Dealing With Increasing Complexity:
Media Orientations of Communication Managers
in Public Sector Organizations

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Communication managers in public sector organizations operate in increasingly complex environments. An influential political realm, diverse stakeholder environments, and media scrutiny combined with macro-level developments in the public sector put high demands on their media and stakeholder relations. Media are both important stakekeepers and sources of information for other stakeholders. Therefore, we assume that individual-level perceptions of the media in relation to the organization are important factors in understanding stakeholder relations, but these perceptions have not been systematically analyzed and theorized. The present qualitative interview study focused on communication managers of Dutch independent administrative bodies. We developed a new conceptualization of media orientation and empirically explored how its dimensions are reflected in the managers' understandings of stakeholder relations. We found that communication managers try to cope with sector-specific challenges by implementing integrated communication strategies and exploring their communicative autonomy. Level of management support and incidents are key determining factors.

Keywords: media orientation, communication managers, public sector organizations, stakeholder relations

The relation between the public sector and the news media is often perceived as specifically challenging, which makes the job of the communication manager in public sector organizations (PSOs) demanding (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2016a; Gelders, Bouckaert, & Van Ruler, 2007). The inherent political nature of these organizations and the binding powers that they exert regarding citizens and other social institutions make them interesting for journalists who want to keep an eye on power (Liu, Horsley, & Levenshus, 2010; Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012). At the same time, this specific nature has consequences for their strategic communication. Compared with private organizations, PSOs face additional legal and formal constraints in their communication and need to take their more diverse stakeholder environment—among which political superiors, other parts of the administration, and citizens—into account (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2016a; Gelders et al., 2007; Liu, Horsley, & Yang, 2012).

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In general, the circumstances under which PSOs operate, and therefore their communication managers, have become increasingly complex. The environment of PSOs has become more volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous, challenging professionals in the public sector (Van der Wal, 2017). At the same time, new ways of thinking about the public sector have affected its organization and functioning. The large-scale transition from traditional public administration to new public management and the current post–new-public-management paradigm in which public value is stressed has had large implications for how bureaucracies are organized (De Vries & Nemec, 2013). Both the specific demands of strategic communication in the public sector and the more complex nature of public sector management are challenges for communication managers in PSOs.

Interaction with stakeholders is a key concern for communication managers. Public organizations have diverse types of internal and external stakeholders, such as board members, employees, clients, and community groups (Van Puyvelde, Caers, Du Bois, & Jegers, 2012). The media are a special type of stakeholder. On the one hand, they are external stakeholders questioning the organization and are subject to organizational information subsidies, but on the other hand, they serve as important intermediates between the organization and its other stakeholders (Jacobs & Schillemans, 2016). Interactions between public organizations and the media have been studied from different angles, such as public relations, strategic communication, and mediatization (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2016a; Liu et al., 2010; Thorbjornsrud, Figenschou, & Ihlen, 2014). This research focuses often on the organizational level. For instance, by examining how the logic of the news media perpetrates and transforms PSOs, organization-level consequences are considered as indicators of mediatization (Fredriksson, Schillemans, & Pallas, 2015; Verhoeven, 2016). The role of actors, such as communication managers, in underlying processes, however, is often not elaborated or explored. Consequently, we followed the trend to look at the role of agency and shifted away from macroscopic (societal) and mesoscopic (organizational) approaches (Marcinkowski, 2014). Actors are constitutive in strategic processes, engaging in the creation or transformation of norms and practices related to media practices (Pallas & Fredriksson, 2013), especially those actors who fulfill a key strategic position regarding the media. We focused on the communication manager in PSOs and their interpreting and dealing with a specific stakeholder and intermediate among stakeholders: the news media. Previous research on the concept of media orientation has identified interrelations between media-related attitudes of actors in organizations and the relevance of and prevailing approach to strategic communication in these organizations (Jacobs & Wonneberger, 2017; Kohring, Marcinkowski, Lindner, & Karis, 2013; Pallas & Fredriksson, 2013). We aimed at further exploring the concept of media orientation by verifying and possibly expanding its underlying dimensions. In doing so, we specifically paid attention to the consequences of media orientations for stakeholder relationships. This allowed for a more fine-grained analysis of how perceptions are related to strategic actions.

