (UK versus Germany, etc.) originated through lack of consistency and, as a consequence, lack of efficiency in Shell's communication. The changes in Shell's communication style after the decision not to sink the Brent Spar seems, on the other hand, to increase both consistency and credibility of the company's messages.

7.5 Conclusions

Based on an integrative framework, this article has suggested ten propositions. These propositions have been illustrated with the corporate responses to strategic issues in the Brent Spar case. This illustration resulted in an increased insight into the explanation of Shell's initial buffering strategy, followed by a dramatic shift in corporate response towards a bridging strategy. Two important company-specific determinants, namely the importance of the product and the size of the company seem in particular to influence Shell's original tendency to a buffering strategy.

As is suggested in Proposition 4, the key factor in explaining the recent choice for a bridging strategy, as opposed to the discussed buffering strategy in the Brent Spar case, is clearly top management. In future research, however, it seems important to pay attention to both the influence of the type of corporate level strategy on this factor (Porter, 1987 and Goold, Campbell and Alexander, 1994) and the process of strategy formation in large companies as well. Such research efforts could create more insight into the influence of
organization and management processes on this key factor. Follow-up research along these lines could show that, although top management is and remains primarily responsible for the choice of the corporate response to strategic issues, existing organizational communication and management processes can indeed make such a choice very difficult in the short run.

The Shell's most recent Annual Report, in line with the Speech of Herkströter of October 1996, top management refers to the rejection of the proposed deep-water disposal of Brent Spar and concludes: “We learned in 1995 that we need to have greater external focus if we are to create a better acceptance of the Group's business among varied audiences. Group companies must consult, inform and communicate better with the public. In such a dialogue they will need to point out the complexity of the issues and always balance human, environmental and economic considerations.” (Annual Report 1995, 1996, p. 2). On the basis of the presented framework, this can be considered as an indication of a form of a bridging strategy initiated by Shell's top management. The meaning of firm specific characteristics regarding the organization, communication and, in particular, top management for the dynamics in bridging versus buffering strategies of companies, is once more highlighted.

7.6 References


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Internal communication as a management process

Jan van Delden

8 Challenges at home: from injection to interaction

8.1 Introduction

Internal communication has traditionally been one of the areas of operations of public relations. ‘Public relations begin at home’, we used to say in the pioneering days of PR and we made sure that our external ‘messages’ were first communicated to our own staff in the organisation. Like external PR, this effort was simply motivated by a concern for image. A strong image among your own people is radiated to the external world and influences the image that others have of us, was the guiding thought. A second classical objective of internal PR was ‘binding’, to the business community. The staff magazine provided both, with image messages and people stories. The concept of the profession was still simple. This book shows that the PR profession and the landscape in which it is practised are much more of a motley picture than in the image era. Public relations became (corporate) communication, internal PR became internal communication. The challenges more or less permanently facing our organisations create an equal number of exciting challenges for, in our case, internal communication experts. My brief is to challenge the reader to try out a new paradigm for internal communication for accepting these new challenges. By way of introduction I shall briefly describe the state of the art in the Netherlands.

8.2 Doubts about instrumental model

Internal communication in the Netherlands is in the process of becoming an area of attention equal in value to external communication, but things haven’t got that far yet. Communications managers are usually contracted in for external communication and regard internal communication as a sideline, which can be serviced with the same professionalism. A small proportion of the articles in our trade journals also deal with internal communication. However, there is a reasonably well-filled bookshelf on the subject in the Dutch language. What does it show? Allow me to summarise what Otto Scholten, a communications scientist at the University of Amsterdam, wrote a year ago about seven recent books submitted to him for discussion. All seven quote internal communication as a major pre-requisite for the proper functioning of organisations, which is a gain compared to the open-ended nature of the past. Some of the books are very much focused on practice. With their checklists and milestone plans they offer a wealth of information but still little knowledge and understanding. And their practical concept of internal communication is so very much ‘transmitter-oriented’, with the transmitter as management of the organisation. The scientists among the seven are each in their own way looking for a new concept. They distance themselves from the instrumental, top-down transmitter model (‘injection needle method’) and are on the lookout for forms in which the ‘recipients’ are given a greater role. From influencing to imparting significance, from information transport to interaction. But the wise men are still not agreed on any single consistent alternative paradigm. They do agree on the condition that for a new concept or paradigm, internal communication must be studied in conjunction with management and organisation. That coherence can also be seen in consultancy practice. Where in the past the PR agency was the adviser to management, increasingly multidisciplinary management consultancies are deployed in internal and external communication issues. The communications consultant is a colleague to the management consultant, the change expert, the strategist, the HRM expert and the trainer. Our Dutch professional journal for communication practice also reveals that the instrumental injection needle mode is worn out and must be replaced. In a series of articles on internal communication, we find news from the ‘media front’ as well as a search for a new concept. The media front is mainly concerned with the Intranet and the functions it may assume for internal communication, with knowledge management as what I regard as the most ambitious application. The Intranet offers interactive options and thus unmistakably breaks down the top-down transmitter model. Reflecting on applications of the Intranet is mainly concerned with exchanging work information, notably for knowledge workers. In addition, various authors are looking for their alternative to the transmitter model in management communication. Rather than campaign-like transmitter reinforcement, the various authors argue, we must organise dialogue and debate within the organisation, and must address the process/processes of communication, we must undertake more behaviourial training-like activities and – as a result of new professional practices – develop new qualifications and thus new training courses for the internal communication profession. The informer must become a communicator. A bustle of activity on the thinking front. It should be noted that it is virtually exclusively consultants and scientists who get involved in the discussion. The people from practice tell
So far, we can provide the following provisional definition of management communication:

and announce changes in the things organisation from behind a desk. You need people to achieve them.
of support and involvement of all staff’. To put it even more subtly, change is always focused on the different
behind a desk. But in most cases, that decision makes a claim on (as we like to say in the Netherlands) ‘the base
organisations. The effects that we are seeking come about over time, in an interplay and in a learning process at organisational level. The problem (and the solution) is therefore not just at the interpersonal level of communication, management communication is a process flowing to and fro within the organisation. No feedback equals no management or control, says the cybernetician. My line of thinking results in a program of requirements for a new concept and my own fleshing-out of it: the BIOPi model. This gives form to management communication as one of the management processes used to direct. I round off with a few of the many questions that have yet to be answered.

Management communication versus work communication

Discussions about our field are often confusing as the meanings of internal communication differ. One person means all communication between organisational members, whilst another means dealing with that part driven from the top (staff), whilst a third means the entire corporate-wide messages from the top. Sometimes it is found that the speaker is not talking about communication but of the staff function or department with the same name. I shall therefore first demarcate that part of the field I intend to deal with: management communication. I use the term management communication to refer to a specific part of internal communication, specifically in terms of function within the organisation. From that function, I develop a specification of requirements. For my story, I can make do with the division into the internal communication field by function, into ‘work communication’ and ‘management communication’.

Functional or work communication is the ‘logistic’ supply of information in day-to-day working processes. This functional or work communication is enacted between central management (staffs) and the shop floors of production, but also in and between staff and management levels. Communication mainly means the distribution of information, sometimes standardised and sometimes ‘tailored’; sometimes ‘delivered’ and sometimes collected or sought. The information is factual in nature, and the interpretation by the recipient (the user) professional. In this functional part of the field, organisations have few duties and questions for their communications consultant. (With the rise of the Internet and other ICT applications their interest in work information has been aroused again.) Production and day-to-day work occur in a steady-state situation which can run on process control, work information and directive management.

Management communication on the other hand is communication which serves the management of change in the steady state. At the service of directive management, in other words, which does not first and foremost control production but the organisation. The greatest interest displayed by management and its communications people is usually in ‘Internal Communication during changes’, followed by ‘Communicating policy’. Usually this refers to major changes and decisions driven from the top, but that is a distorted picture. Management of an organisation is always concerned with a large number of smaller or larger changes simultaneously. The top of the organisation is personally busy with a few of them, others are drawn from the staffs or lower-level management.

Managing change

This brings us to the first problem. Frequently, each of the transmitters we have just referred to may dress up his own communication campaign for his project, (thematic management communication), giving rise to what is termed the ‘showering effect’ for lower-level management and staff. This brings us to point 1 of the programme of requirements: rather than thematic communication, management communication in the organisation must be organised as an ongoing process with changing content. Change usually does not mean pressing a button, but a process over time. Directive management must be able to follow it (monitoring) and requires bottom-up information for this. Point 2 is therefore: management communication requires an interplay between a top-down flow and a bottom-up flow.

Changes relate to the things organisation and the people organisation. The things organisation means for example the structure, the hardware, the products, the sales, the ‘content’ choices. You can decide upon them behind a desk. But in most cases, that decision makes a claim on (as we like to say in the Netherlands) ‘the base of support and involvement of all staff’. To put it even more subtly, change is always focused on the different functioning of the organisation and that almost always requires changes in knowledge, understanding, attitude and behaviour on the part of organisation members, individually and above all collectively. You can think up and announce changes in the things organisation from behind a desk. You need people to achieve them. So far, we can provide the following provisional definition of management communication:

Management communication is communication at the service of executive management, which relates to the totality of ‘policy and changes’ under development or under implementation over a given period; this means that management communication is a vital management process.
Now, the instrumental model (the ‘injection needle’) not only fails to have sufficient effect in the level of support and involvement; it also lacks the bottom-up flow required for control. So why do we still attempt to come up with top-down messages and why are we so laborious in arriving at a better concept of management communication? Are we so stupid as managers or communications people? No, we virtually have no other choice within the dominant instrumental management concept. To arrive at a new communication concept, it is first necessary to look at the management concept in use.

**Instrumental management culture**

Management and its advisers, in entering into new challenges, would absolutely love to shake off ‘bureaucracy’. Meanwhile, many of them have unconsciously a fairly Taylorian view of the world. A century ago, Fredrick Winslow Taylor in America developed his organisational and management model for shop-floor production. It was his ideal to make the functioning of the organisation fully independent of people. To this end, he used a far-reaching division of labour. This starts with a strong separation between thinking and doing. Managers have to do all the thinking, so that the workers (‘the men’) on the shop floor only need use their hands. I refer to this as the ‘head hands’ paradigm. It is accompanied by narrow, precisely defined tasks for both the workers and the eight types of managers. All on the assumption that the structure and procedures will naturally ‘heal’ again that ‘division’.

In the century that has passed since then, this instrumental view of management has been further perfected on the one hand (consider systems theory and BPR), whilst on the other human-oriented (motivation) approaches have been thought up to offset the drawbacks for man and organisation. ‘Hard’ and ‘soft’ relieve one another in the history of management science. A nice compromise has come about, but the synthesis still won’t gel.

**Diagram**

The ‘head hands’-paradigm, the Taylorian division between thinking and doing, continues to the present day below the surface and is the cause of many problems in management communication. It leads to a difference in images of the world at top and bottom and provides only top-down in directive communication.

We still come up against Taylor daily in organisations in implicit thinking which is applied. Managers and staff ‘make policy’, middle management implements it and the shop floor constitutes the ‘hands’ to whom a lot is said and of whom little is asked. We can recognise in many even today the belief that a good structure and procedures will ‘of themselves’ heal the division of tasks. There is a preference for quantitative information (which fits into models) to qualitative. When problems occur, management steps in most naturally at systems level and prefers not to intervene in ‘live’ functioning. Talking about policy (the upper triangle) is more popular than getting involved in the drudge of implementation. All symptoms of instrumental management culture. Insufficient distinction is made between managing production and managing the organisation. This leads to an instrumental view of communication. The logistics, transmitter-oriented form which is usually good for work information is also applied to management communication: the top-down distribution of change messages. Nevertheless, virtually all managers and advisers do have a notion that communication should actually be ‘two-way traffic’ but how (and precisely why?!) continues to hang above the discussion as a question. I will attempt to answer this. To do so, we look first in greater detail at the functions or effects that communication may have in the organisation.

**Effects of management communication**

What do we ‘use’ management communication for, and how does it work? In the instrumental model, the answer is usually: management communication so as to transfer management messages to the employees, so as to create a level of support and involvement in policy or a change project. Behind that, there is the linear view that what is transmitted can be transferred one to one to the head and heart of the recipient and when it arrives there leads to approval and behavioural change. Should this not succeed, the message has clearly not yet arrived that what is transmitted can be transferred one to one to the head and heart of the recipient and when it arrives, the transmitter will have to be switched on longer or at a higher volume. What precisely ‘base of support’ and ‘involvement’ actually are isn’t specified, but it means something like: the people are enthusiastically behind their management. It may happen that a management message does have such an effect, but it is highly improbable for the totality of communication themes.

To arrive at a more realistic picture about the function and workings of management communication, we must look at two levels: at (inter)personal level and organisational level.

From the organisational level perspective, the function of communication is to help ‘heal’ the divisions within the organisation, between levels, departments, individuals, so as to arrive at optimum ‘collective functioning’. With management communication, this particularly means healing the divisions between thinking and doing, between top and bottom, between hard and soft management, between the things organisation and the people organisation. It is one of the processes used to manage an organisation. Communication doesn’t come after managing but is an essential part of it. And the intended effect is much more varied than in the linear thinking. It’s a question of the equal alignment of the organisation and its members (including management), such that they – in the many situations that are not ‘controlled’ – can make the optimum contribution to the organisation’s objectives. Equal alignment arises from a collective reference framework and that has three important dimensions:

- Equal alignment demands collectivity of knowledge (information) and understanding regarding a theme or the greater whole, to which everyone contributes from their own position and takes from it.
- Equality of alignment also requires collectiveness of the ‘world image’ from which we give significance to the information. Who are we as an organisation, how do we see ourselves in our environment, how do we
measure the importance of events, how do we interpret messages from one another? A process of ‘imparting significance’.

- And equality of alignment is determined by the quality of the relationship between the organisation in the abstract (the ‘system’), management and the others. Whether we think in positive terms about one another, have trust in one another, experience respect and give it, equally determines the equality of alignment and the willingness to meet the outside world as a single man/woman.

Such a collective reference framework of knowledge, world image and a relationship develops over time and in an interplay (dialogue) between all the players in their various roles. That is why good management communication at organisational level is an interactive and continuous process of information exchange, collective interpretation and imparting significance and relationship development.

At the (inter)personal level, it is a question of how individuals and groups develop their attitude towards their organisation or their management or their personnel. It is a question of coordinating mutual needs, not just material needs, but also such needs as appreciation and respect, sense of influence and success, sharing in the knowledge and sharing in the discussion, identification and involvement, positive image of the organisation, independence and self-awareness rather than dependence. All these are simultaneously motivating factors for people and valuable ‘assets’ for the organisation because they are pre-requisites for everyone’s optimum contribution to the whole. And these personal effects in turn can only come about in an interactive process over time.

The way these concepts are fleshed out may differ at any place in your organisation. If the process starts with an initiative from the top, a ‘kick-off’ with messages from the top is useful, but they must then be specified for each individual in their own place. The feedback to the initiators in turn must be generalised. It is inconceivable that the communications manager can govern everything in addition to the top. Fortunately, the organisation already has a structure for this: the management line or administration chain, the top, middle management, executive management, executive employees and vice versa. Management communication is therefore line communication, supported by parallel resources.

Requirements

In my argument to date I have specified the following requirements – with some diversions – which a concept must comply with for better management communication to my mind:

- it must be set up as a circular process at organisational level, i.e. a circle via the management chain up and down;
- it is a continuous process and ‘content’ may be imparted to it at any place and at any time;
- it is an integrated process, it is not set up separately for each theme but covers the entire complex of themes with which the organisation is involved;
- it is administered, i.e. it allows management to monitor by means of a bottom-up flow and if necessary adjust it;
- it is interactive, i.e. it is two-way traffic mainly focused on mutual influencing and development of knowledge and awareness, world image and relationships over time.

The reader may rightly observe that we are no longer speaking of a communication process and its management, but of managing minor and major change processes. That is why I call this type of communication a management process.

It is tempting to further develop a theme of ‘managing change processes’ here. For here, too, we see this instrumental approach (‘milestone plans’), and faulty understanding of what the ‘process’ of change is and how to control it. But within the scope of this article, I must leave it to the reader to familiarise himself with the following communication model and to consider how to see it as a change model.

8.4 The BIOP model

The BIOP model is a process model which allows everyone within the organisation to be involved (in their own position and in a predictable manner) in the policy cycle: change decision (or preparation for it) implementation (or control of it) and evaluation and improvement. Each one in their own place means that people obtain specific information and make a specific contribution via their boss from the place where they work and have most expertise.

Diagram of BIOP model

The BIOP model, interactive management communication by means of a circular process from top to bottom and back, via the management channel. Each one is able to participate in the process of influence at their own place, management can control the process.

The diagram shows an organisation with four levels: shop floors, immediate management, middle management and the board. The management chain is organised in a linking pin structure. Essential in the conceptual model is that the shop floor (on-the-job consultation) is part of the chain and not just, as with Taylor, an object of management.