Within the broad spectrum of PSOs, the type of independent administrative body (IAB)[1] is especially interesting. These organizations have been granted legal autonomy to carry out their public tasks, and they enjoy relative managerial autonomy in determining their own (communication) strategies (Verhoest, Peters, Bouckaert, & Verschuere, 2004; Yesilkagit & Van Thiel, 2008).

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[1] *Zelfstandig bestuursorgaan* (ZBO) in Dutch.

The current study followed a qualitative approach by interviewing communication professionals in the Netherlands and addressed the following research question:

RQ: *How do media orientations of Dutch strategic communication managers in independent administrative bodies affect their understanding of relations with key stakeholders?*

Communicating in Challenging Circumstances: Strategic Communication in the Public Sector

Strategic communication for public organizations can be considered more difficult than for private organizations, as "all public organizations are, in one way or the other, instruments of elected bodies in carrying out public policies" (Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012, p. 193). This inherent political nature and the public responsibility have several implications for those organizing and conducting strategic communication. Communication managers often have to navigate among different and competing values such as efficiency, fairness, and democratic principles. Political logics and election rhythms influence the principles of PSOs and, consequently, raise uncertainty for the organizations and their communication managers. PSOs do not have the autonomy to change their own mission and are oriented toward societal problem solving instead of taking advantage of opportunities, which affects the possibilities for strategic communication (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2016b; Liu et al., 2010; Van der Wal, 2017; Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012).

In addition, the environmental circumstances in which PSOs operate have been changing. PSOs have to deal with an environment that is increasingly volatile, as incidents and crises happen more often, are interconnected, and gain public attention more easily. At the same time, PSOs have to deal with a great variety of stakeholders and issues, which makes their work more complex. It is also ambiguous: Stakeholders have different objectives and not all positions are clear (Van der Wal, 2017). While navigating between different principals and stakeholder positions, citizens and other stakeholders expect governmental communication to meet demands regarding transparency and accountability (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2016a).

Making Sense of a Challenging Environment: Stakeholder and Media Relations

PSOs generally have to deal with a wide variety of stakeholders who are affected by the organization or can put claims on it (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2016a; Van Puyvelde et al., 2012). There is a large body of literature on categorizations of stakeholder types according to the powers that they can exert vis-à-vis the organization (e.g., Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997). Conceptualizing media simply as external stakeholders, however, neglects the specific role of media in linking or mediating the relationship of organizations and various stakeholder groups. Fassin (2009) discusses the variable character of media operating either as stakeholder, stakewatcher, or stakekeeper. Specifically, accounting for the watchdog function of the media, their potential to control and create publicity for organizational issues either in a generic way or by following demands of other stakeholder groups, such as consumers or citizens, qualifies the media as stakekeeper.

Whereas most literature is focused on for-profit organizations, nonprofit organizations need a different approach as their diversity in types of stakeholders is extensive because of their political nature.

From the perspective of principal–agent theory, it is also more difficult to identify the principals in this relationship (Van Puyvelde et al., 2012). Van Puyvelde et al. (2012) identify three stakeholder categories for nonprofit organizations: interface stakeholders (organizational board members), internal stakeholders (e.g., employees), and several types of external stakeholders: funders (e.g., governments), beneficiaries (consumers, clients, members), suppliers (e.g., other organizations), competitors, organizational partners, and others. Although Van Puyvelde et al. do not pay specific attention to the media, it can be argued that media constitute an additional type of external stakeholder—or stakekeeper. Media can have influence on organizations; they do not hold a stake but keep it. They control and signal and are therefore considered as stakekeepers (Fassin, 2009). Media can be considered as an institution in their own right, scrutinizing governmental practices while informing and influencing other stakeholders (Liu et al., 2010). In addition, they fulfill democratic functions in society and are essential to PSOs that have to keep up with values of accountability and transparency.

Media Orientations of Communication Managers and Stakeholder Relationships

The communication manager, being in charge of a strategic function, can be considered as having a boundary-spanning function between the organization and its environment. Hence, maintaining relations with stakeholders, among them media, is a core practice for communication managers and especially challenging for those working in the public sector (Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012). Given that the media operate as a stakeholder and -keeper that act autonomously and as an intermediate between the organization and other stakeholders, we were interested in how considerations regarding the role of the media affect the ways communication managers understand and plan stakeholder relationships. A specific strand of mediatization literature uses a neoinstitutionalist perspective in its analysis of corporate–media interactions, emphasizing the importance of agency (Pallas & Fredriksson, 2013). In their study of the microdynamics of mediatization, Pallas and Fredriksson (2013) analyzed factual practices on the micro level such as innovation, adaptation, collaboration, and interaction with the media. We followed this focus on actors in organizations, but added the role of a preceding factor, which is the interpretation of the media environment by actors in organizations (Merton, 1948). In addition, we analyzed which role these interpretations play in relation to key stakeholders.

Marcinkowski (2014) coined the term *mental mediatization* to capture specific media effects on the individual or micro level. Central to this conceptualization is the effect of media coverage on the subject of reporting (e.g., individuals working for organizations). He states that these subjects start anticipating the content and consequences of media publicity.

As a specific form of mental mediatization, the concept of media orientation serves as a means to analyze media-related attitudes of individuals, or more specifically, perceptions of, in this case, communication managers regarding the importance and impact of the role of media coverage for their organization (Jacobs & Wonneberger, 2017; Kohring et al., 2013). Fredriksson and Pallas (2017) outline theoretically how actors in organizations decode and translate elements of media in organizations, stressing the importance of better understanding how mediatization unfolds on the level of individual perceptions. Following this suggestion, we proposed that the concept of media orientation can be used as a starting point for the study of organizational mediatization processes.

Media orientation has not yet received much empirical scrutiny. Still, three dimensions have been discerned: (1) attention seeking: the relevance of media coverage and attention for the organization, as perceived by communication professionals; (2) strategic impact: the perceived relevance of media coverage for strategic decision making; and (3) media hostility: the quality of organizational media coverage, as perceived by communication professionals (Kohring et al., 2013; Wonneberger & Jacobs, 2016). As media orientation can be explained as an interpretation of a part of the organization's environment, and because strategic behavior can follow from this interpretation, the concept can be considered a specific element of sense-making (Weick, 2012).

Previous research has linked media orientations of communication professionals to the prevalence of specific communication strategies, such as buffering and bridging, in their organizations (Wonneberger & Jacobs, 2016). The present study expanded this perspective by exploring the consequences of media orientations for strategic considerations concerning stakeholder relationships. This step emphasizes that the meaning and relevance of media for organizations are tied to their perceived function for specific stakeholder relations. The approach followed in the current study allowed us to uncover the blind spot of stakeholder models, that is, addressing the special position of media as stakeholder. In addition, this approach broadens the view of previous research of mediatization of (public sector) organizations. In the following, we reflect on the specific organizational context of our study and the relevant stakeholder groups before turning to our method and findings.