Let us first look at the bottom-most triangle separately. The arrows pointing downwards and upwards show a communication loop between the executive manager and his staff. It is a loop of information exchange and mutual influence. Input from the manager and response from employees fits in this loop, or vice versa: initiative
from staff and reaction from the manager. This bottom-most triangle is anything but self-supporting. Most of the
change initiative come from the higher regions and many initiatives on the floor cannot be resolved within the
bottom-most triangle. A good linkage is therefore required – via one’s own manager – to the next highest level,
and that is different from current practice. The immediate superior does not protect the middle manager from the
shop floor, the middle manager asks inquisitively what is negotiated down below there.
The same loop can be imagined in the central and top triangle. An initiative from the top may sometimes be
rounded off within the top-most triangle, sometimes a loop through the second and the third triangle is required.
Sometimes once up and down (or down and up) is sufficient, but in change processes a theme will usually flow
throughout the process for a longer period. What is then essential is the process of interaction, represented by
the arrows, continuously and content-independently circulating. It is therefore not dressed up afresh (as often
happens) for each theme, it is a continuous communication process with changing content. The greatest
challenge is not thinking of the structure, in the example the line structure is simply used with linking pins.
What it boils down to is effectively describing the roles of ‘each in their own place’. The most difficult thing
will probably be the intermediate roles, in our example the middle manager and the executive manager. In the
classical communication plan they are ‘transmitter amplifiers’ from the top. The top would prefer to address the
floor directly out of fear that intermediaries filter and distort excessively. In the BIOP model, the intermediaries
have a specific, explicitly described selection and translation function top and bottom. The top must continue to
drive the ongoing interaction process and to direct it. It can do so by indicating the sort of process actions it is
asking of lower management and what it wants to hear back from the channel. The shop floor must get used to
the role of being ‘members’ of the administration chain. For all of them, it is mainly a change in management
culture. That is a change process in itself.
A frequently heard misunderstanding is that a process approach is a question of verbal interpersonal
communication skills on the part of the various players in the game. Meetings and dialogues are certainly part of
this, but our BIOP process can also be enacted via other forms of communication: letters, reports, e-mail,
Intranet or an old fashioned pin-board. And another misunderstanding I am wishing to avoid: the BIOP model
does not make transmission from the top redundant. Furthermore, organising a contribution via project or think
tanks remains necessary. And apart from vertical management communication in the line, there remain a wide
variety of horizontal and diagonal forms of communication. But the vertical process is the backbone connecting
everything together.

8.5 Much discussion still required

Dutch professional colleagues have gradually reached consensus that the instrumental injection needle model is
due for replacement. The BIOP model offers a genuine alternative. Honesty demands that I say that I am not
able as yet to offer a case in which the model has been used en bloc, though I have experience with parts of it.
The decision to put it into practice is not up to the communications expert but to senior management, which has
to do a great deal itself. The choice is not between two similar options. Many managers (and situations) demand
rapid action. The choice of the instrumental action-like model then is experienced as self-evident. A rapid
project, a tried and tested communication plan (transmitter plan), familiar resources, soon show results. They
also deliver an effect and may be delegated to the communications person to a large extent.
If the BIOP process has still to be developed (which could readily be done on the basis of such a project), this
will require comprehensive fundamental discussion, to start with between the top and their communications
adviser, and then lower down in the organisation. None of the players can fall back on routine here. Once the
process is working smoothly, it need not take any more energy than at present and the benefits are there for the
taking. In organisations that are seriously dealing with empowerment and seeking to bring down other forms of
resolving capacity the choice should not be difficult. An injection needle approach gives people ‘in their place’
inadequate support. An interactive process model right down to the floor does provide that support and helps
senior management monitor and direct.
What does all this mean for the communication field? The communications consultant is also having to deal
with a new and uncertain situation, what to tackle and how to go about it. Like his manager, he is part of an
instrumental culture and, like Baron von Münchhausen, he’ll have to extricate himself from morass by pulling
on his own hair. If he currently is still allowed to call himself communications manager, he will soon have to
abandon that title. Line managers manage the communication and he supports and coaches. And probably there
will be other disciplines putting themselves forward as management communications consultant. General
management consultants, HRM experts, change experts and trainers can all make a contribution from their own
field to developing and maintaining management communication. The communications person can make
various choices here. He can leave the profession (but that’s not very bold), he can also continue nicely in the
old model and not disturb sleeping managers. The other extreme is that the communications consultant should
acquire the skills of all these disciplines. Very interesting, but too much of a good thing. A middle way may be
to outline an interactive process for his organisation and develop and support it together with line management
and the other specialisms. And much of the old profession will still prove valuable. Analyses and
communication plans will have to be drawn up, messages formulated, activities and resources developed and
results evaluated. But in an entirely new context.

Reaction from readers are very welcome with a view to further developing the model and the underlying
philosophy, for example on www.jvdelden@xs4all.nl.
9 The communication grid, a situational model for strategic communications management

Betteke van Ruler

9.1 Introduction

The way in which we deal with one another within Dutch society changed markedly halfway through the twentieth century. The sociologist De Swaan wrote an article on the subject in 1979, which remains interesting today. Now as then, there was serious discussion of the question of whether norms in society were in decline. His answer was: no, but they are changing. In his contribution to this collection (Chapter 1), Spangenberg lays bare the key socio-cultural undercurrents at the start of the twenty first century. He draws attention to their consequences for trends and changing patterns of consumption. In my contribution, I wish to explore the patterns of relationships changing as a result of the socio-cultural undercurrents, a theme that has traditionally preoccupied public relations. The clusters that Spangenberg identifies have a major impact on the nature of the communicative actions of organisations.

9.2 Changes in society

From command economy to a negotiation economy

De Swaan predicted twenty years ago that whilst there may be many fewer rules imposed by origin, upbringing and hierarchy, there were increasing numbers of rules concerning how people ought to deal with one another. As he sees it, the way in which we deal with one another (our intercourse economy) has changed from a command economy to a negotiation economy. In the process it would appear that people have become freer, but actually the norm has become that consultation is required on everything, and negotiation is called for. We could call this the process of democratising society, by analogy with the process of democratising politics from much longer ago. Time has proven that De Swaan is right. The whole of Western society requires people to take account of a great many other people and a much wider diversity of other people than appeared necessary in the past. As a result, they have much more frequent contact and maintain contact with many more people, who also exhibit major differences among themselves in terms of interests and reference framework. This applies not only to individuals but also to organisations.

Being good and visible as a requirement for organisations

The form that these contacts must take is open to discussion, however. This has to do with another development which is probably even more radical for organisations. The communications scientist Scholten (1999) recently described how two matters are of fundamental importance to survival for organisations nowadays, namely ‘being good’ and ‘being visible’. Being good has two meanings. Naturally, an organisation has to be good in the sense that it supplies good-quality products or services at an appropriate price. Being good also means, however, that organisations are prepared and willing to demonstrate that they operate in such a manner that they acquire legitimacy to continue. The latter implies that the organisation must seek in society to learn what is responsible and what isn’t. That’s one side of the coin. On the other side, the organisation must also be visible. Again this has two meanings: being visible in the form of showing what his products or services are, but also showing what it represents, accounting for what it does, and showing that it takes note of what society thinks. Both matters are new in this extended meaning and have consequences for the way in which organisations have to communicate with their environment.
Relationship management is the determining factor

The communications scientist Gutteling (1999) is conducting research in the Netherlands into crisis communication. His finding is that the outcome of communication processes in crises (as expressed in confidence by relevant audiences) depends to a large degree on the relationship that the organisation had with those audiences prior to the crisis. This implies that the method of communication is not only concerned with individual communication activities, but also (or perhaps primarily) with the preventive development of good relationships. His findings are confirmed by other research, such as that by Marra (1998). It sounds simpler than it is, however. The fact is that audiences are not fixed entities, of which you can hold lists in your computer. Ever changing groups are emerging with which the organisation has to maintain contact, and they are also ever changing in composition. It is therefore better to see audiences as categories of persons who form themselves into an audience on the basis of a particular interest in or involvement in themes at play in society. At the time when the organisation is involved in such a theme in some way or another, the audience for that theme has become an audience group for the organisation. Crisis communication literature reveals that once an audience has become active and is manning the barricade, it is too late. Communication with employees, with customers, journalists, action groups, labour market, money providers, etc, therefore requires a policy-based and management approach at a high level in the organisation and on the basis of a long-term strategy. That is why we are currently speaking of strategic communications management in the Netherlands. This refers to the specialist function in or for a public or private organisation, concerned with initiating, directing and supervising communication and information processes in the context of an organisation, within a particular policy framework, from the perspective of the functioning of the organisation, and with a view to what will benefit the organisation as a whole in its functioning within society and relating to short- and long-term decisions within the organisation.

9.3 Two-sidedness as a basic principle of communications management

Demarcating communications management

What is common to all thinking on communications management by scientists and professionals is ‘initiating and maintaining or sustaining contact between individuals within an organisation and between an organisation and its environment with particular intentions’. This is a vague description, but can be seen as the largest common denominator to be found in all the literature, and also emerges from all the research among professionals. Communications management can be seen at what is termed a border or marginal position in an organisation. This means that it is a position where it is part of the function to maintain contact with others who do not have the same interests (see inter alia Dozier, 1992). With communications management, this concerns on the one hand the top of the organisation and on the other the internal and external environment in the form of audiences. Everyone agrees about the fact that communications management operates in this conflict field. The way in which this borderline position is shaped in the literature has been very different over time, however, and thus also the way in which contact is maintained. In the early period, the emphasis was mainly on communication as an official task, in the eighties the emphasis was on communication as a means of implementing policy (management instrument). Nowadays, communication is also (or even primarily) seen as a means of shaping policy, the background being that policy which enjoys support is also much more likely to be a legitimate policy. Shell uses the terms ‘dialogue, decide, deliver’ to contrast with their former approach of ‘decide, action, defend’. Viewed in this light, communication is a strategic instrument. This means that the range of responsibilities of communications management is becoming ever wider, and the organisational level at which communications management takes shape ever higher.

The question that actually emerges in this integration process of communication into organisation is the question of who must do something in the contact. Does organisation management decide its direction and do staff and other relevant categories and individuals have to go along with that, or should something be happening at both parties? This is also sometimes seen as the problem of one-way traffic or two-way traffic or asymmetry or symmetry in the relationship. Literature shows a historical development in this respect.

Communication as an ornament

In the sixties and seventies, there was talk of little but public relations, information, advertising and the like. Communication was not as yet a current term for referring to these areas, although they were seen as forms of manifestation of communication. The characteristic feature was that they were used at the end of a policy or production process: when the decisions had been taken or the products were ready, we had to let the external world know what had been decided or what the special features of a particular product were. From this perspective, it was a form of expression of the organisation to the public at large, usually via the mass media or via brochures and the like which were dishd out to anyone who wanted them. Following Grunig, I call this a craftsman’s approach to communications management (see Diagram 1). A premise in this thinking is first of all that coverage is sufficient as an effect and secondly that coverage is a natural consequence of the announcement. This implies that no well-founded policy plan need be developed to decide which statements should be made, how, and to whom, and that no control system is required. If specialists are required, they are mainly copywriters and journalists, i.e. professional craftsmen who are able to write well and produce a story. But there were virtually no clear ideas as to what one ought to be able to do or not. From this perspective, communication is only an ornament, not a variable in the decision-making process itself. Officials who have to provide this expression naturally do not require a policy position either, but can make do with a supporting staff function or a
position low in the hierarchy. Then of course there is no need for structural budgets either; allocating funds by individual campaign is sufficient. In communication science terms, there is simply unfocused and uncontrolled one-way traffic in the form of an information flow from the organisation to an unknown public. This is sometimes sneeringly referred to as ‘communication as a magic bullet’.

Diagram 1  Craft model

Communication as management instrument
There was growing criticism of the view of communication as an ornament in the seventies. Advertising was embraced by marketing as part of the promotion and seen as one of the variables in the marketing mix (see for example Kotler, 1976). Public relations was also incorporated into much marketing literature as a means of promotion. Authors on public relations, however, always sharply opposed this, because they felt that they were serving entirely different objectives from marketing (see for example Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Methods were developed for advertising and thinking turned to effect studies. Public relations lagged behind the development of methodology. Criticism in the government sector in particular became ever more open, but in other sectors as well the former PR departments were under pressure, because it was unclear what they supplied (Lagerwey, 1997). The reply in the Dutch literature was that what the marketing manager does for the services and products, the information official (a term mainly used in the government sector, referring to the same phenomenon) or the information official (a term mainly used in the government sector, referring to the same phenomenon) or the PR official (the customary term in the other sectors) does for policy (see for example Van Woerkum, 1982). What is characteristic here is that objectives are set and a sound plan with target research is called upon, a careful co-ordination of resources, and a control system. There was a desire to get away from the terms public relations and information on account of the one-sided connotation of information and the bad reputation of public relations. Most authors, like many professionals, opted for the general term communication as an umbrella concept (Van Ruler, 1996). In the literature, communication was assigned a specialised function from the perspective of management instrument, along with P&O, marketing, finance and the like. Public relations grew as a result from an ornament into an instrument and thus became subject to planning and control. One of the things that this served to clarify was the need to co-ordinate statements from what have come to be known as ‘the communications department’, which mainly focused on journalists, financial and social target groups, and the marketing department, which focused on commercial target groups (see in particular Van Riel, 1995). What was also confusing was that advertising started to use the term ‘communication’ to refer to its activities. This was one of the reasons that led Van Riel to develop the concept of corporate communication. The key principle in this thinking is that all communication from the organisation must be co-ordinated and also founded on common points of departure, derived from the strategy of the organisation and set out in its mission statement.

There are two dimensions that are deciding factors in the planning system of corporate communication: the perception that target groups have of the organisation (image) and the presentation that the organisation naturally gives through its behaviour, symbolism and communication statements (identity). If the image is negative, the organisation must improve its performance. The premise behind this thinking is that a particular form of presentation also results in a particular picture of target groups. It is clear that this requires research methodology, planning systems and structural budgets, and a department high up in the organisation, preferably at management level. In this literature, the communication statements attract much more attention than the symbolism, whilst the behaviour of staff is left virtually untouched. I call this a seller’s vision of communications management, because communications management has the function of ‘selling’ products, services, ideas or decisions (see Diagram 2).

This method of working requires managers who have had a specialist training at senior educational level. In communication science terms, this is controlled one-way traffic from the organisation to target groups segmented by the organisation by certain characteristics, with the check both before and after one’s own communication campaign taking the form of a baseline measurement and follow-up measurement for summary evaluation. Although many call this a two-way process, I prefer to call this one-way traffic because the initiative and the content of the two communication flows emanates from the organisation. From this perspective, communication policy is still seen as following organisation policy. There is therefore no scope for an autonomous communication flow towards the organisation which can affect your organisation policy. The changes at best are ‘front stage’ rather than ‘back stage’.

Diagram 2  Seller’s model

Communication as a strategic instrument
Since the end of the eighties, there has been a different vision of the role of communications management in the specialist literature and among early adopters in communications management itself (see for example Caywood, 1997; Grunig, 1992; Van Ruler, 1998). This assigns a bridging function to communications management between the organisation and environment, the heart of the matter being that to influence image mainly requires the actions of the organisation itself to be changed, such that it accords better with what the environment considers legitimate. This implies that a permanent two-way communication flow must be maintained. This cannot be left to chance, but must be guided. An elementary point is that the organisation is prepared if necessary not only to change its presentation (front stage), but also its total way of acting, including strategic choices (back stage). In the process, communication policy is no longer (automatically) derived from organisational policy, but an interplay is assumed between the two. The top level of the organisation opts for
different action from this perspective if the strategy adopted is found not to be appreciated or legitimised. The premise behind this thinking is that audiences generally will only allow themselves to be influenced if the organisation is prepared (directly or indirectly) to enter into dialogue with them and to arrive at a consensus about the overall actions of the organisation. In communication science terms, this is controlled two-way traffic between organisation and environment segmented by interest, with control being an ongoing formative process. Grunig calls this ‘the symmetrical model of public relations’. It refers to an intermediary vision of communications management, as communications managers have the control function of the communication and information flows internally and externally (see Diagram 3).

From this perspective, public opinion and changes within it assume an important position. It is here that changes occur in what is considered legitimate and what isn’t. This is sometimes referred to as the reflective role of public relations/communications management (Van Ruler, 2001). It is also part of this perspective that internal communication acquires much greater attention than in previous views of communications management, as it is the behaviour of the organisation as a whole that is up for discussion. This is sometimes referred to as the educative role of public relations, in which the communication skill of all members of the organisation is open to discussion. The position of communications management within the organisation must necessarily change as a result of this broadening. This requires such a position in the organisation as to allow both for critical distance and confidential dealings with and therefore influence on the senior level of the organisation. The literature often refers to a sparring partner position and the need for a staff position within which one can give process advice (Seydel, 1996). It therefore cannot be other than all forms of communication are brought under a single heading, but also that a visible control position is formulated in the form of a specialist at senior management or staff level. Schultz et al. (1994) speak in this connection of a ‘communication tsar’. Visible means that the position is also visible as a weighty position in the organogram. This new perspective of the role of communications management demands forms of communication which allow for dialogue on a large scale and planning systems which can be deployed flexibly because they are situational.