Independent Administrative Bodies

In this study, we focused on one specific type of PSO, which is the independent administrative body. IABs in the Netherlands can be considered a specific type of a quasi-autonomous nongovernmental organization or quango (Van Thiel, 2006). In the last decades, many Western governments have been creating quangos as a part of broader public sector reforms. The Dutch government established IABs to hive off departmental units, but at the same time keep them within the public domain (Van Thiel, 2006). Regarding their legal autonomy, IABs are not a part of a ministry and operate at "arm's length" from the central government (Rijksoverheid, 2014; Verhoest et al., 2004; Yesilkagit & Van Thiel, 2008). Usually, the minister has responsibilities for policies carried out by the organization and supervises the IAB (Rijksoverheid, 2014). Yesilkagit and Van Thiel (2008) found that IABs enjoy the highest level of de facto policy autonomy (as opposed to formal or legal policy autonomy), compared with other types of Dutch semiautonomous organizations. Managers in IABs have higher degrees of managerial autonomy in shaping their organizations in terms of finance and personnel, but also regarding strategic communication, compared with organizations that operate closer to the central government (Overman & Van Thiel, 2016; Verhoest et al., 2004). At the same time, some of them can expect rather high levels of public and media scrutiny because of their (public) tasks (Liu et al., 2010). The IAB label covers a wide range of organizations that differ in terms of their statutory positions, policy domains, media visibility, and size (Van Thiel, 2006). The combination of expected media pressure and relative autonomy to decide about communication policies and strategies renders them an interesting case for studying media orientations and understandings of stakeholder relations.

In this study, we aimed at unraveling media orientations of strategic communication managers. First, we analyzed their individual perceptions concerning the role of the media for their organizations and, second, the interrelations of these perceptions with their perceptions of other stakeholder relationships. Five key stakeholder relations of communication managers within IABs can be discerned (cf. Van Puyvelde et al., 2012): first, the relation of the communication manager with the general public; second, relations to the news media in general or, more specifically, contacts to journalists. The third relation concerns a hierarchical, intraorganizational stakeholder: the board of the organization. Fourth, relations with the ministry to which the IAB is connected (the core department) are also relevant, just as, fifth, are relations with the political realm, represented by the parliament. In sum, we took the wider sociopolitical environment of individual communication managers as the locus where mediatization is enacted and analyzed how their media orientations interact with key stakeholder relationships.

Method

To explore the concept of media orientations and how it affects communication managers' understanding of relations with key stakeholders, we employed a qualitative design. Semistructured in-depth interviews with strategic communication managers were employed to answer the research question.

Sample

This study focused on persons who are in charge of the strategic communication of independent administrative bodies. The Dutch IAB registry comprises an overview of all Dutch IABs (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2017). In October 2017, approximately 120 organizations were listed. Within these organizations, the manager of (corporate) communication (or his/her functional equivalent) is the main responsible person for communication policies and strategies. We followed Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton's (2013) approach of considering persons in organizations as "knowledgeable agents," constructing organizational realities and "know what they are trying to do and can explain their thoughts, intentions, and actions" (p. 17). We first applied a purposeful sampling strategy using maximum variation sampling to analyze the characteristics, differences, and patterns in this category of organizations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). Applying maximum variation sampling ensures a highly diverse sample within the population of independent administrative bodies on our two main criteria. Stakeholder and media relations were key aspects of this study, and it was therefore essential to include organizations that (1) vary in their stakeholders and (2) are exposed to different levels of media attention. Stakeholder networks are organized around the tasks, policy domains, and core department of the organization; variation on these aspects was therefore a first criterion. Consequently, the selected organizations varied in their statutory position,[2] size, tasks, and core department. As media perceptions and relations were the second crucial topic, we also distinguished between organizations that provide direct services to citizens (under the assumption that journalists are particularly interested in organizations whose work directly affects citizens) and/or have communication to the general public as an assigned task. In addition,

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[2] Specific additional legal regulations regarding autonomy or communication apply to some organizations in our sample. During the interviews, it turned out that some organizations listed in the IAB registry have a different legal basis.

we took varying levels of factual media presence in national newspapers into account, searched via LexisNexis for the period January to June 2017. We approached 29 organizations via e-mail and telephone. A total of 20 communication managers from 20 different organizations responded positively to our request, which is about one sixth of the population of IABs. In three cases, the interviewees were assisted by a colleague. The respondents and organizations were anonymized for the presentation of the findings.