**Diagram 3 Symmetrical model**

9.4 The basic strategies of symmetrical communications management

The direction of the contact

The three visions of communications management formulated here are not visions of day-to-day dealings with communication, but of general communication policy that an organisation follows and which serves as a starting point for day-to-day action. The question of whether an organisation is open to external influence is in fact not a matter of communication but of organisation. A question of which vision is adopted is therefore not so much or in any event not exclusively the problem of the communications manager as a general organisation problem. We can also see this vision as the degree of communication awareness of an organisation (cf. Caywood, 1997). At the most developed phase of communication awareness, the organisation is prepared to open itself extensively, i.e. back stage as well, to external influence. The organisation literature shows that this form of communication awareness seems to be the most appropriate in our current negotiation society. As far as that is concerned, developments in communication theory and organisational theory go hand in hand. It does, however, lead to a great range of confusion about day-to-day practice of communication. The principle of openness does not mean that all forms of contact should be forms of two-way traffic. Nor are they so in practice, not even at organisations that open themselves to external influence. It is and remains the case that many contacts within the organisation or between organisation and environment are exclusively deployed with the intention of changing something at one party. To further complicate matters, allowance must be made for the fact that it is not only the organisation that is seeking to make others aware of something or to influence them, but equally that other persons or bodies may initiate contact and trigger a flow of information to the organisation, or do so via the link, via third parties or public opinion. In that event, it is someone else who has the intention (direct or indirectly), of having one-sided contact with (individuals within) the organisation. It is therefore not only the organisation that is a transmitter of messages, others also do so, towards the organisation. This must be channelled. If the organisation sets out to be open, a communication system will therefore have to be established. This does not detract from the fact, however, that there are two types of flows that require management: (controlled) one-way traffic flows and (real) two-way traffic flows. What is interesting then is which stream is desirable in which situation. My hypothesis is that this is connected on the one hand with the phase of policy development and asks the question whether there is scope within the organisation for internal influence. On the other hand, it has to deal with the phase of the public in which the other party finds itself. Grunig (1992) makes a distinction between latent, conscious and active public. Every type of public has its own information and communication needs. The choice of one of the two traffic flows therefore has to deal with two variables: the phase of policy and the phase of public.

The intended result of the contact

The second question that arises is what the contact is intended to deliver. Broadly speaking, there are two opinions on this. These boil down to the difference between a narrow view of communication and a broad one. As some see it, communication revolves solely around the ability to share in one another’s experiences, in other words communication is the process in which parties attempt to make messages (characters and symbols) antecedent to one another to make clear what they have experienced or thought up. This is a problematical process which at best can yield an understanding of what the other is talking about (one sided or mutual understanding) and is also seen as ‘influencing the knowing awareness’. I define this as the interpretation of
communication in a narrow sense. Other see communication as a process of targeted influencing of knowledge/attitude/behaviour of one by the other. This is a much broader view, where the direction of the influencing of the knowing is made part of the communication process. This is also referred to as effect thinking, in contrast to the former view, which is referred to as transaction or interaction thinking. At first glance, these views would appear to be quite some distance apart. And yet that is not entirely true. The factor that is at play in the theorising on effect thinking is that people do not fall for the nice words alone, and more is therefore required than putting out messages, as discussed in transaction thinking. The process in effect thinking is therefore more comprehensive than the message-antecedence alone. The literature therefore shows the communication as a focused influencing process can only be achieved under certain conditions, and these lie not exclusively or even not so much in the message as in the transmitter and receiver conditions (see for example Perloff, 1993). At the same time, it is also clear in transaction thinking that the interpretation of the message is not fully autonomous, but should be seen more in terms of degrees of freedom. So these two opinions are not so very far apart. I therefore propose not to regard these two views of communication as mutually exclusive but as complementing each other. That allows them to be seen as strategies in communications management.

The variants placed in a model

Viewed in this light, the direction of the contact and the intended result can be seen as dimensions of communications management. As regards the nature of the contact, I have made a distinction between controlled one-way traffic and two-way traffic. As regards the intended result, I have made a distinction between making messages the antecedent, which henceforth I shall refer to as ‘revealing’, and targeted influencing of knowledge, attitude, behaviour, which I give below under the heading of ‘influencing’. Each of the two dimensions therefore has two values. We can place them in a matrix producing a situational model of communications management, with the direction of the communication traffic on one axis and the intended result on the other. Four squares are thus created in the model developed, which are part of the competency of communications management. This creates a model which I call the Communication Grid. It is perhaps redundant to point out that in my thinking, it is the role of communications management to act as the pivot in controlling an organisation’s communications, i.e. not as communicator but as communications manager, or director, educator and facilitator of the communications of others. Anyone wishing to do so from an asymmetrical shaping of his borderline position not only controls the communication towards staff and external categories. Senior management is just as much a public group for control by the communications manager. Everyone is a transmitter and receiver, is everything at some time and sometimes virtually simultaneously. The communications manager is the official who stands in the middle of communication traffic, and from there diagnoses the problem, decides what can be changed by deploying communication, and opts to deploy one or more of these strategies. The borderline position of communications management must therefore be seen in my perspective as a very central position in the organisation, in which the boundaries between staff, departments, business units, senior managers, fellow sector members, competitors, customers and other stakeholders are settled.

The communication grid explained

The four fields that can be identified in the matrix can be seen as sub-areas of communications management, each with their own theories, in which conditions are described under which they can operate and can realistically be deployed as strategy. These conditions lie in the actor variables ‘phase of policy’ and ‘phase of public’.

The four strategies constitute the ‘toolkit’ of communications management so to speak, and thus are strategies from which communications management can choose to resolve communication problems, according to the type of problem involved, the phase of policy and the phase of the public. It is therefore a situational diagram (see diagram 4).

Diagram 4 The Communication Grid ®

The square of controlled one-way traffic and revealing provides the information basic strategy. This is what extension science sometimes refers to as ‘help in forming opinions or decisions’. The concept of help is open to discussion here, but this wording defines what fits this square, namely the strategy of the transmitter who wants to inform someone of something, with a view to getting him or her to think, form an opinion and if required take a decision on how to act. It is the transaction of making a message antecedent. The strategy demands a rounded policy (for there has to be a clear message) and a public requiring information, and which is therefore aware.

The square of controlled one-way traffic and influencing provides the persuasion basic strategy. This is sometimes referred to in extension science as persuasive information, but it is equally the basis of advertising and propaganda. Corporate communication in the sense of profiling the organisation so that there is a positive basic position with relevant stakeholders also fits this square. It is the targeted influencing of knowledge, attitude, behaviour of the other, the strategy of a broadcaster wishing to persuade someone else that he is right. The strategy demands a rounded policy and a public with latent interest.

The square of two-way traffic and revealing provides the dialogue basic strategy. This ties in with the consultation that many organisations are currently seeking with prioritising stakeholders in developing policy. It is the facilitating bridging function that is formulated in interactive policy-making and socially responsible enterprise. But this also ties in as a strategy with considering effective deployment of job discussions or small-
scale brainstorming to identify particular problems and to collect possible solutions. The strategy fits with the first phase of development of policy (exploration and identification of the problem), and requires an aware public.

The square of two-way traffic and influencing provides the consensus creation basic strategy. This strategy refers to the concern for co-ordination between the organisation and the environment or between employees. In much public relations literature this is seen as ‘the’ function of public relations. From my perspective, it is not the only function, but a strategy for managing relationships internally and between organisation and environment. It is a strategy which is mainly deployed when there are conflicting interests at stake and it refers to a process of mutual influencing. The strategy can be deployed with an active public and requires space for modifying policy, therefore, and fits with the phase of policy development.

Theorising about the information strategy is mainly found within mass communication. Theorising on the persuasion strategy mainly occurs within social psychology. These are both also theoretical fields which are drawn upon when theories on the communications management arise. The dialogue and consensus creation strategies are less easily found within the theoretical field of communications management. This does not alter the fact that consensus creation is an important phenomenon in conflict and negotiation theories and in theories on personal communication within an organisation. And dialoguing is, at the end of the day, a strategy which finds its basis within theories of mediation and interviewing and is currently being widely discussed and applied in the context of the learning organisation and knowledge management.

The four basic strategies are all identifiable in reality because they are used daily in communication traffic between people. In the practice of communications management, however, one-way traffic strategies are deployed much more than two-way traffic strategies. I am not aware of any manual in the field of communications management in which all these forms of communication are discussed, let alone dealt with as strategies for well-managed communication traffic in the context of the organisation.

9.5 Discussion

The model I have developed of basic strategies in communications management as outlined above, has been well received in Dutch professional practice. It offers a solution to demarcating the area of operations, it provides a vision of the communication policy of organisations, and it offers a ‘toolkit’ for day-to-day practice. It inspires communications managers and consultants to take a different view of their field and it offers a hook for talking differently about their work with clients and principles. However, I can still see three problems.

First of all, this form of communications management can only be practised if communication is seen as an integral part of an organisation. And communication can only be so if it is seen as a specialist policy area alongside the organisation’s social, financial and commercial policy. That is not yet very frequently the case and the question is what has to be done for that to come about. Grunig (1992) offers an interesting angle here. In his PR theory, he assumes that the choice of a particular PR theory depends upon a number of factors, within which three are the main focus: 1) the vision of senior management (the dominant coalition) of the way in which an organisation should deal with its environment, in other words with its relationship policy, 2) the structure of the organisation which must be such that an open culture is or becomes possible, and 3) the potential of the communications department. I think his analysis is a correct one. From my perspective, it constitutes the second and third problems that I would like to discuss here.

The second problem that I see is that communication and organisation can no longer be separated. Anyone seeking to manage the flows of communication and information in a particular manner must concern themselves with how the organisation is structured. That gives rise to a ‘turf’ problem and thus to a battle for competence within organisations. I also observe that in organisations where communications management assumes this form, they are considering merging with the Human Resources or Strategy departments. That however, shows up the relatively weak status of communications management in the Netherlands: the head of the department usually becomes a Personnel manager and the name of the department also reflects this. Communications management thus loses its visibility.

And the third problem is the enormous change in the role of the communications manager himself. All too often, I see the communications manager positioning himself as a communicator rather than as a manager of communication and information processes of others. In an intermediary vision of communications management, he will only rarely be a communicator himself, and much more often the planner, the controller, the teacher and the facilitator of the processes of others. The output from his activities are thus less visible. Furthermore, he must adopt a critical stance, and that also means with regard to management. Their communicative skills and their view of reality are also up for discussion. This undeniably gives rise to problems of loyalty and legitimacy. It is inherent in this use of a borderline position and does not serve to make the work any easier. The area of operations of communications management in a negotiation society does become more interesting but not any simpler. The time when the communications manager or consultant could get by with a good network of relationships and with a good level of general development is definitely a thing of the past.

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10 Fluid public opinion: new requirements for ‘leadership in communication’
10.1 Quotations

Some recent quotations.

Charles Huijskens (former journalist on the Dutch daily De Telegraaf and TV programme NOS Journaal): “Figures don’t help you. That’s also the lesson from Brent Spar, the oil platform that had to be scrapped. Shell’s figures did make sense, but Greenpeace controlled the emotions: don’t turn the sea into a rubbish tip!” (Interview in Esquire, September 1999)

Bram Peper (former Netherlands Minister of Home Affairs): “Media support feelings of discontent. The high rhythm and frequency ensure a constant level of nervousness, particularly in politics.” (Internal paper)

Jozias van Aartsen (Netherlands Minister of Foreign Affairs): “Within a few hours the public and politicians will join forces behind some theme or other.” (Interview)

10.2 Thesis

Thesis: The transition from the 20th to the 21st century in the field of communication will be mainly dominated by different patterns in the establishment of ‘public opinions’, both within organisations and beyond. Partly as a result of the nervousness and the formation of opinion and images, accelerations are occurring in decision-making and in the change in behavioural patterns. This has demonstrable consequences for the form and content of communication processes, requires a different type of ‘leadership in communication’ and sets different and growing requirements for the quality of the practice of the profession by communications people. The position of the communication field is changing as a result as well.

10.3 ‘Managed democracy’ in communication

Communications professionals concern themselves with the use of different communication modalities, such as information, public relations, advertising and lobbying to measurably influence knowledge, attitude and behaviour of groups and ultimately individuals. They do this at the strategic, tactical and executive level. In practice such a deliberate, intentional control of communication means organising a process of ongoing interchange between the receptiveness of the recipient and the power of conviction of the transmitter, who regularly change role within such a process. From the point of view of the communications professional, who performs communication activities on behalf of his or her client, it essentially involves informing, inspiring and activating, after the knowledge, attitude and behavioural level of the relevant groups have been identified as thoroughly as possible. It is not for nothing that the work of a communications professional sets high requirements for sensitivity, the capacity to engage in a real dialogue and skills in achieving inspiring communication processes and products.

Organising effective communication therefore requires managing bottom-up and top-down processes, so that pre-defined communication objectives can be achieved within public-opinion processes (within and outside organisations) via a form of managed democracy. This demands leadership and communication in an environment in which the establishment of public opinion is rapidly changing.

10.4 A growing industry

Another paper in this collection (Denig, Chapter 2) indicates just how much the communication field has developed in terms of content and volume since the Second World War. In fact, there has been a booming field in the Netherlands over the past 20 years, growing significantly more rapidly than average economic growth. There are no grounds for assuming that this trend will come to a standstill in the near future. Other Western countries are displaying similar patterns.

10.5 Content of communication

Apart from the spectacular growth in the volume of communication efforts and expressions in the Netherlands, major changes can be identified in the content and nature of the communication processes. These can be summarised in the following six main trends:

1. As a result of the growing interest attached to the emotional aspects of communication, image-forming and image, based on emotional impulses, are winning out in effectiveness in influencing public opinion over content, argumentation, logic and rationality. “Emotional intelligence” (Goleman, 1998) then becomes of decisive importance not only in surviving in the current communication society but in bringing about image and opinion formation in a professional manner.
2. Partly as a result of electronic media, transmitter and recipient are changing roles ever more rapidly, which means that the communicative individual or the communicative organisation are increasingly the subject and object of communication simultaneously. It is no longer a question of osmotic processes between stable organisation forms and their environment, but an ongoing and dynamic interchange between the views and behaviour of individuals in various roles (employee consumer, campaigner, family member, communicator) and their organisational contexts changing over time.

3. The current network society leads to growing overlaps between public and private communication with far-reaching changes in the job content of communications professionals and the private and public sector.

4. As a result of the increase in speed in communicative process (brought about by such factors as the Internet, mobile telephony and the 24-hours economy) and the globalisation of communication, incidents and hypes are playing a role of growing importance in the formation of images and decision-making.

5. The above trends, which are connected with the individualisation of western society, are leading to a need for new solidarity. This new solidarity is no longer based on the ancient ‘isms’ and associated traditional forms of organisation, but on new, highly personal values, which are expressed in temporary, project like forms. In his contribution (chapter 14), Warner points for example to the growing importance that Dutch businesses attach to socially responsible and sustainable business.

6. This unstable communication environment is leading to new requirements for communications professionals. The need for organisations to profile and legitimise themselves is increasing almost exponentially, leading to a further focus on vision, mission, positioning, brand policy and a communication strategy and implementation, which is able to rapidly enhance the capacity of individuals organisations and branch to stand out. Network organisations demand a sharp focus on process support, which in fact is communication in the administrative sense. The growing number of media demands a deepening of media policy. In short: the requirements for internal and external communications consultants are becoming ever broader and higher.

10.6 Background to the trends

The trends in communication described above are based on a variety of social developments which are described elsewhere in this collection (Spangenberg, Chapter 1). At the same time, communication is an integral part of these trends by accelerating or curbing social processes, according to the position of the communicating individual and/or the communicating organisation within these developments.

The growing need for polysensuality (people want to feel, smell, taste, hear and see more) is, for example, a major source in the West of the growing urge to travel, the growing interest in art manifestations, the rise of the concept of emotional intelligence and the associated stringent requirements made of the empathy and communicative leadership of politicians and managers. It also leads to new specialisms in the field of communication. Consider such concepts as experiential communication (‘event marketing’ in advertising speak) and cultural change. In both cases this essentially entails the sensory internalisation of new norms, values and patterns of relationships with individuals, organisations and their products. In his book The Dream Society, the Danish futurologist Rolf Jensen predicts for example that it is not the best product that will survive – for there are hardly any bad products being made now – but the product with the best story behind it. It is his conviction that the company of the future will have such jobs as Director of mind and mood, Culture team leader and Virtual reality evangelist.

There are other trends which currently are leading to dramatic changes in the content and nature of communication. The spectacular growth in the world population (a doubling over the past 40 years) is causing ongoing economic growth, internationalisation and the development of new technologies, with the incredible growth in information technology and its applications over the past 20 years most definitely a key factor in the changing communication processes. Communication via the electronic highway has taken a flight with e-mail, voice and fax communications. One-to-one communication is thus rapidly gaining ground, target groups are shrinking and communication via mass media is fragmenting at a high pace.

The dual trend of high tech/high touch is becoming tangible and visible in all its aspects. The fact is that e-mail technology can bridge global distances in nanoseconds and is fostering the need for ever more rapid communication technology, but at the same time this technology is in turn creating such a physical gap that the need for physical intimacy would appear to be growing proportionately. At least, that is what could be deduced from the growth in meetings, festive or otherwise, and the great attention and lack of inhibition in the media to emotional-physical subjects.

The new electronic communication techniques also encourage the customary top-down influencing pyramid in media land to be turned on its head. We’re moving from broadcasting (limited number of statements for a wide public) and narrow casting (a wide range of statements for smaller, identified target groups) to private casting (everyone selects a different package of information and entertainment tailored to their own interest).
There are several reasons why the world of communication is literally being turned on its head. Consider the growing liberalisation of markets and societies in the West, the growing openness and democratisation in numerous countries, including non-Western countries (from Glasnost and Perestroika in Russia through to elections in Indonesia), the emancipation of growing numbers of people as a result of that same openness and the higher level of education and experience, the shift from industrial to service economies with their associated additional need for commercial communication and the ongoing processes of change within governments, institutions and companies as a result of these realignments.

‘Old politics’ is losing its face as a result of de-ideologisation and bureaucratisation. The network society is institutions and companies as a result of these realignments.

The functioning of businesses, organisations and governments is also fundamentally open to discussion by new management thinking, project-based working and the great value attached to the self-organising capacity of employees. In short, we are growing into a communicative society, which poses high requirements for communicative organisations and communicative citizens.

The result in turn is that policy-makers (in industry and politics) in Western countries see communication ever less as a supporting, executive technique in their responsibilities, but increasingly as an intrinsic part of them, as a key factor to success, as a professional management instrument in achieving administrative or business objectives. Leadership in communication thus becomes an indispensable feature for managers and organisations.

10.7 The importance of leadership in communication

A leader of an organisation (a business, a government institution or not-for-profit organisation) is responsible for achieving organisational objectives which are often set in a broader context. With the trends described above, the recipient and his or her conscious need for communication comes to feature ever more centrally: zap behaviour increasingly decides how individual information and communication needs are shaped. Employees of an organisation are not alien to the world and expect new communication styles and techniques to be applied within their own organisation as well. The time where a manager could make do with pinning up a formal notice on communication to communicate a major decision is now far behind us, if this time ever existed. A leader of an organisation is increasingly expected not to lock himself up in his or her ivory rationalistic tower but to communicate constantly and effectively to achieve results. He or she is increasingly achieving this, which leads to a growing need for support.

According to Goleman (1998), the four main skills for managers in inspiring and supporting individuals and groups are:

1) to formulate a common vision and task and to manage to enthuse the others for this;
2) to step forward in providing management;
3) to supervise the performances of others without depriving them of their responsibility and
4) to provide management oneself by good example.

Goleman argues that his analyses reveal that approximately two thirds of success for their actions lies in emotional skill. As he sees it, for genuinely good leaders emotional skills are actually eighty to one hundred percent decisive in contrast to technical or cognitive skills.

Such capacity is further needed in change processes that are increasingly assuming a continuous nature in the day to day practice of many organisations. Transformational leadership is more than management alone. Goleman: “It requires someone who is able to move people with the pure strength of his own enthusiasm. Such leaders do not issue commands or instructions, they provide inspiration. They express their vision in a way which is intellectually and emotionally stimulating. They reveal that they themselves fully believe in that vision and encourage others to pursue the same objective. And they set store by a fruitful relationship with those to whom they provide management.”

Lange (1991) also emphasises that motivational leadership is not merely a question of having a vision and knowing the ways of achieving it. He emphasises the importance of love of the product and the people who produce it. “A feeling for basic human needs. Dealing with power on a basis of integrity and not allowing pure self-interest to predominate. Personal attention to others based on a healthy respect. Showing confidence by delegating.”

In brief: communicative leadership demands more than technique, it demands above all personal effort and skills. Communicative leaders radiate a natural presence in their attitude and behaviour, along with involvement and a willingness to communicate. They’re able to communicate their ideas with stunning accuracy and put them forward for discussion among a richly varied, critical and demanding public. What is decisive for the
effect of their efforts is the right connection with the world of knowledge and experience of the recipient. Effective communication demands a seamless tie-in with the current high pace and visual-emotional nature of communication.

The leader of an organisation fulfils a key role on the boundary of his organisation and society. Here, too, he has to deal with a wide range of groups, ranging from members, clients, shareholders, government institutions, politicians, local residents, journalists through to interest groups. It is vital to an organisation to deal as sensitively as possible with the views and feelings of these groups, because ultimately they are what determine the social basis of existence of any organisation. That requires not only staff with highly developed antennae, but also an organisational mentality and infrastructure focused on receiving and sifting external stimuli and impulses, and entering into the external dialogue if necessary. As Mr. A. Seret, one of the founders of public relations in the Netherlands once pithily described it: “social breathing”.

Such a communicative organisation only comes about if the leader of the organisation recognises its importance and takes the lead. One’s own staff will be motivated to attach the same importance to a constructive dialogue with social groups and management of the organisation. The external world must be given the conviction that management is working from a clear vision of the future and honest involvement on the part of all interested players. If this succeeds, there may also be a significant motivating effect on the internal organisation.

10.8 The major influence of ‘public opinion’

Communicative leadership alone is not sufficient. What is essential to the future communication policy of institutions and companies is the awareness that the establishment and role of public opinion, a key concept to communications professionals, has radically changed in recent years. Dr. Jaap van Ginneken, a publicist and communications scientist at the University of Amsterdam, recently published a pioneering book under the title Breinbevingen (Brain Quakes). Just to help define matters: just as political processes (i.e. decision-making processes on the basis of power relationships) occur in society and in organisations (‘company politics’), opinion-making processes also are enacted within society as a whole (nationally and internationally) and in organisations. They are similarly complex processes. A public opinion at the end of the day is more than an accumulation of separate individual verdicts, it is a product of communication and mutual influencing. The defensive and offensive influencing of these processes is the core task of communications professionals. A good result in this field means sympathy and cooperation with the objectives of an organisation, both internally and externally.

Van Ginneken defines public opinion as a complex adaptive system, performed by communication and other forms of interaction. He regards hypes as capricious processes, with a particular question being blown up to enormous proportions as a result of an accumulation of causes which also become interwoven. He refers to recent thinking on chaotisation processes, where infinitesimally small details may provide the basis for new and radically different ordering processes. As a result of a minor text change in the Emscher Depesche, Bismarck triggered a war between Germany and France in the last century. The basis of ‘chaos thinking’ is the finding by scientists that minuscule differences in calculations provide radically different results in weather forecasts (‘The fluttering of the wings of a butterfly in Brazil may unleash a tornado in Texas’). In fact, not really something new for communications people who know that formulating an essential photo caption may have a significantly greater influencing effect than formulating and implementing an integrated communication strategy. The contribution of each communication statement is, it must be said, dissimilar and thus of unequal weighting in the ultimate opinion-shaping.

10.9 Capacity for assessment with change

Van Ginneken points out that emotions are mainly a means of dealing efficiently with new and uncertain situations. Threats may lead in the animal kingdom to reactions which for the sake of convenience start with the letter ‘F’: flight, fight or freeze. Public opinions have comparable and even deeper differentiated emotional mainsprings and are therefore complex in the way they rise and disappear, tiered, conflicting and inconstant. Van Ginneken draws a parallel with the structure of human brains, which he describes as “complex adaptive systems of extraordinary complexity”. In a comparable sense, public opinion is as he sees it a complex adaptive system of processes or chains which cannot be grasped, in which informal and formal communication, individual and mass communication infinitely alternate and within which messages are endlessly processed and changed. They are collections of chains, which sometimes bifurcate and sometimes come back together, criss-crossing over one another, sometimes following the same direction and sometimes at ninety degrees to one another.

An important aspect in the Van Ginneken approach is that he evokes a better understanding of the lack of predictability of communication processes. That requires a different way of organising communication, with monitoring, pro-active issue management and flexible response strategies being more important than ever before. At the same time, his analysis is a challenge to communications professionals to get to grips with the potential for increasing the predictive value of their own recommendations and efforts. A realistic capacity for
assessment and the recommendations based on this and actions are at the end of the day the basis for the communications profession (see 10.3).

10.10 The importance of norms and values

In such a process, shared norms and values may play an important integrating role. Naming, sharing and practising emotionally-determined norms and values therefore becomes ever more important to effective communication. Large Dutch companies such as Shell and Rabobank have identified that efforts towards sustainable development – based on the pillars of economic progress, care for the environment and social responsibility – are essential to future survival. A company such as Shell also adds communicative principles to this, such as direct and personal contact with stakeholders, pro-active ‘assistance’ to stakeholders (asking their opinion and assessing them by value), transparency and openness and ‘verification’ (independent checks on actual behaviour).

Identifying the importance of this development demands of communications professionals a strengthening of power at two poles in this coming century:
1) the ability to represent the binding heart of an organisation, service or product (the essential norms and values) with inner conviction and involvement and at the same time
2) be able to deal with them situationally. The latter demands not only content knowledge, but also process support, negotiation and intervention skills and the ability to express an integrated vision of the development of one’s own organisation.

10.11 Consequences in practice

The six main trends, as formulated at the start of this chapter, are radically changing the nature of leadership in communication and the role of public opinion. What are the consequences of these changes for the position of the profession and day-to-day practice of the communications professional in the 21st century?

Five major consequences can be identified for the development of the communication field.

Consultancy is becoming ever more important
Although the growth in volume of communication is mainly occurring in implementation (media, messages, techniques, events, publications), control and coordination of communication policy is of strategic and growing importance. The fact is that one is dealing with commercial and political interests on a large scale, which may be influenced directly by investments of millions in the communication field. Understanding speed and effectiveness are of decisive importance. Communication must be sound from the outset. The time for reflection and thorough analyses is declining, the need for effective advice, covering short- and long-term effects is rising proportionately.

Need for a sharper profiling of the professional
Clients have little interest in the nuances of the various communication modalities. They call everything publicity, promotion or at best communication. That means that various disciplines are happy to position themselves as the leading discipline with a growing market. For example, advertising people in the Netherlands recently started calling themselves communications consultants, adding the label ‘commercial’. Organisation advisers, management consultants and training institutions are also entering the communication market in Holland on the basis of the importance that they see in this discipline for the better functioning of companies, managers and their staff. In short, there is a motley patchwork quilt which is compelling communications professionals to sharply profile their own profession.

Growing need for generalism
The growth of the profession is bringing about a natural growth in specialisms: internal communication, crisis communication, investor relations, positioning, brand policy, press policy, environmental communication, policy communication, campaign management, sponsoring, direct mail, public affairs etc. This list could easily be expanded. As internal and external clients need not concern themselves with these detailed points, this is increasing the need for generalists who are able to assemble and effectively control the right mix of modalities on the basis of an organisation’s objectives. Organ players who are able to master high as well as low registers.

Reallocation of internal and external activities
The above developments are increasingly confronting management of organisations with the question of which activities should be undertaken internally and which can best be subcontracted. Factors to consider include possible risks of disruption to organisational policy, cost effectiveness, the option for rapid policy adjustments, the need for internal integration of external developments and the like. In general, the trend being adopted is to have policy development and control with the communication field in house and to subcontract executive and creative activities.

Border disputes with other disciplines require the profession’s own ‘body of knowledge’
It was already indicated that other disciplines are eager to claim the communicative aspects of their activities as
part of their responsibility. Financial people consider that investor relations is the central part of their skill area on account of the associated material expertise. Personnel people think the same of motivation and culture programmes, lawyers feel called upon to include lobbying activities, designed to influence the establishment of legislation and regulations as part of their area of operations, whilst marketeers and administrators demand responsibility for integrated communication programmes. ICT specialists see their profession as the heart of the communication process. This is the consequence of the successful rise of the communications profession as a fundamental pillar in our current information society. It also has to do with the often still diffuse definitions of communication and the still limited scientific basis of the profession. These border disputes serve only to make an acceleration in the development of the profession’s own body of knowledge all the more necessary. The independent power of communication programmes must be identifiably demonstrated.

10.12 Consequences for the profession

The above developments mean a different priority in the professional’s activity content in the professional requirements which have often been previously formulated. Future priorities can be summarised as follows:

- a high degree of effectiveness (in rapidly changing situations, effective advice and action is called for);
- great personal involvement (required for credibility towards the client and recipient);
- sensitivity to the emotional charge of messages and events (the emotional value of expressions becomes more important than the underlying rationality);
- a helicopter view of social and psychological processes (the basis for each attempt at influence) and
- a thorough knowledge of current media developments (which groups feel associated with which media?).

10.13 Profile of the professional

What will typify the communications professional in the 21st century? On the basis of the above, the following profile can be outlined, which can be identified by the aspects of own personality, content competent and relational skills.

The communications professional excels in his or her own communication skills (visual, verbal, written), as otherwise no-one takes him or her seriously. If you’re not capable of individual communicative behaviour, what do you have to offer clients, will ask themselves. He or she is also above all a communications director with all editorial skills: the ability to analyse messages and public, the ability to translate the text creatively, the ability to inspire actors, the ability to dedicate oneself with full commitment to faultless implementation, connecting the variety of wishes on the part of the author, actors, public costs and time. That requires empathy and assertiveness, various intervention styles, a helicopter view based on theoretical knowledge and experience and project management skills. At the same time, it demands the soul of an artist, who unlike any other is able to sense the slight vibrations which are difficult to describe and express them, these often being the pre-cursor of rapid, radical and mass turnarounds in collective feelings and opinions.

In terms of content, he or she is able to formulate objectives with the key players involved, to demarcate areas from other disciplines, to forecast communicative effects and to use the right resources for achieving them. Relationally, he or she is able to develop win-win situations, reduce uncertainties among the players involved, support processes and ensure that the content ties in with birds of very different plumage.

In short, the communications professional of the 21st century will be an emotional generalist with rational training. An outsider who can move on the inside. An independent thinker, who feels connected to his environment with every fibre of his being. A professional, who is able to achieve communicative leadership within the culture of a participative network society. Actually an artist with courage, who knows that spirit triumphs. They do exist, they really do.

10.14 Bibliography


About the author

Han Heemskerk (56) has been General Manager of Van Sluis Consultants since 1989. This agency, with a payroll of 60, ranks among the top three in Holland. Working on behalf of the agency’s clients, he concentrates on strategy of communication, crisis communication and management of complex projects. Han Heemskerk began his career as an editor at Het financieele Dagblad. He was then Manager of Public Relations at VMF-Stork-Werkspoor. This was followed by a period at Rabobank, where he was responsible for setting up and developing a new Public Relations Department. This was followed by his appointment as Head of Public Affairs.
Communication at Shell Nederland, a position he held for six years. In the evenings, he lectured in communication theory for five years at the Hogeschool Utrecht.

11 Public relations and legal practice

Douwe de Joode

11.1 Introduction

Public relations occupies a separate place within communication science. If we regard PR as the systematic promotion of mutual understanding between an organisation and its public groups, the PR function must be referred to as an applied social science. People are at the heart of things where social science occurs. The right way of interacting between people is important with a view to achieving objectives laid down from policy, and which with PR are mainly set by organisations. However, people’s behaviour is often unpredictable, with all the consequences that that entails for communication and by extension the good name, the image of the company involved.

In legal terms, a distinction is made between a natural person, the individual, and a legal person, the company. The behaviour of natural persons may influence the image of a legal person. The more important the individual is to the company, the greater this influence is. For example the behaviour of the CEO will have a greater impact than that of the vice president.

The behaviour of people very much depends upon the emotional situation in which they find themselves. As this situation differs from the normal standard, i.e. the circumstances under which day-to-day work can be efficiently performed, the individual will have less sight of his own actions. As a result, he may increasingly pose a hazard to the image of the organisation for which he works. Birkigt and Stadler define corporate image as “planned and operationally deployed self performance of a company internally and externally on the basis of a defined company philosophy”.1

Being involved in a legal conflict and the possible legal proceedings involved brings people out of their equilibrium, makes them emotionally labile. On the one hand, this is a result of the unknown circumstances in which they find themselves – they no longer have any understanding of their own situation and no longer control the initiative -, on the other as a result of circumstances of an external nature such as publications on the legal question or influencing from the personal arena, the family.

In the Netherlands, situations that may cause damage to the image of both the individual and the company are increasingly being identified in good time. For example, lawyer’s offices frequently opt for ways of serving the client on more than legal grounds alone. Accountants and management consultancies are brought in, but increasingly communication consultancies as well. Agencies where the emphasis is on PR, public affairs (PA) and lobbying. (The term ‘communication consultancy’ will be used in this paper.)

The press also influences the erosion of the image of an individual or company. In the Netherlands that influence is not of primary importance, however. It is mainly the environment and the relationships that determine to what extent a particular image of an individual or company is accepted. If legal proceedings are brought or there is a suspicion, that carries more weight in the formation of opinion with the public and clients. Legal means are not deployed so rapidly and thus have a large impact. Local and regional press are developing rapidly, however. This is coming about not just through improved technology and education both among the writing press and radio and tv journalists, but also and above all as a result of the growing interest on the part of the public in what is happening in their immediate environment. In practice it is found that press involvement has certain consequences. Reason enough to bear in mind the local and regional press in situations of possible damage to image. The careful establishment of a good relationship between the communications consultant and the press, but also between the lawyer and the press, demands attention. Often, contact with journalists is only sought out – incorrectly – if there is no other way.

This paper deals with three topics:
- the relationship between the lawyers office and the communication consultancy in general;
- practical examples of the role of a communications consultant during legal issues;
- the specific situation in health care.