Interview Procedure

We held 20 semistructured face-to-face interviews on the premises of the communication manager's organization (except for one interview that was conducted at a quiet coffee place). An information sheet was handed out, an informed consent was signed, and audio recording was approved by the interviewees prior to each interview. In general, the interviewer focused on the role that media play for the organization (as interpreted by the communication manager) and the way that the communication manager translates that into the organization and strategically deals with it regarding his or her stakeholders. A guide with four main topics was used during the interviews. The guide and interview setting allowed the interviewer to ask follow-up questions to go into more detail. The four main topics were media awareness; the self-interpretation of the nature, amount, and importance of media attention for the organization; the self-interpretation of actions and behavior as a consequence of these observations; and the self-interpretation of strategic impact (the perception of media impact on the organization). Within these topics, understandings of relations with key stakeholders came up as a relevant issue (see Gioia et al., 2013). As the collection and analysis of data were interrelated, iterative processes and because our goal was to explore the concept of media orientations and its consequences in its full width, the interviews that were held in a later stage of the research were informed by insights resulting from the ongoing analysis. Gradually, we paid more attention to the transition to integrated communication and the role of the organization's board, as those topics turned out to be important factors in the first interviews (see Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Gioia et al., 2013; Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). The interviews took 60 to 90 minutes and were transcribed by two student assistants.

Analysis

Working with Atlas.ti, we fragmented the transcriptions of the interviews, and the fragments were coded as closely as possible to what was expressed by the interviewee. We thus engaged in open coding or initial coding (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Examples of open codes assigned to interview fragments in the sections about perceived organizational media presence were "quantitatively increased," "mainly in professional media," "not the organization but the incidents," and "presence mainly relevant for stakeholders." Subsequently, after discussing the open codes, we applied axial coding to explore and develop categories, subcategories, and the links between them (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We further analyzed the codes by linking what was expressed by the interviewee to our own theoretical knowledge (Gioia et al., 2013). For example, we organized the codes "easy access to the board," "conduct research to convince the board," "the management has a naïve media image," and "the management is involved in the case of sensitive topics" under the axial code "management support." We thus contextualized the phenomena under study and explored the relevant conditions, strategies, context, and

consequences regarding the role that media orientations play in understanding stakeholder relations (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We used the "coding paradigm" because the goal of our research was in fact to explore dimensions and other aspects of the prechosen concept media orientation while being cautious not to force categories on the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). In this coding process, concepts in strategic communication and mediatization research were also used to characterize fragments, if necessary and applicable. Selective coding was applied to integrate the categories. In this process, we connected our main categories or "aggregate dimensions" and developed the main analytical idea of this study (Gioia et al., 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the process of selective coding, the translation of media orientations in stakeholder relationships became a central topic. We wrote memos during the stages of interviewing and coding to keep track of the concepts and categories and to assess how they are related to theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). For example, we connected the axial code of "management support" to the board as an internal stakeholder. Last, we used member checks to verify whether the interviewees recognized themselves in the findings and to adhere to ethical standards (Morse et al., 2002).

Findings

Our findings suggest a refined conceptualization of media orientation. In addition, they indicate differences and patterns in the way communication managers interpret the role of the media for their organization in stakeholder relations.

Media Orientation

Our approach enabled us to refine previous conceptualizations of media orientation by allowing us to strictly delimit the concept to those factors that deal with a person's interpretation of the media environment of the organization. Based on the interviewees' spontaneous and question-driven reflections on their experiences with journalists and media coverage regarding their organization, their evaluations of the media landscape, and their differentiation between media types, we derived three dimensions that refer to different aspects of individually perceived relevance of the media for organizations.