11.2 Relationship between lawyers office and communication consultant

Law is a phenomenon of the social reality designed to organise the way people live together in an effective manner “by means of valid rules all of which fit within a systematic processing and compliance with which may be enforced by means of external means of coercion.”2

Communication in its simplest form means letting the other person know what you want or intend, so you both benefit. Communication can be divided into day-to-day communication and professional communication.
Professional communication stands apart from day-to-day communication on account of the planned and systematic approach which is designed to communicate so that pre-defined objectives are met. The legal professions, notably lawyers, and communication consultants, enter into a commitment to make efforts rather than results. For these and other reasons the concept of ‘no cure no pay’ does not apply to these professional groups. An exception may occur in the lawyers’ sector for injury damage. In the Netherlands, this practice is not, as yet, a matter for discussion, whilst in countries such as the United States it is very common to ask for a particular percentage of the funds collected. The claims are, however, generally higher than in the Netherlands. (After an El Al Boeing crashed in an Amsterdam suburb, a great many US injury damage lawyers offered their services). An area in which the injury damage lawyer is increasingly brought into play in the Netherlands is health care. The communication consultant can also play an important role in this situation (see 11.4).

The relationship between a law firm (LF) and communication consultant (communications consultancy CC) may have various grounds:

a. the LF brings in a CC to provide the PR and PA for the LF as a company;
b. the LF brings in a CC to provide communication (PR and PA) for a client of the LF;
c. the CC is already working for a company which brings in an LF in a particular situation in which a lawyer’s advice is required.

Point ‘b’ is important in the context of this contribution. Five examples are described in broad outline below. The emphasis is on the interplay between LF and CC.

11.3 Practical examples

- **The first example: the banking official**
  Senior official Peters, working within a bank, is charged with regularly submitting excessively high expense claims. If this occurs again after a warning, Peters will be threatened with dismissal. He does not agree with his superior and brings in a lawyer. The lawyer writes a letter to the bank management on behalf of his client and requests them to immediately cease the unlawful action against his client. The bank management considers this such a serious situation that they immediately suspend Peters. The bank informs his lawyer via their own lawyer that the official has been suspended pending a dismissal procedure on account of ‘repeated fraudulent practices with expense claims’.
  Peters is furious and starts establishing a dossier at home covering all the things that the bank has done wrong in this affair. An additional threat to Peters is the fact that once he has acquired a bad reputation at one bank, he will be unable to work for any other bank, particularly if he has been dismissed. He is 45 years old, has spent his entire working life in banking and worked for this bank for four years. His lawyer has a difficult time keeping Peters in check and advising him properly. The official already has a fat report ready for the bank’s internal Complaints Commission and the Works Council. These reports are so detailed and complex in structure that Peters is advised by his lawyer to bring in a CC. A senior adviser from the CC helps him to structure the texts and the personal presentation. The adviser also proposes going to talk with the bank management on Peters behalf and thus entering into direct communication rather than dealing with everything in writing. In the first instance, bank management refers to the lawyer but thanks to the mediation of the head of communication at the bank, a good colleague of the communication’s consultant and also a member of the Professional Communication Association, talks with management are feasible. This shows that they are prepared to give Peters a fresh chance. However, they were angry at the fact that he had got a lawyer involved. There hadn’t been sufficient communication to establish mutual clarity. Following discussion between the adviser and management, there is space for both lawyers to reach agreement. Clarity is given on the method of submitting expense claims for the future and agreements are made on internal communication. Although it concerns a senior official, all the squabbling was kept away from publicity thanks to the involvement of the CC. Peters is still working to the great satisfaction of both parties at the bank.

- **The second example: the headmaster**
  The managing director of a CC receives a call from an LF. He has a client, a headmaster of a large school community, who is suspected of abusing pupils. Complaints have been submitted by two families to the department of justice of abuse of their fourteen-year-old daughters. A public prosecutor is investigating the case.
  The lawyer says that the two families have often caused alarm at other schools by spreading similar stories about teachers. Their daughters have just started this new school year in the second class of this school complex. They’re nice girls and they tell the police that they know nothing about it. However, their parents have a different opinion and tell everyone who will listen the story about the headmaster. The headmaster, who enjoys the full support of his colleagues and has never been suspected of such action in the past, has asked the lawyer to help him. He wants to seek out publicity himself before the press get wind of it or are informed by the parents. The lawyer has discussed the matter with her colleagues and says that she agrees with the headmaster. ‘But’, she says, ‘I want to put it forward to a CC’ and asks: ‘What’s your opinion?’

  The senior adviser does not agree with the lawyer and the headmaster that he should seek out publicity. This will simply trigger responses from people who know nothing about the case and will certainly think...
that there’s no smoke without fire. Furthermore, the case is being investigated by a public prosecutor. He advises not giving any response, if asked for it, as things are being investigated. The same response should be given if the parents seek publicity and the press come looking for a story. However, a report is put together on the situation so that if necessary a balanced response can be given.

The CC’s advisor also has talks with the headmaster. He gives him media training and deals with the Qs and As. He also gives the headmaster’s colleagues instruction on how to act if they are approached. For the time being, the lawyer is appointed spokesman and she too is given media training by the CC’s adviser. Furthermore, the adviser is available 24 hours a day during this period, both for the headmaster and the lawyer. The Department of Public Prosecutions, the Public Prosecutor, is unable to find any proof and dismisses the case. The parents receive a letter from the LF in which they are summoned to refrain from any further personal deformation on pain of summary proceedings being brought. The two families send their daughters to a different school.

- The third example: the discomfort of the jam company
  A company is enjoying protection from creditors but is at risk of going bankrupt unless a buyer for the company can soon be found. The receiver, in the person of a lawyer from LF, contacts a CC. It is a small company with 90 staff and works in the preserves industry. If the company were not to be taken over, an entire Dutch sector/industry would disappear. There are two interested takeover players in the Netherlands but both would prefer to wait until bankruptcy has been pronounced so that they can buy the most favourable elements from the bankrupt estate without having to take on staff. The question to the CC is: ‘What can you do?’

Management of the company that is at risk of going bankrupt undergoes media training together with the receiver involved and the Qs and As are dealt with. They work towards a national press conference, because a bankruptcy would cause an entire industry to be lost to the Netherlands. The press arrives in large numbers, including the leading national tv news programme, at the press conference. It is announced that interest has been displayed by a French company in taking over the company with all its staff. This report makes the publicity media in full detail and as a result one of the Dutch companies soon takes the bait and takes over the company before the French competition becomes too hot.

The fourth example: child labour
A clothing company is suspected of using child labour in an Asian country, to pay excessively low wages and to earn substantial amounts on the clothing in the Netherlands. An article has appeared on the subject in one of the large national dailies and a storm of criticism rages in the Netherlands. Sales at the clothing company soon decline. Management of the company brings in an LF. It in turn advises management to bring in a CC in an attempt to minimise the damage together with the LF as far as possible.

The senior adviser at the CC advises after thorough research into the way the clothing is produced (he actually went with the lawyer to Thailand, the country of manufacture), that two actions be undertaken: 1) inform all staff at the company about the actual details of clothing production and 2) invite a number of journalists from the written media and the radio and tv to take a look in Thailand so they can see with their own eyes how production is handled. The central message in both actions is: the clothing company is seeking to promote employment in Thailand and reaches agreement with the government of the country that children below the age of 14 are not allowed to be part of the production process. In this manner, staff at the company were able to provide sound information to their family members and the immediate environment. This also stopped them applying for jobs elsewhere, which would have been a major problem for the company at a time of labour shortages. Only few journalists took up the offer to ‘see in Thailand with their own eyes’. Subsequently, no further attention was given to this matter in relation to the clothing company.

- The fifth example: tax evasion
  An LF approaches a CC client. The client, the managing director of a medium-sized company, will soon be appearing in court on charges of tax evasion. He personally channelled major transactions via Switzerland. According to the Financial Information and Detection Service (FIOD), VAT was avoided on a large scale. As no Dutchman has previously been charged for such offences, the Department of Justice has a vested interest in depicting the situation as an example. The LF is convinced that the Director has acted correctly. According to her, he is acting within the limits of what the law allows. The lawyer at the LF asks the senior adviser of the CC to generate as much publicity as possible on the case and thus to demonstrate that the man is the victim of this jurisprudence.

First of all the senior CC advisor informs both the lawyer and the managing director concerned of the consequences to the MD’s image if publicity is sought in this manner. In addition, a hardening could occur between the Department of Justice and the MD, while the Public Prosecutor could gain further strength in bringing his case. Despite this warning, the two decide to seek out publicity. The CC agrees to help. An article is written explaining the MD’s approach and clearly indicating that there was nothing dishonourable about his action. The Public Prosecutor’s witch-hunt is also described.
The advisor then takes a friendly journalist who writes a well-known column on financial economics into his confidence. He is allowed to put any questions he wishes to the MD. Prior to the interview, the MD is given media training and all Qs and As are dealt with. After the interview, the journalists are convinced that the MD is in the right, and writes a detailed article on the case. This leads to written questions in the Lower House, Parliament, and many declarations of support. Nevertheless, proceedings are still brought against the MD. He is ultimately found guilty and instructed to pay a particular amount in tax. The amount is not even a tenth of that demanded by the Public Prosecutor. The MD does not appeal.

11.4 Situation in health care

Health care in the Netherlands is meant to be equally accessible to all. This is a basic right which cannot be violated. The Government monitors this and largely determines the costs of care. It falls beyond the scope of this article to give all the details of health care. A good example is outlined in the book Health and Healthcare in the Netherlands.

All surveys in the Netherlands that pose the question of what is the highest good are first given the answer ‘our health’. Stringent requirements are therefore laid down for the bodies and individuals responsible for health-care provision. Increasingly, statutory requirements are being laid down for the actions of health-care practitioners, for example in the BIG4 Act, and care institutions such as hospitals.

It is interesting to stop to consider the requirements laid down for physicians. Although the Board of a hospital within which a physician works is deemed to be primarily responsible for what happens within the institution, claims may be brought against practitioners such as medical specialists for their actions. Imagine a situation where a surgeon has removed the wrong breast. From the legal perspective, proceedings may be brought against the physician in three ways:

a. under disciplinary rules, jurisprudence which assesses whether the profession and the professional group has been harmed by his actions (there have been public hearings in the Netherlands for a number of years now);

b. civil law, jurisprudence under which the patient can turn to the civil court, often with the assistance of an injury claims lawyer, to have sentence passed on the physician and thus to obtain compensation from the physician (if the physician is found guilty under disciplinary rules, this may help the patient under civil-law proceedings);

c. penal law, if the Government finds via the Department of Public Prosecutions at the Ministry of Justice that society has been or may be harmed by the action of the physician.

A large number of the mistakes made by physicians can be attributed to errors in communication between people. The wrong operations are carried out as a result of inadequate consultation with the patient and/or his own team. There are many examples of communication errors leading to the patient not receiving adequate care.

For these and other reasons, the Medical Treatment Agreement Act (WGBO) came into force in July 1995. Under its provisions, physicians must pay greater attention to providing information to the patient in advance so that they know precisely what is going to happen to them and what the possible consequences are. If a claim is made after an operation, it is possible to verify on the basis of the statutory text whether the physician has proceeded with due care in providing information.

Hitherto, physicians have been annoyed about this, because they have the feeling that they never have the communication process regarding ‘informed consent’ fully under control. Patients claim to understand the information provided and give their consent, but subsequently are found often not to do so. Written confirmation on the part of the patient, by means of a protocol, would therefore seem to be the only way of protecting the physicians adequately if challenged before the court.

To help doctors provide information and to help them to communicate better with their patients, there are a few CCs in the Netherlands who specially provide communications training for health care. They look at personal behaviour, use of information with material, the way in which a dialogue is conducted and the way in which a good relationship can be established.

Production of the right information material for the highly different situations which patients may find themselves or which they must as a minimum be able to identify is a separate story. Examples are used in the Netherlands to demonstrate that information material such as brochures and folders, CD-ROMs, videos and internet information can have a beneficial effect. On the basis of the fact that every Dutch citizen is entitled to good health-care provision and medication to assist in this process, it follows that every Dutch citizen is therefore entitled to excellent information material. However, the state of play regarding the quality of information material is poor, quite apart from its completeness. Its production is in many cases left to amateurs in many institutions. These are grounds for physicians who are feeling the heat of the new WGBO legislation to urge for the production of good materials that can provide support in their personal information. The government does not see itself as having any role in this field. Insurers could take the lead and explicitly involve CCs.
Finally, it is clear that CCs could also play a part if errors in health care have legal consequences. Again, there are practical examples.

Notes


2. This definition is provided by professor Mr. Dr. A. Komen (Amsterdam, 1980).


Purpose and background

The BIG act is designed to enhance the quality of professional practice, to monitor it and to protect the patient against inexpert and careless actions by a professional practitioner. The Act is focused on individual health care, which means care directed at a single individual. The BIG will replace all twelve existing statutory professional schemes. The oldest of these is the Act on Medical Practice (WUG) from 1865. There have been many changes in the health care field since then. Some of the schemes were therefore very much out of date.

The WUG prohibited medicine being practised by unauthorised individuals. Initially, only physicians and midwives were allowed to perform medical actions. This was later extended to include dentists and paramedics (e.g. physiotherapists) who were allowed to perform actions defined by law. Other practitioners (e.g. nurses) were actually guilty of a penal offence if they performed these operations. That was not the case, however, if they did so as the ‘extended arm’ of the physicians. Many people had been feeling for a long time that the ban on the unauthorised practice of medicine was no longer appropriate to the modern era. Emancipated patients must be able to turn to the practitioner from whom they expect greatest benefit in the regular or alternative circuit. This freedom must not be curbed any further than is strictly necessary in the interests of the patient. Furthermore, the old legislation was difficult to enforce. The number of infringements was so large that in practice it was only possible to act against unauthorised individuals who caused harm to patients. There were also many cases which were not covered by law, or hardly so. For example, until now there was no statutory regulation for medical specialists. It was also difficult to promote the quality of professional practice by peer review and refresher training.

The BIG allows for regulations in this field. Rather than banning the practice of medicine, there is now a statutory scheme that in principle allows for medical action. This increases everyone’s freedom to choose the provider that they wish.

The BIG act, however, specify a number of reserved operations. These may only be carried out by authorised practitioners, to avoid unacceptable medical risks to patients occurring as a result of inexpert action. Furthermore, a penal provision has been added to freedom of medical action in the act. It is a penal offence to damage someone’s health. Protection of title is being introduced for a limited number of professions. This title indicates that the bearer is expert in a particular field of health care. The disciplinary rules for the various groups of practitioners are being modified. One new aspect is that certain groups are coming under disciplinary rules for the first time.

5. De WGBO, Medical Treatment Agreement Act, part of the WGBO that is relevant to this article from: Schrijvers, A.J.P. et al. (1997). op.cit. (chapter 22).

The WGBO fixes the responsibilities of patients and providers.

• Information

To decide on the necessity of a therapy, a patient needs information about its nature and risks, possible side effects, the chance of success, and any alternative therapies. It is the provider’s responsibility to present this information in understandable language. The way to accomplish this task has not been fixed. When taken together, consent and information form the basis of the concept of informed consent: No therapy without consent, and no consent without therapy.

• Medical Record

The WGBO also requires providers to maintain reliable patient medical records. The record must contain all the details related to the patient's therapy: history and physical, diagnosis, test results, correspondence, etc. Although the health-care practitioner is the administrator of the medical record, the patient has an unlimited right to inspect the medical record. Moreover, a copy must be provided to the patient on request. Medical records must be kept for ten years. These medical record-keeping policies and procedures enable the patient to verify what has happened during a certain course of treatment, as well as to determine whether it complies with prior agreements. The medical record also provides important backup information should a patient complaint be lodged.
De Joode Communicatie was set up by Douwe de Joode. With a background in journalism, he worked as Head of PR in profit and not-for-profit organisations. He was Deputy Director for the Benelux at the international PR consultancy Hill and Knowlton, and chairman of the NGPR professional association. De Joode went his own (more specialist) route in 1997 after eight years of managing De Joode Kok consultancy. De Joode obtained his degree in Dutch law and successfully took his exams in the doctorate options health law and hospital science at Amsterdam University. He also obtained his doctorate in extension science at Wageningen Agricultural University, gives guest lectures at Universities and within senior vocational education.

12 Public relations or communication education?

Sonja Kleijne

12.1 Introduction

PR education in Europe can currently be divided into a triangle in terms of educational curricula: on one side the northern countries, such as Scandinavia, along with Great Britain, Germany, Austria and the Benelux, on the other the Mediterranean countries and on the third side the former Eastern block countries. Despite the different approaches, the training courses in these countries pass through the same stages. In the initial phase, the professionals have received training or at least have experience in journalism. This is no surprise in view of the initial thinking about the role of the PR official. In time we see that virtually all disciplines can produce successful PR colleagues. It is not until later when the PR official reaches a more mature stage of development with a more strategic role, that we see a larger number of PR officials with specific professional training. These professional training courses are not only run by private institutions, but also by regular higher educational institutes. The quantitative ratio between the two differs markedly by country.

12.2 Hypothesis

Despite the current differences in emphases in the curricula, professional training courses in Europe will in future be marked by a split: on the one hand there will be more general training courses in strategic communication, which are broader in structure than the PR field, and on the other courses in PR technique and skills will be offered. PR courses with a theoretical component alongside the practical component will disappear entirely.

12.3 PR education in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, PR falls under the economic sector in terms of higher vocational education. At the end of the seventies, the Ministry of Education received a request from the trade unions that they be allowed to start a full-time programme in PR. At almost the same time, an application for day training in advertising was submitted. To foster the female inflow at HEAO (Business Studies), the Ministry decided to establish Communication as a field of study. The 4-year programme, like the other 3-year courses in HEAO, leads to a bachelor of economics. In fact, the communicative element is added to the existing business school-like structure of the HEAO. Graduates have to be capable of working both within advertising and PR. At the time the only Dutch university offering PR - as a subsidiary - is Utrecht. Naturally, there are also courses offered by private institutions. These are often run by members of the professional association. The association itself does not provide any courses, but does organise the examination.

12.4 PR education in Europe

Elsewhere in Europe, notably in the North, PR is mainly taught at universities, often within social sciences. The curricula are strongly focused on mass communication and/or media and are cognitive in nature. In Great Britain, the current new universities and former polytechnics offer PR programmes which again are highly cognitive and focused on the techniques used within PR. In the Mediterranean countries, studies from the angle of mass communication and traditional ‘training’ occur less frequently. The Dutch economically oriented higher education, which seeks to educate young people for strategic positions in PR and advertising at applied level, is initially a somewhat strange association in the communication scene.

12.5 Mass communication

Although most managerial professionals working in PR in the seventies and eighties were trained in a range of different disciplines (Van Ruler, 1996), teaching staff at the Communications department in the Netherlands enjoyed training in mass communication. They are assisted by colleagues who come straight from practice and show the relativity of this course, which is very much focused on the media. It is precisely mass communication
that links the programmes in the various countries. The Mediterranean countries remain an exception here, and they also have a different educational system.

12.6 A platform for PR education in Europe

The new structure of the European Confederation for Public Relations (CERP), representing European national associations, offers a home to an educational organisation, alongside organisations for in-house professionals and consultants. Cerp-Education creates the opportunity for teachers to become familiar with foreign curricula and lecturers. Virtually from the outset, there has been a strong interest in PR research. Interest of any significance in educational curricula did not come about until the nineties, when Cerp-Education published the audit of full-time PR courses in Europe (1994). One year later an accreditation system was set up. This is recognition of the curricula by the CERP Confederation. The accreditation system was adapted under pressure of some professional associations. This was a result of the various views on the role of the PR professionals. A study of the way of thinking among a limited number of national associations showed distinguished differences. If divided into four roles (based on Grunig and Dozier, 1992) the first two journalistic and more executive roles scored significantly higher than the symmetrical and more strategic roles (Cerp study, 1998). A few national associations responded to the accreditation the way the roles were filled by their members. The second phase of accreditation, in which inspection visits were made, did not really get off the ground.

12.7 Growing interest in applied research in industry

In the eighties, it could be observed that the various universities in Europe offering PR courses had a growing interest in industry in general and communication within organisations in particular. For professors in Europe, however, it is an exception to switch jobs, alternating between a position in education and a position in industry. With the growing interest in industry, a number of countries became involved in integrated communication, also referred to as total communication at the time. Social sciences continued to determine the liberal arts nature of most courses, in the North and South of Europe alike. Courses in economics were almost non-existent.

In the Netherlands, the courses focused on organisations and their communication; referred to as integrated communication and offering public information, PR and marketing communication. In the nineties, the national association changed its name (see Denig, Chapter 2). The same thing happened in Sweden. In Germany, the various communications associations started to co-operate formally under one umbrella. The European Commission produced its Green book for commercial communication (1996), initially lacking PR, but adding PR at a later stage as part of communication. In the discussions on commercial communication, and corporate communication as well, ‘emotion’ is regularly featured as a focal point in marketing communication. The step from purely informing to emotionally influencing and persuasion were increasingly discussed and taken.

The Netherlands Professional Communication Association draws up levels of professional profiles for assistant/junior/senior and top level. Educational criteria are linked to the levels for the communication curricula. All communication curricula for higher education focusing on applied strategic communication have to meet 70% of the content criteria, including practical experience. In Belgium, higher education is being restructured, with the option of studying marketing communication in virtually all PR courses of an applied nature. For political reasons, this is often called business communication. In Great Britain, where efforts are being made to formulate criteria for all professional groups in order to be one step ahead of the European Commission, the criteria for PR are being adapted by the national organisation. However, they still speak of PR. The same thing is happening in the Mediterranean countries.

12.8 The former Eastern block countries

Meanwhile, the former communist countries are catching up. Calling upon various financial support programmes from the European Commission – such as Tempus and Phare – efforts are being made not only to familiarise the former Eastern block countries with the free market economy but also to meet the communicative requirements that are demanded by organisations within that economic system. Universities in the - soon to be - EU countries, such as Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic, are facing a lot of work at an almost inhuman pace. As there is a lack of experts in senior positions, research programmes and doctoral degrees are encountering problems. In the former Yugoslavia, PR education has suffered too much from the war to play any significant part. In most countries the specific interdisciplinary nature of PR is not easy to incorporate within the University structure. This often leads to curricula which are clearly focused on external communication and media contacts. Unfortunately, little use is made of the opportunity to incorporate integrating marketing communication into the curricula, a clear component of communication in the new market economy with many possibilities for new media and e-commerce.

12.9 Impact of Anglo-Saxon countries

Both the Confederation CERP and Cerp-Education and Research (CER ) are bilingual. The history of CERP has ensured that both French and English may be spoken within the organisation. As a result of the rise in translation costs, the use of English, which is easier for most members, is becoming even greater. Participation
by Latin-speaking countries is declining, but this seems to be changing as a result of activities of bilingual Belgium.

The Sorbonne Treaty was recently signed by most European countries at government level. Under the terms of the treaty, it is agreed that the education will adopt the Anglo-Saxon educational system with a bachelor and masters level. Not a sinecure for the Mediterranean countries, which generally have a four-year maîtrise course and a DESS (diplôme d'études supérieures spécialisées). This is not including the ‘young’ PR countries in Central Europe, which apart from the interdisciplinary and applied nature of the field, are struggling with the English language. Naturally, the possibility of international recognition of diplomas is very much simplified by the use of a clear educational system. Modification in the various countries will however take a few years and has a great many consequences for education in the various European countries.

12.10 Increase in internationalisation

Partly as a result of the internationalisation of this field, to which the Green book for commercial communication (1996) has given a major boost, the internationalisation of education has increased. Virtually the entire spectrum of higher education in Europe now features international activities. Supported by sources of subsidies such as Socrates, based on bilateral contracts between educational institutions, and Leonardo, which is focused on co-operation between education and international business, the universities have set up international networks. They are working on internationalisation of the curriculum, teacher and student mobility and international collaborative projects. It has long ceased to be the exception for students to undergo part of their programmes in higher education, apart from studying the field itself, must also look into training skills enabling them to become standard features of curricula.

In setting up curricula, it is now assumed that the student himself will modify and augment his knowledge on an ongoing basis. Programmes and training courses are set up as parts of a life-long learning programme. The basic programmes in higher education, apart from studying the field itself, must also look into training skills enabling students to engage in knowledge and career management independently. Furthermore, the student must adapt to a society which is constantly changing and which is constantly firing them with fresh impulses. Spare time, amusement, a job and ‘fun’ are essential elements in their existence. This poses new requirements for education.

12.11 Changing student

The student, who has become reasonably spoilt in terms of internationalisation, has also changed. In the past, he became familiar with foreign cultures during his summer holidays or he put his studies on a hold so that he could go and work and gain life experience for a period in other countries. The modern-day student has few opportunities for delaying his studies and deferring the time of graduating. If he starts a course, it makes sense on a number of grounds to complete it as quickly as possible. Meanwhile, we are having to deal with students who have largely grown up and been educated in the digital age (TV, video and Internet). They are used to seeking out information and studying actively and in a focused manner. They are no longer prepared to absorb any ballast and studying units where they don’t see the point. They have adapted to a society which is constantly changing and which is constantly firing them with fresh impulses. Spare time, amusement, a job and ‘fun’ are essential elements in their existence. This poses new requirements for education.

12.12 Changing education

Education is attempting to adapt to the constantly changing requirements put by society and the student. International developments demand an international approach. This is accompanied by long-term activities, in which mastering foreign languages and studying other cultures is a central element. At the same time, they must remain abreast of developments in the field. Technological developments ensure that elements of the curriculum are constantly being modified. As soon as elements have been developed, they are immediately out of date as a result of the pace of change and modifications in the field of technology. Consider for example the use of chips, computers, the Internet and Intranet. Studying website developments, digital television and e-commerce have become standard features of curricula.

In setting up curricula, it is now assumed that the student himself will modify and augment his knowledge on an ongoing basis. Programmes and training courses are set up as parts of a life-long learning programme. The basic programmes in higher education, apart from studying the field itself, must also look into training skills enabling students to engage in knowledge and career management independently. Furthermore, the student must acquire techniques of trend watching. All this is at odds with the requirements of industry to offer short-term training courses, to say nothing of the ongoing cuts within education.
12.13 Changing teachers

Teachers and professors are required to monitor developments in the technological field in addition to developments in the field of PR and communication. In addition, a strong internationalisation tendency within Europe requires them to be abreast of the different cultural approaches and developments in education and industry in the various countries. They must also actively master languages and keep these skills alive, so that they can exchange ideas with colleagues within their field. Teacher mobility within the EU Socrates/Erasmus projects meets these needs only partly.

Meanwhile the ongoing technological developments have ensured that students are often more familiar with the technical changes and opportunities than the lecturers. The modern-day student demands that the topics offered by teachers are free of elements that they consider ballast and furthermore it must be varied. Developments in society have made them sensitive to amusement. Teachers must therefore offer the teaching material in such a form that they not only manage to fascinate the students but also preferably entertain them.

12.14 Change in communications jobs and profiles

Changes in the fields of technology, politics and the market have brought about changes in jobs within the field. We speak of knowledge managers, direct mail managers and website managers, to list but a few. Those who hold down these positions naturally have not followed some clear training course with this aim in mind. The profiles of these managers have come about as a result of the ongoing developments, studying and modification of the changing requirements of society and the field. For the future professional, it is good practice to keep tabs on developments in adjacent fields in addition to developments in his own field. Increasingly, the communications professional will transcend field boundaries.

12.15 Consequences for PR education in the 21st century

Because of factors like life-long learning and changes in the profile of the professional (see Heemskerk, Chapter 10) communication education in the 21st century will be dominated - on the one hand by a: generalistic approach, with a focus on social responsibility. Trend watching, knowledge and career management are standard elements for the most strategic roles here, and on the other: more specialisation, with a focus on new application techniques. As a result of the rapid developments in the high-tech field and its applications in the field of communications, there is a greater focus on the more executive roles here.

Emotion, creativity and empathy will come to play a greater part, both in the content of the curriculum and in teaching methods. They will become part of the tools available to the teacher and the profile of the communications professional.

Courses will increasingly be linked to other forms of training and work experience in the communication field. To this end, courses will increasingly be offered on a part-time basis, for example in periods of alternating working and studying or as evening and weekend training, alongside a regular job in the field.

Courses and training – partly under the impact of the wishes of industry – will be offered increasingly in readily digestible form. Partial certificates will be the result.

The higher degree of professionalization will simplify accreditation of professional practitioners by the government.

As a result of the life-long learning process and part-time training, companies and courses are increasingly working together and ensure that courses are provided in which professionals are involved as course members and as teachers. Accreditation of teachers is essential.

In view of the developments, a pan-European approach is needed, but a diversified cultural execution and application will continue to exist in the various European countries. But isn’t that precisely what makes international communication so interesting?

12.16 Bibliography


Cerp-Education (1994). Public Relations Education in Europe, survey of programmes with appendix. (internal publication)

Practitioners are increasingly under the scrutiny of their clients, the media and public opinion. They are judged by the results they achieve in their professional activity. They are not only accountable for the quality of their services, but also - more and more - for alleged failure in meeting their clients' expectations. In some cases they are held liable for the results obtained, and even taken to court. Does this trend affect the public relations profession? If not, will it in the future? Why?

This paper presents some thoughts based on both a theoretical and empirical analysis of the past and current situation.

13.1 Introduction

It has been argued that public relations is one of the world's oldest professions. Man being a social animal with a higher level of consciousness than other species, he also has the ability to express himself verbally and communicate with his fellows. Communication therefore has been a major factor of evolution and societal regulation.

Although physical power has always been - and still is - a means for individuals and groups to impose their will, persuasion by communication is one of the main features of life in human society. Communications practitioners therefore hold a special responsibility. Are they then morally accountable for their actions and possibly liable from a legal point of view? Is there a pattern in the perception of their responsibility? What have been the major trends in the past?

Public relations is the art of presenting, representing and interpreting facts in a particular way with a view to achieving a given objective. This art of influencing, seducing and convincing has been practised throughout history. At individual level, men and women have always sought to protect their self-interest, trying to gain love, win support, acquire power or make profit. They still do. National states, governments, organisations, corporations, interest groups have done the same. They also still do. Religion, politics and commerce always depended on the acceptance and the goodwill of their specific target groups. They still do. There is thus seemingly little difference between preaching, seducing and selling.

Most people have no difficulty in accepting this fact of life and are not questioning its legitimacy. However, recent history has created a very complex, technically highly developed global society, quite different from the previous civilisations of the past 10,000 years. The evolution of democracy since the French revolution, the development of increasingly sophisticated communication tools and not the least the overwhelming power of the media have shaped a world in which communication called for a professional approach.

Although ‘professional’ counsellors have long existed at royal courts, as well as in the shadow of the powerful men and women, the profession of communicator and communications adviser is younger than a century. The raison d'être, the contents, the operational scope and the organisation of this profession are described elsewhere in this book. We, for our part, are inviting the reader to have a closer look into the evolution of the accountability of the communications practitioner, in other words his/her moral, societal and legal responsibility in a rapidly changing world.

Since the practice of public relations is the deliberate attempt to earn goodwill from others, one can say that communication is indeed everybody's business. It means that everyone is accountable for the substance and the
form of his/her communication. For practical reasons we obviously limit the scope of this paper to those who are making a living of communication, the PR practitioners and, more particularly, the consultants.

Outsiders have only a vague conception of what professional communication stands for. The practitioners themselves are adding to the confusion. The services they offer vary from straightforward promotional activity to strategic counselling at boardroom level. The importance and extent of the practitioner's accountability will therefore vary according to the impact of his/her action on client, employer, third parties and society. The responsibility and liability of a PR agent organising a special event for the launching of a new car is small in comparison with that of the top adviser to the Board of a multinational corporation facing a dramatic oil spill or making workers redundant in regions with high unemployment.

13.2 Credibility first

Long-established and well-defined professions, such as physicians and lawyers, do not need to justify the importance of their social role. They are perceived and accepted as being indispensable to human well being and progress. Architects, engineers and even more so, accountants, who have a more recent history as a legally recognised and vested? profession, are publicly recognised. Communications experts however, often need to explain, without any guarantee of being understood by other than initiated businessmen or experts, what their business is about and how they contribute to the defence, the development and the success of their organisation or client.

Not so long ago the competent public relations man or woman had basically to be able to handle almost everything that dealt with material communication: copy-writing, getting financial news to the papers, promoting products… Usually he did not have to be much of long-term planner. His primary job was to solve problems already on the books.1

As an organised activity, public relations, in the beginning, was largely press relations and other forms of visible communication. Behind the scene, however, policies were designed to form the broad and vital basis for effective public relations programmes. It was felt that the problems of the future would call increasingly for practitioners who also had broader grasps and who would more and more participate in policy discussions.2

To gain recognition for their professional capabilities and merits PR practitioners first had to establish their own credibility among their clients, employers, the media and the public. They did so, with limited success, by getting together, setting up professional associations, organising public conferences, taking stock of where the practice was standing and where it should be heading to.

It is interesting to note that the First World Congress of Public Relations, held in Brussels in June 1958, by the International Public Relations Association, was devoted to the theme ‘Public Relations in the service of Social Progress.’ It shows the need felt by the practitioners to establish their credibility by becoming true actors of societal change.

This became even truer as the communication practice evolved from publicity and public relations in its limited sense to an intrinsic part of management. Generating understanding and acceptance for a company or an organisation in society at large still means building bridges, but the context has changed dramatically within a couple of decades.

Indeed, until recently industrial society used to differentiate clearly between public and private affairs. A company or an organisation was required to abide by the institutionalised norms and values of society, which were amplified in legislation. Norms and values, which were generally accepted, and which were not questioned, were taken for granted.3

Nowadays professions, careers or activities are expected to operate on the basis of ethical principles and are only legitimised by society when the members of the profession act for the common good.4 In the last few years it has also become apparent that randomness, irregularity, unpredictability - the chaotic in sum - may hide behind an appearance of order.5 Uncertainty is a current feature at the dawn of the 21st century. Futurologists of the past decade have proven to be more wrong than right in their forecasts about human society.

Another feature of today's society is that various publics believe, rightly or wrongly, that they are entitled to assess and judge actions of other parties. In a given common situation interests vary of course and are often conflicting. The media reflect them, amplifying the dramatic aspects, stressing the opposition rather than emphasising the common ground.

Besides, the PR community has not yet succeeded fully and globally, i.e. world wide, in describing the role and relevance of its professional practice to everyone’s satisfaction. As a professional category public relations does not possess an ‘ideology’.6 This makes the practitioners perhaps more vulnerable than other categories when their responsibility is concerned.