The interviewees reflected on the extent to which media attention is considered relevant for executing their organization's tasks. Their answers fell in the range between "media attention is not relevant for our organization" to "media attention as a goal in itself": "We don't need to be visible, we need to be findable" (medium-sized organization with low media visibility, no direct services to citizens). Some interviewees, particularly from smaller organizations, stressed that they do not feel the need to be acknowledged by the public: Visibility is not an organizational goal. If media attention was considered relevant by the interviewees, some considered it inherently valuable and visibility a goal itself, but most of them considered it an intermediate for other goals: communication with stakeholders, policy goals, or legitimacy: "You shouldn't organize publicity for its own sake, but you should organize it in such a way that you are legitimate and that your policies are accepted" (medium-sized organization with medium media visibility, no direct services to citizens). Even an interviewee from a highly visible organization indicated that it should be the products of the organization that receive attention, not the organization itself. We summarized these reflections in the first dimension of media orientation: the perceived function of media attention for the organization.

Second, we discussed the relevance of a specific medium type or channel for the organization, as perceived by the interviewee. Corresponding to their public functions, most interviewees indicated that their organizations still focus on traditional news media: "The traditional channels still have a lot of impact, so you cannot just say: we quit using them" (medium-sized organization, low media visibility, no direct services to citizens). But also niche media, that is, sector-specific media platforms, were of high relevance, particularly for organizations not serving citizens directly. Social media were generally regarded as "challenge":

> I think that within public organizations, especially the big ones, there is some reluctance to engage in a dialogue via social media. That is a way of communicating that is different from what we used to do: mainly sending . . . but now we are working on interaction with the user of our services. (Medium-sized organization, low media visibility, direct services to citizens.)

The active, strategic use of social media mainly played a role for few larger organizations that have started to actively position themselves via social media. For others, social media were generally regarded less relevant, partly because of limited resources. Social media were, however, mentioned as relevant for public debates, either for issue monitoring or as channels where information from or about organizations spreads more rapidly. The interviewees' reflection on medium types in relation to their organization was the foundation for the second dimension of media orientation: the perceived relevance of specific medium types for the organization.

Third, we discussed how the interviewees evaluated media coverage about their organization and their organization's media environment. This third dimension, the evaluation of the organizational media coverage and the organization's media environment, comprised three subdimensions. The first one was the perceived presence of the organization in media coverage. The perceptions of the communication managers varied from "not often" to "especially niche media presence" and "often." The second subdimension, redefined "media hostility" as "perceived valence," a neutral label for the perceptions of the tone and level of criticism of media reports. Interviewees recognized the difficulty of being covered with "good news" and had mixed perceptions of the tone of media coverage regarding their organization. Many interviewees shared the impression that, guided by negativity as journalistic news value, negative coverage prevailed. Concerns were expressed that negative coverage does not sufficiently reflect the public task and responsibility of the organization but rather the image as an administrative, inefficient body. Some respondents indicated that this even was a reason for their organizations to prefer low levels of media attention (no news is good news). The last subdimension, perceived quality of journalism, refers to the actor's perceptions of the current profession of journalism. On the one hand, the respondents referred to a lack of accuracy, tendencies to simplify complex situations or to find a popular angle, the (increasingly) fast pace of journalism, and the focus on media hypes. On the other hand, most interviewees also showed an understanding of the particular features and rules of the media environment. In addition, there were positive evaluations of journalistic work, often related to closer and more frequent journalistic contacts. Specifically, investigative journalism was appreciated and, in turn, developments that lead to a decrease of more thorough journalistic work and the shrinking of science journalism, but also the increasing number of freelancers were assessed more negatively. One interviewee summarized it as follows: "We have a mutual interest" (medium-sized organization with low media visibility, no direct services to citizens).