Information, communication and opinion-moulding activities therefore require new approaches. Correctness in theory, adequacy of action and skillfulness in interpreting new situations - thus demonstrating that their theory
and practice were adequate, are expected from the PR expert. The activity of public relations is not restricted to informing and explaining actions by a client or an employer, by a company or an organisation. The success of PR performance resides in achieving its central goal: to make sure that “Caesar's wife not only seems honest, but that she truly be honest”.7

As a result of his changing role the communications practitioner has in many cases increasingly become an intrinsic part of policy and decision-making processes. This means that his/her responsibility is also greater, not only towards his/her employer or client, but also towards involved third parties and society at large.

13.3 Legitimacy

Professional competence and good conduct in public relations practice are primarily the personal responsibility of the individual practitioner. But to what extent is he/she responsible for achieving the expected results? And to what extent is he/she liable for the negative consequences of a given communication policy or PR action? These questions get right to the heart of the profession.

In his farewell lecture8 held at the University of Utrecht in 1994, professor Anne van der Meiden, illustrates his thesis about moral legitimacy and accountability with a surprising and interesting case taken from the Bible. Achiqofel, counsellor of King David I, and subsequently of his son Absalom, hangs himself because his advice to the royal prince has not been followed, leading indirectly to Absalom’s defeat and death. It seems thus that Achiqofel felt himself liable for his failure as an adviser. Without suggesting that this is what PR practitioners should do when their advice leads to failure, it certainly raises the question of accountability in clear terms.

Analysing the meaning of a counsellor’s role and legitimacy Van der Meiden begins with the etymology of the (Dutch) words ‘advies’ (advice) and ‘raden’ (to guess, but also to counsel). He distinguishes three options, of which we retain two:

1. Giving a piece of advice is offering the result of insights or a vision based on a critical evaluation of facts and findings. Advice is needed by someone and, by advising him/her, the adviser participates in a decision-making process. Of course, the receptor can or can decide not to use the advice he received in the frame of a strategic plan.
2. Advice in PR practice is nearly always systems-oriented and planned. It is a creative act. A practical solution is sought for someone who is in need of counsel.

It is quite obvious that both options lead to consequences, which can be either positive or negative. To what extent is the adviser responsible and accountable for these consequences? Answering the question requires, once again, a clear definition of the professional status of the communicator or communications adviser and his assignment. Is he/she only the instrument of his/her client, a spokesperson without any other legitimacy? Is he/she an ‘officer of the court of public opinion’, a trained advocate like the lawyer, ready to accept to defend either side of an action and bound by duty to defend even criminal acts? Or is he/she like the journalist and the educator are supposed to behave - pledged to publish the news without bias or teaches the ‘truth’ without prejudice?

Is it not common knowledge that PR means first to clean the house and then show it? It is along these lines, that we should understand the call of Plotinus, who believed that if we are not satisfied with our image, we should do like the sculptor, taking off here, cutting there, polishing until the true image emerges before our eyes.9 But what happens if we sculpt an attractive picture of an ugly person? Are we not hiding the truth? And are we not manipulating public opinion if we build up credibility and a positive image of company just showing one facet of their true goals and attitudes?

Many practitioners - and even more outsiders - believe that communications specialists should serve only those clients whose actions are ‘good’ and causes that are ‘in the public interest’. However, this is not clear cut because the definition of ‘public interest’ itself is subject to religious, political and cultural norms and values. And morals are sometimes changing within the span of a lifetime. On the other hand public interest is largely dictated by public opinion, reflected by the media and expressed in political addresses. A critical analysis of events and facts shows that public interest is more than often self-interest of individuals, groups, corporations, nations, religions, races.

“Though men be much governed by interest, yet even interest itself, and all human affairs, are entirely governed by opinion.” wrote David Hume10 two centuries ago. Men haven't changed, society has. The power of the media, the massive volume of information and the speed of transmission are shaping quite a different environment, in comparison with only twenty years ago.

13.4 Accountability

Public relations practitioners stepped into a position comparable to that of the architect and engineer four or five decades ago. “The architect and the engineer take the principles evolved by the physicists and chemists, and
make practical application of the principles in the use of steel and concrete and other material to create bridges, buildings and other structures. Likewise public relations practitioners are on the way to becoming social engineers, making practical applications to human relations problems of the principles evolved by the social scientists, particularly in the areas of communication, attitudes, group dynamics and leadership.” said J. Caroll Bateman, PR Director of The Milk Industry Foundation (U.S.) in a speech in 1956.11

But, except in a personal sense, architects and engineers need not consider moral values in applying the principles that the scientists have made available to them. There is nothing ethical or unethical about their use of a formula for computing the stresses of a bridge span. At the most they are accountable for miscalculations or technical errors if the bridge collapses. The PR practitioner, by contrast, is dealing with human beings and in every instance of application of a particular principle or technique he should be very much aware of the moral implications of his act.

Opinion-moulders face the ethical dilemma of every propagandist. The latter must either forego the use of certain techniques of persuasion that will help him obtain the immediate end in view or violate prevailing moral codes. He must choose between being a less than fully effective technician and a scrupulous human being, or an effective technician and a less than scrupulous human being. With this in mind we cannot but appreciate the extent of accountability in the PR profession.

13.5 A matter of excellence in quality? Or is it more?

In our view a distinction should be made in the areas of behaviour as well as in the degree of accountability. There are three separate areas of behaviour to be considered:

1. in the professional field;
2. in the relationship with clients/employers;
3. in the community and/or society at large.

1. The professional field
The first area is well known and documented. For several decades professional standards have been set. Professional associations at local, national and international level rule and control the practice. Codes of conduct have been established. Malpractice and improper conduct within PR agencies and departments, when detected, can be sanctioned and are indeed.

The accountability of the officer or consultant relates to capabilities and to ethical attitudes at work. Incompetence, negligence, piracy of clients or personnel, false representations, unfair competition, manipulation are not very much unlike situations in other business sectors. It should be stressed however that many public relations activities and assignments deal with delicate and confidential matters. Strong ethical behaviour has thus to be expected from the practitioner. The highest standards of ethics and education should therefore continuously been pursued.

A significant breakthrough was made by the adoption of the Helsinki Charter12 on quality and quality improvement. The Minimum Quality Standards specify a number of requirements that should be basically the same for the profession, regardless of the area or conditions in which the service is rendered. The MQS measures the quality of the services in four distinct categories: the process, the practices, the performances and the personal skills.

For a couple of years now some PR companies have also been adhering to ISO 9000 Certification. Key aspects are management responsibility, client needs, human resources and quality system. In the recommended MQS the requirements for the communication process are built on the structure of the ISO Quality Loop, renamed ‘The Public Relations Quality Loop’.

Against this background it is quite easy to measure the importance and extent of accountability of a communications adviser or PR officer. Failure to meet the set standards with proven malpractice or damage as a result may be a sufficient ground to invoke the liability of the counsellor or the officer. But this kind of legal liability is not much different from any other form of commercial accountability.

2. The relationship with clients/employers
In the sphere of client relationships, much of what has been said here, also applies. Yet, we believe this area to be far more complex. The concept of ‘quality’ in communication activities covers positive characteristics that have nothing to do with how much is produced. The perception of quality depends not only on a particular situation, it is also very subjective as it is being observed from a particular point of view. Fulfilment of the client's needs, supposed to be clearly expressed or at least implied, is not always straightforward.

‘Quality’ in the client's perception often means the ‘results’ he has in mind. The consultant or officer is supposed to deliver these results. But in a significant number of cases, especially in conflict and crisis situations, fulfilling the client's expectations largely depends on exogenous facts and reactions, which are difficult, if not impossible, to master.
This situation exists in several other professions. If we make a comparison with law practice, we will find many similarities in the client relationship, the evaluation of the quality of advice and service, the measurement of results. The basic difference though is the presence of an authoritative third party, i.e. the Court or the Jury. Most clients will accept - and pay - the fee of their lawyer, even if the outcome of the judgement is not what they were hoping.

More than one practitioner has been faced with clients who either terminated a service agreement or refused to pay the fees because they were not satisfied with the results. In one case a long-standing contract covering a fully-fledged communication programme, including press relations, public affairs and lobbying, which had been running for two years to the satisfaction of both the client and the consultant, was abruptly terminated because the action had failed to oppose a Bill in the European Parliament. The client could or would not understand that, in spite of positive media support and verbal commitment of influential MEPs, many of these members changed their mind in the course of the process, basically under pressure from other interest groups and national governments. The consultant himself was held accountable for not having succeeded in exerting pressure on a European Commissioner with whom he had a close personal relationship. He was dismissed with no compensation.

In another case, a client refused to pay the agreed fee, pretending that ‘the services rendered were of poor quality.’ In fact, he was not pleased with the results of an in-depth analysis of legal, political and societal attitudes regarding an environmental issue. He had expected the consultant to advice him on how to manipulate decision-makers and opinion leaders, and obviously failed to mention it during the briefing. The margin between influencing and manipulating is very small, as we all know.

3. The relationship with the community

The relationship with the public at large, the community or the society is a complex one. A distinction has to be made between:

- the professional relationship, where the action of a communications practitioner is geared towards a specific community or society at large, i.e. public opinion;
- the social and societal environment in which a practitioner is operating.

In the first case the accountability of the PR consultant or officer clearly depends on the impact his/her action has on public life and interest. His most obvious misdeed would be the deliberate publishing of falsehood or misrepresentation of facts in any situation affecting the common good. This includes any false statements about a person, an organisation or a product, as well as political campaign ‘smears’, the subordination of press editors and media, the propaganda on behalf of interest groups acting against the state and generally accepted values.

It is obvious that a communications practitioner might be held accountable for the wilful preparation and dissemination of false and misleading information designed to deceive or defraud the public. In our view such a person should not only be subject to sanctions from his/her professional association, but also be liable before the courts of justice. He/she may argue in defence that he/she served the interest of the client. While this might be understandable from a commercial point of view, it is totally unacceptable from an ethical one.

In a recent case a leading Belgian PR practitioner has been condemned to jail for malpractice. Although the facts had less to do with communication as such and more with fiscal manipulations, the behaviour of this consultant was mainly dictated by the interest of his clients. The court ruled he was accountable and liable for his acts.

The case in point is that a public relations practitioner can conduct his activities without regard to proper conduct or ethical standards. Professional associations have little means of acting against crooks and unscrupulous practitioners. Unlike the legal and medical professions, where the disbarred lawyer is out of business and the medical doctor loses his licence, the PR profession cannot enforce its code of ethics by legal means.

It is therefore of utmost importance that the PR and communication practice should be legally recognised as a profession. This would be to the benefit not only of the business itself, but also of the clients and the community. Accountability for ethical behaviour in conducting communication activities should evolve to liability. We are quite definite in this position.

In the second case, by contrast, we are pleading for the greatest carefulness, caution and prudence.

13.6 Operating in an ‘e-mocracy’

The term of ‘e-mocracy’ has been coined recently by some social thinkers and writers about the role of the media today. They observe that factual information and editorial commentary are disappearing from the written and audio-visual media, making room for infotainment. An emotional approach dominates much of the news, in the written word as in the pictures. Politicians, church and business leaders play the game, paying more attention to the fact that they need to be seen and speak in emotional talk, rather than be guided by the substance of their message and a rational debate. Labour unionists, environmentalists and other special interest groups behave much in the same way.
Images of oil-contaminated birds, angry farmers blocking roads with tons of food, crying workmen at the closing of their plant, bloodshed women with dead children in their arms, mile-long queues of emaciated refugees say more about the misery of an otherwise affluent and seemingly successful society than in-depth analyses. But nevertheless, too little is said about the underlying causes and the consequences of these human dramas. Rational and critical analysis is left to intellectual debates, often with the same experts and TV stars, or to popular talk shows where any ill-informed person can give his or her views, which we are supposed to accept as common sense or public opinion.

“We are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them. And those preconceptions, unless education has made us acutely aware, govern deeply the whole process of perception,” wrote the famous editor and columnist Walter Lippmann. This is creating a dangerous climate in which there is an increased demand for scapegoats to be, if not publicly lynched, at least morally hanged. The size and complexity of public administrations as well as multinational corporations have led to anonymous decision-making. It is no longer clear who has got the real power. It is la dépersonnalisation du pouvoir. As a reaction against this situation people, given a voice by the media, are more and more asking for simplification, for quick judgements, for liabilities. And the media, largely guided by circulation and audience figures, which influence their market value and profit margins, give in.

At the same time people have realised they can easily serve their self-interest or their cause or just make money by designating culprits, by claiming damage and justice, by calling on real or supposed liability.

Media and publics form one reality, one psychological polarity of stimulus-and-response, which is underestimated if one is considered stimulus alone and the other reaction alone. This cross fertilisation is making the media a Bewusstseinsindustrie, a conscience-building industry.14 It is shaping an unprecedented societal landscape in which facts and opinions are no longer separated. Actually, opinions are facts since conscious feelings become very much factual and lead to a social reality as soon as people behave according to these feelings.

Professional accountability has to be seen against this background. The communications practitioner, more particularly, the consultant at management or boardroom level, is under growing pressure as far as the responsibility for his/her advice is concerned. Clients behave according to l'air du temps. There will be a shift towards claims on the counsellor's liability, not necessarily based on facts but on perceptions.

A company getting adverse publicity following its failure to successfully manage the closing down of an operation may sooner or later well ‘try’ to sue its PR advisers. Not only would the adviser have to bring evidence that ‘all adequate means were used to guarantee a harmless conclusion to the closing down’ but he might also be required to prove that ‘all other options had duly been considered in advance’.

We acknowledge the trend towards a greater liability for the public relations practitioner, but believe it should not be isolated from the current attitudes in society. While it is obviously important to keep in mind who, at the end of the day, is paying for public relations - which is not a public service! - the consultant should be able to protect his integrity against client abuse. Without becoming a moralist he should use his influence, both with his client and with opinion-leaders, to ask for more focus on ethics in business in general. Indeed, one cannot expect ethical communication in the absence of an ethical corporate culture, scrupulous media and a society without strong moral values.

Notes

11 Steward, Hal D. (1958) in Key to public relations progress: higher standards of ethics and education, quoted in the proceedings of the First World Congress of Public Relations, CBPR/BCPR, Brussels.
12 The Helsinki Charter (1997) adopted by IPRA, CERP and ICO.
About the authors

As a consultant to Belgian and international businesses, Charles van der Straten Waillet has over 30 years of experience in communication and more particularly in the field of strategic consulting, financial communication and crisis communication. In 1970 he was one of the founding shareholders of Infopublic SA, which he helped to develop into one of Belgian’s leading communication consultancies in the 1980s. The agency was then taken over by the Shandwick network. In 1995, Charles van der Straten Waillet started up European Communication Strategies (CS). The vision he had for the new company, and which is now becoming reality at a rapid pace, was to create a hot house for strategic communication serving Belgian and international clients. He is past president of the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) and the Belgian Public Relations Centre, and a member of the European Public Relations Confederation (CERP).

Mark Dubrulle has 35 years of professional experience in public affairs and communication strategies, as well as in environmental protection and management. His professional career in communication started in 1965 in the Netherlands. He was initially involved in employee and consumer relations, as well as in marketing communication and product publicity. During the following years he was based in Brussels where he gained experience in European affairs and lobbying. He also played an important role in the Belgian P.R. Association, of which he was a Member of the Board and Secretary General from 1966 to 1972. After some time as Managing Director of Hill and Knowlton International in Brussels, he set up as an independent consultant in 1985. He is currently dealing with environmental issues and corporate communication strategies. He is co-founder and first secretary of the Flemish green party AGALEV. At present he is President of the European Society for Environment and Development (ESED).

Ben Warner

14 Communication: creating a solocracy

14.1 The arena of macro concepts

‘Continuous change’ and ‘rapid pace of development’ are terms in common use in today’s world: nothing is certain, everything is in a state of flux. They can be used as an excuse for failure, as an argument in favour of reorganisation or as justification for adaptation and renewal. These general concepts of movement, change and uncertainty are expressed more specifically by such macro concepts as individualisation, globalisation, rationalisation, flexibilisation, dynamisation and technologisation.

Optimists employ them in describing the challenges presented by the times we live in, while pessimists use them in lamenting the complexity and frantic pace of the modern world. Some of these terms can be stretched so far that they are already beginning to look threadbare. Individualisation and globalisation have become so familiar that no-one pays them any attention when they are used to explain a government decision or to justify a change in commercial approach or communication strategy. We are already looking for new labels, because a thirst for change is also a feature of today’s fast-moving world. While there is no shortage of arguments and topical examples to justify the use of these terms, whether they have only now acquired validity is questionable. We should not imagine that they are new phenomena. The sea-borne trade which developed after the discovery of new continents – at least as viewed from a European perspective – was a form of globalisation. All those centuries ago, goods were being shipped around the world, influences and elements from other cultures spread to Europe and new ideas were gaining global currency. The revolution of the Hellenistic era, displacing the hegemony of the gods by man’s own responsibility and making man the central focus, is a clear example of rationalisation and the start of individualisation. The notion that so much has changed and improved also needs to be put into perspective: centuries ago, the fundamental problems facing the world were hunger, illiteracy, poverty, war and disease. Not only are those problems still with us today, the list has been extended with the addition of new global issues such as overpopulation, environmental pollution and water shortage.

Although we should not attribute these developments exclusively to the modern world without some qualification, it does not alter the fact that many developments and influences are defined by today’s society in terms of these macro concepts, that governments, companies and organisations use them in addressing markets and target groups and that the communication specialist is obliged to function in an arena which is surrounded by virtual billboards, beaming these concepts at the players.