Figure 1 summarizes the three interacting dimensions of media orientation. We propose that the dynamic interplay among these three dimensions—perceived function of media coverage for the organization,

the perceived relevance of specific medium types for the organization, and the evaluation of organizational media coverage and media environment—constitute a person's media orientation. These perceptions can vary over time (e.g., with changes of a person's position or role in an organization or specific events or other internal or external factors). The dimensions can serve as a means to analyze and categorize an actor's evaluation of specific aspects of the media environment regarding the organization and their relative interaction and weight as a snapshot or, when considered as an aspect of organizational mediatization processes, over time.
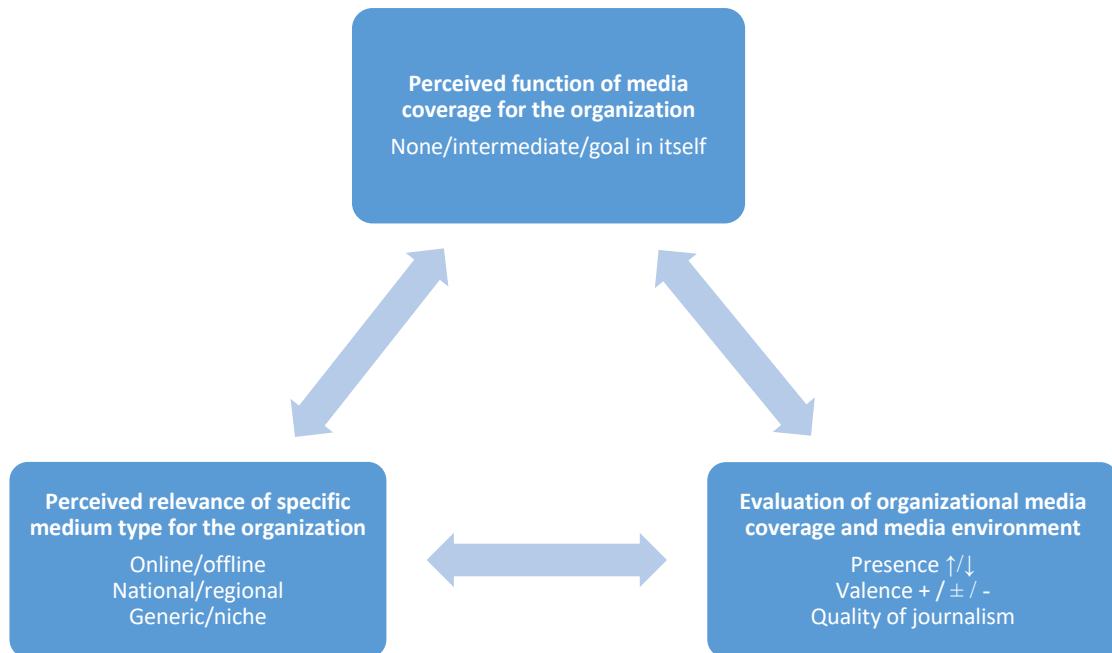

Figure 1. Three interacting dimensions of media orientation.

Role of Media Orientations in Understanding Stakeholder Relations

As a second step, we analyzed the understandings of the impact of media orientation on the communication manager's five key stakeholder relations: the general public, the news media, the organization's board, the communication department of the core department, and the parliament. The key insights are summarized at the end of this section.

The General Public: Media as a Means to Inform Society

In general, the communication managers of the organizations considered it their overarching duty to serve the public interest: "There's only one interest: the citizen's interest" (large organization, low media visibility, direct services to citizens). They referred to public responsibility or citizens as the most important stakeholders. This "public service" principle serves as a guiding principle for their media orientations. The first dimension of media orientation, the perceived function of media coverage for the organization,

manifests itself in the media being considered as intermediate to fulfill the overarching "duty" to serve the public interest. The media are "instrumentalized" as a means for transparency and accountability. Such aims are closely related to concerns about reputation and legitimacy.

The News Media: Interdependency and Expert Role

Plausibly, there is a strong interdependency between media orientation—as aspects of individual interpretation of the media environment—and the concrete role of the media as stakeholder of an organization that is reflected by communication managers' contact to journalists. Although the subdimension "quality of journalism" reveals a mixed picture, the interviewees were aware that their organizations, at least partly, depend on the news media. Several interviewees also referred to win–win situations regarding their relationships with journalists. They were aware that journalists depend on stories and that both sides can profit from good relationships. These interdependencies might explain why communication professionals were worried about negative developments, and specifically addressed the weakening of the media as the "fourth estate" in democracy. Despite criticism, however, they were generally satisfied with their relations to journalists and the quality of the media output for their organizations.