The present situation is, however, remarkable on at least two counts. Firstly, so many of the developments and major trends are taking place at more or less the same time, and secondly, they are perceived and experienced as current phenomena by large numbers of people. Communication specialists therefore have to cope with a working environment in which greater freedoms, pressure of time, global competition and uncertainty as to the durability of concepts are placing heavy demands on their adaptability, creativity and, above all, strategic insight. In a world bursting with dynamism, communication demands high standards of professionalism, appropriate positioning within the organisation and high-level input.

This article briefly discusses a number of spearhead activities in the communication world and outlines possible
14.2 The referendum society

The development of communication as a profession in the Netherlands shows close parallels with the process in other countries in the Western hemisphere which share a similar history, which have a political and administrative system based on democratic principles and where the standard of education and level of affluence are relatively high. Public information and public relations are practised in the Netherlands in a mature and fully accepted form. Maturity is reflected, for example, in widespread application: no village or municipality is too small to have its own public information specialists working in the service of local democracy. Other sectors, such as industry and non-profit organisations, employ dozens of consultants in addition to their well-staffed PR departments. The Netherlands is a communication society.

As a reaction to the combination of dictatorship and propaganda experienced during the war, all possible scope was given for democratic development in the post-war period by a government which favoured openness, vesting a right to information in the public through freedom of information legislation and a free press. The private sector followed this lead by establishing institutionalised consultation procedures and giving higher priority to external presentation, partly of its own volition and partly driven by the demands of the market. From the early forms of communication (public information in the public and non-profit sectors and public relations in the private sector) were soon evolved specialised disciplines such as internal communication, public affairs and corporate identity management. The growth of the private sector, the shift from corporate power to consumer power and the heightened awareness of environmental impact added new branches to the communication tree, with the development of financial PR, marketing communication and environmental information as separate disciplines with their own expertise and approach. With the growth in the number of different media and their impact, the greater assertiveness of today’s global citizen and the advances in IT, other more specialist disciplines have emerged such as media and issue management, crisis PR and countless relational refinements which enable individual information and PR programmes to be developed for practically every target group.

In less than half a century, the provision of information by government to the people has been transformed from a favour bestowed by those in authority into a public-sector duty and a civil right. Each individual now has the right – generally enshrined in law – to information and consultation. One consequence is that three-quarters of the time elapsing between taking a decision and implementing an infrastructure project, for example, is taken up by information and consultation procedures and the actual execution of the project occupies only a quarter of the time. Through this interactive information policy, the public or interest groups are involved in projects and plans at a very early stage. In some cases that can be laudable, but too often it does nothing to speed up project execution. On the contrary: when each individual is able to register his or her protest at the highest level of the law, rapid decision-making and execution are rarely possible. The degree of consultation is thus inversely proportional to the speed of decision-making. In this respect at least, the democratic process and the provision of information which it entails take on the character of a meeting involving a stadium-full of participants. This must, by definition, result in individual dissatisfaction, because ultimately not everyone’s voice can be heard and the decision can never do full justice to all opinions and positions. The right to consultation does not imply recognition that consultation is only meaningful if based on arguments which are grounded in knowledge, that consensus means practically everyone sacrificing some of his or her demands/wishes and that time and competition are virtual participants in the meeting and carry the same weight. Consultation culture based on democratic principles has reached a peak and is now beginning to suffer from the lack of effectiveness, creative solutions and individual recognition.

Modern communication technology makes it possible to consult each citizen individually and give each citizen a say. The Internet enables information to be exchanged on a continuous basis, via referenda and other forms of plebiscite. In the space of about a hundred years, the democratic process – which can be defined as a politically inspired communication process – has moved from collective representation to individual representation. In the parliamentary democracy, the individual’s vote has been subsumed via the political parties into a collective vote, which has then been represented by parliament. Decisions at national level have also been taken in this way. At the present stage of interactive consultation, part of that national collective voting power been allocated to all kinds of local consultation down to project level. Under this model, local interest groups and temporary single-issue alliances play a substantial role in the de facto government of the country. A minister who wants to build a railway line has to fight and talk his way sleeper by sleeper along the projected route. In the near future, these interest groups will fragment into self-organising temporary coalitions, which some have described as an ‘adhocracy’. Rapid consultation via the Internet or related technologies will mean a continuous stream of referenda and opinion surveys.

Communication specialists will be involved more in the logistics than the content of these processes, because there will be no time for control and guidance. They will be ‘traffic police’ in the digital dialogue with individuals who fire their opinions into the network like neurons communicating with their neighbours by firing synapses. Speed will be one of the decisive factors, making flexibility and adaptability even more essential. To paraphrase Darwin: the law for communication specialists will be ‘survival of the fastest’.

14.3 Creacomunicators
In the development of the relationship between producer and consumer there has been a clear shift away from production and consumption dictated by need – towards marketing and buying on the basis of image. In the beginning businesses were small, ranging from one-man outfits such as the village shop to small-scale production units which generally served their local markets. Products and services were closely related to the bare necessities of life. With growing affluence, people were able to afford luxuries. Through expansion and internationalisation, local catchment areas grew into continental and global markets. Under pressure of competition, suppliers were forced to offer add-on accessories and services such as after-sales service, advice and breadth of choice. The basic item was surrounded by a range of ancillary attractions and temptations: in essence, the tangible core product was augmented with a wide variety of intangible benefits.

As competition matured, with all the players offering a similar range of ancillary benefits, it became necessary to add a further intangible element: the image. Simply offering the product or service was no longer enough to turn the consumer into a customer: selling now also involved perception, feelings of affinity and rapport. Identity gave way to image and appreciation of the product gave way to brand awareness (‘brand’ also in the sense of mental imprinting). Now, as the pace of life increases, experience becomes more transitory. Overwhelmed by the flood of information, our perceptions are necessarily fleeting. The predominance of the media is reflected in all kinds of hype, with change following change at a dizzying pace. This is the stage we are at today. Communication specialists watch over the corporate image from the highest level, developing new strategies for preserving or strengthening that image and deploying their entire arsenal of specialist techniques in countless combinations within the operational concept of integrated communication.

What awaits us over the horizon? Is virtual the successor to image? It seems probable. In the beginning, suppliers fed, clothed and housed the consumer in response to needs which are essential to life. Then, through the brand, the supplier sought to enter into the consumer’s mind and implant an image. The virtual world reverses these roles completely: the customer/consumer now enters into the mind of the supplier. Consumers are increasingly using computer technology to define the products they require and communicate their wishes remotely to the supplier(s). The first supplier who can meet these requirements gets the business. In the virtual world, customers have input into the design of their own furniture, car or clothing and thereby control the supplier’s production process – the ultimate in service, individually conceived and individually produced, and all at high speed. In marketing, for example, it is still the function of communication specialists to promote the sale of goods and services and develop the brand or image, but in the not too distant future their task will be to help target groups develop and apply their virtual power. Instead of informing or engaging in dialogue with the customer, communication specialists will generate creative potential. Their task will be to persuade consumers to become customers by helping them to improve their personal creative processes. Communication will then no longer be concerned with messages about product value, qualities or image, but with initiatives for innovation at the individual level and tools to strengthen creativity and design ability. The future belongs to the creators.

14.4 The short-term/long-term dichotomy

This progression from necessity to image-perception and self-design has two relevant effects for the individual who is fortunate enough to live in an affluent and richly-provided environment. Firstly, the satisfaction of primary needs is taken for granted. Secondly, no higher individual level than self-creation appears to be conceivable: the pyramid of self-development and fulfilment has reached its peak. It is now time for a new collective. Partly out of ideological resistance, partly out of intellectual resistance and understanding and perhaps partly out of boredom, there is a need for a new necessity. It is not the survival of the individual, the family or the community which is at stake, but that of the world community. By transcending local and individual interests, which have now been satisfied, globalisation gives us a greater insight into global concerns. It is not the individual’s physical well-being or environment which is the primary concern – the quality of both is reasonably assured – but the collective environment: the habitat and species. That insight is being translated into two goals in the Netherlands: achieving sustainability in production processes and in socially responsible behaviour. Sustainability is inherent in both movements: one seeks sustainability with respect to the material world and the other seeks sustainability of mankind and quality behaviour. On the one hand, therefore, modern society is witnessing a media-driven and commercially oriented process of rapid change and variation, with all the characteristic features of short-term thinking and action which that entails. On the other, an undercurrent is developing which seeks to ensure quality behaviour on a long-term basis.

Viewed in that light, communication specialist will have the task of explaining and presenting an organisational strategy which takes account of both aspects. We must not allow tomorrow’s success to be a burden on the day after tomorrow. The quality of our behaviour the day after tomorrow must be inherent in today’s innovations in products and services. This is a delicate balance, especially in a world where affluence and economic growth are far from evenly distributed. Achieving critical mass on two fronts will be essential: on the competition front a critical mass of sales and on the sustainability front a critical mass of resistance.

14.5 The renaissance of ethics

Mission statements, codes of conduct, licences to operate and targets – all bear witness to a renewed concern for standards and values. Where the traditional collectives, represented by the authority of the state, the church or the social hierarchy, have been eroded, fresh appeals for moral renewal are being made. This renewal may be
based on universal time-honoured values and conventions, but will not emerge within the traditional institutions and power relationships because those have been eroded. Here, too, there are signs of a shift from collective towards individual responsibility. Governments and corporations face a Herculean task in this area, as is clearly demonstrated by considering the position of a hypothetical global company. Let us assume that it chooses its international field of operations with reference to three main criteria: one economic, one security-related and one ethical.

The first criterion states that the company will not invest, work or trade in countries or regions where it cannot make a profit, which are sparsely populated, where purchasing power is low or where there is no infrastructure. If no other qualifications are stipulated, that excludes Greenland, the Sahel countries, Mongolia and many others. The second states that the company will not work in or maintain commercial relations with countries where hostilities are in progress or where war threatens due to serious instability, because it cannot guarantee the safety of its employees. The knowledgeable reader will be able to decide which countries and regions have to be discounted on security grounds. The third states that, since the company sets great store by socially responsible behaviour, it will not operate in countries where freedom is restricted, which are governed by dictatorships, where the people, certain minorities, the press, the trade unions or religious groupings are repressed or where the rule of law is non-existent. The company uses Amnesty International’s black book as a guide: this disqualifies three-quarters of all the countries in the world.

As to whether it is realistically possible to do business worldwide exclusively on the basis of these three criteria, the conclusion is clear: there are pitifully few countries which qualify. This example demonstrates the long and difficult road which has to be travelled if one wishes to rigorously apply socially responsible business practices. Codes may indicate one’s intentions and provide a guideline, but they are difficult to apply in practice. Public-sector agencies and governments face the same ethical dilemmas. The role of communication – and the function of specialists in that profession (but not of course exclusively in that profession) – is therefore to engage in an unprecedented dialogue in pursuit of human or biological sustainability. The same is true of the pursuit of material sustainability.

If public information and public relations, as communication of the highest quality and serving the highest goal, can achieve mutual understanding and respect, there will be another world which has to be addressed. Recognition of the importance of that function is growing in the Netherlands, helped by the open dialogue between all concerned and a national character which tends to seek consensus.

14.6 On time-seekers and dual roles

The communication specialist is having to cope with many changes of function and status within the organisation, two of the most significant being the growth in teleworking and the importance given to communication as a critical success factor.

The traditional bond between the employee and the organisation is breaking down. The links are being weakened by individualisation, rapid career changes and reduced working hours. There are 8,760 hours in a year. Employees work on average 1,600 hours a year in the Netherlands. If they sleep for eight hours of the twenty-four, which amounts to around 2,500 hours a year, that adds up to just over 4,000 hours, less than half the total number of hours in a year. In other words, over half of the year is available as leisure time, which the employee can spend on activities (individual or otherwise) of his or her choice. Employees now have two and a half times more leisure hours than working hours. Since the satisfaction of certain needs can be taken for granted in today’s welfare society, people work only part of the time to provide for the traditional necessities of life and allocate more of their pay to leisure activities or the quality of their leisure time. Employees in the Netherlands also enjoy leave of various kinds of between 30 and 40 days a year. Despite these benefits and the generous amount of leisure time, there is growing demand for sabbatical leave. The pressures of work resulting from the reduction in working hours are evidently so great that even the leisure time already available is not sufficient for recuperation. Running counter to this trend are the demands of the 24-hour society and the economic importance of achieving maximum efficiency in the deployment of corporate assets. Not surprisingly, employers are increasingly resorting to individual contracts of employment, while reducing the number of permanent staff to a minimum. Organisations are becoming small fixed nuclei supported by a changing network of external support staff. This trend fits in well with employees’ wish to decide their own working hours and their choice not to be tied by a collective labour agreement.

Working only 1,600 hours a year, everyone is effectively a part-timer now. This trend is set to continue: the working year will be measured in days instead of weeks. Taking advantage of the opportunities offered by teleworking and eliminating the inefficiency and environmental impact of commuting, a problem rendered more urgent by the threat of impending gridlock, the factories of today (which we call offices) will be transformed into ‘charging stations’. At these stations, commercial data, instructions and results will be transferred between the employees’ laptops and the organisation’s server and fresh inspiration will be provided by exchanging ideas with colleagues. Employees will become ‘contactors’ instead of contractors, who will be paid on the basis of the number of times the network uses their services, just as telephone calls are metered. It will be in everyone’s interest to be a needed link in the organisational network.

The employee will be required to change from a handworker (someone who produces something) into a headworker (someone who contributes to the process of communication which ultimately results somewhere in
a product or service). In the over-supplied information economy, where added value is the only thing that counts, there will be a shortage of genuine leisure time and space when one is not logged-on to the network. The well-paid contactor will become a time-seeker, searching for this valuable resource and willing to pay a high price for it.

For the communication specialist, the nature of internal communication will change dramatically. What will become of pride in the company or the traditional sense of kinship inherent in working together in one business, in many cases at one fixed location? It remains to be seen how far traditional pride in the company can be replaced by loyalty to the brand or kinship with the parent behind the brand. In this new scenario, the task of providing internal information through in-house journalism and related editorial expertise is transformed into process management of an amorphous information stream where the communication value (dialogue and understanding) resides not in the transfer of content – the content is provided by the network participants themselves – but in the logistic and cybernetic qualities.

The in-house communicator will be called upon to perform a dual role. The primary and longest-established role is that of staff specialist, deploying communication expertise in the service of the organisation as a whole, the group’s business units and other critical factors in the organisation. For the organisation as a whole, the communication staff will concern themselves with overall policy (corporate communication), group image and, where applicable, PR support for the organisation as a brand. For the business units, the communication staff will be involved in sub-image development, target group communication and activity/product branding. For the other critical factors in the organisation, they will provide PR expertise: financial PR for the finance factor, labour market communication for the labour factor (human resources management), marketing communication for the commerce factor and, for example, environmental information for the technology factor.

The second – new – role of communication is as a critical factor in itself. In other words, it is not enough for an organisation to have everything in place in terms of finance, quality staff, commercial market expertise and technology support. If internal communication – both organisational (work and target information) and intangible (motivation and inspiration) – and external communication with relevant groups do not function effectively, success will remain elusive and objectives will only be achieved, if at all, through greater effort and heavier investment. In the former function, communication will take the form of mainly of strategic or specialist advice and operational expertise. In the latter function, it will perform a controlling role through mental and logistical management of a dynamic integrated process.

14.7 Solocracy

Family and tribal relationships were collectives: small-scale social communities. As a result of modern technologies, the scale is both decreasing (individualisation) and increasing (globalisation). The individual is breaking away from the traditional collectives (state, church, small communities) and is literally creating his or her own world. That world need not be a small or lonely world: in exchange for the loss of these small-scale relationships, the individual is becoming part of a global relationship, a network of billions of participants with access to an unprecedented wealth of information and knowledge. As a synapse within that network, the individual can determine the extent of his or her participation in terms of issues, intentions, time and (self)interest, in the process destroying the concepts of market segmentation and target groups. Communication specialists will have to address both the individual and diffuse and constantly changing interest groupings. Mutual understanding and two-way traffic – which have long been key terms in communication – are giving way to pluriform and highly dynamic processes. Although these are chaotic in nature, they are based on underlying forms of organisation that are not yet properly understood but which are now having an influence.

Individualisation is often equated with egocentricity and other forms of asocial behaviour, and it is certainly possible to cite examples or consequences of this. The individually-centred global citizen is, however, also capable of taking an interest in macro-issues: ecology, the global water problem, overpopulation and ethical issues dominate the mental agenda of the engaged individual. At the level of the organisation, those concerns are manifested in the priority accorded to and standards imposed on sustainability, socially responsible business practices and detailed codes of conduct. The spectrum of personal interests will range from highly egocentric concerns to planet-wide issues – from ego to geo – and organisations will need to address this broad spectrum in their communication strategy and objectives. The collective formed by the people will cease to exist, and with it the traditional characteristics and foundations of democracy. Where there have been close parallels between communication and democratic processes, the communication strategy will have to be revised.

Communication specialists will need to become adept in new processes and methods, both in talking to the interested parties within their own organisations and in mass communication. Where people have to be addressed on the basis of their individual participation in relatively anonymous networks, communication specialists will have to cope with the effects of a new ‘power base’: solocracy. Where individuals engage in global issues and interests within networks consisting of hundreds of millions of contacts, the organisation will have to deal with a holocracy. In short, there will be receptors for our messages and dialogues at both the macro and micro levels.

About the author
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