Considerations regarding perceived valence as a subdimension of media orientation were related to more specific perceptions regarding the role that journalists attribute to organizations. Some organizations are attributed an expert role, and in this function they receive neutral or positive media attention. Others are more susceptible for negative media attention or even crisis situations related to their public responsibilities. Data privacy risks, for example, are sensitive issues for public organizations. Related ICT problems represented a specific issue that several of the organizations had to cope with toward the public.

The Organization's Board: The Importance of Management Support

The majority of communication professionals reported a close link to the management board and experience their management as positive and supportive. Communication managers recognized the role that media can play regarding the organization and evaluated the importance of coverage (subdimension "perceived function of media coverage"). Consequently, they feel the need to "translate" this specific media orientation into the organization and especially to their board members. Several interviewees also indicated that negative news (subdimension "evaluation") can spark intraorganizational processes (e.g., introspection). Across organizations, these translation practices seem to have contributed to more structural changes: The interviewees observed tendencies toward increasing awareness of the relevance and potential of strategic communication and greater embeddedness of communication in strategic processes. Many interviewees described the transition toward integrated communication either as a recently implemented change or as still ongoing. However, we also observed considerable differences in the degree of integrated communication based on our interactions with the interviewees. Some interviewees, mainly of smaller organizations, described relatively low levels of integrated communication and perceived generally less attention for strategic communication by the board. Based on the interviewees' information, we identified three main drivers of integrated communication: crisis situations, management change, and the identity of communication professionals.

Crisis situations or media incidents can advance developments toward more integrated communication. More specifically, several organizations experienced that opening up and involving stakeholders in decision making can help prevent them from harsh criticism or can increase public legitimacy. The interviewees indicated that some organizations experienced a changing mindset regarding the strategic role of communication after the appointment of new management. In two organizations, a new board had changed the organizational positioning of communication, followed by greater strategic involvement. Finally, the success of transition processes toward more integrated communication, at least partly, depends on the individual professional identity—arguably, a determining factor of media orientations—and ambition of communication professionals. An increasing relevance of communication after a change of management was often accompanied by the appointment of a new head of corporate communication or the establishment of a renewed communication division. In the perception of the interviewees, such organizational changes but also the approach of integrated communication in general frequently created some struggle or conflict with existing mentality. Interviewees related long employment times in communication but also other divisions to organizational inertia and resistance to changes in procedures or perspectives. It is striking that interviewees mentioned management support as an important factor to carry out their work effectively. If management support for strategic communication issues or the role of the media for the organization is perceived as low, interviewees considered it their professional responsibility to change this.

Communication Department of the Core Department: Varying Levels of Communicative Autonomy and the Impact of Incidents

The exact nature of the relation between ministers and IABs, which basically defines their autonomy, has been the subject of numerous discussions (see above; Rijksoverheid, 2014). This debate creates room for individual interpretation and action, which is reflected in varying levels of perceived communicative autonomy and the heterogeneous ways in which communication managers design their relationships with the communication department of their core department. Perceived autonomy can be considered interdependent with a manager's media orientation, specifically, with the perceived function of media coverage and its evaluation. Some interviewees mentioned that they experience quite a lot of autonomy in their strategic communication possibilities and spoke of "collaboration" or a "division of tasks" rather than hierarchical control. Some interviewees also rely on the way autonomy is formally arranged: They indicated that they operate independently (in a communicative sense) when they are allowed to do so; if not, the ministry is in charge. The relation between the ministry and the communication manager also depends on personal factors. Greater autonomy can be considered as individual achievement: Two interviewees, for instance, described how they advocate the approach of integrated communication also toward the ministry.

Coherence regarding the image of policies and the government in society and media coverage is also an issue. One interviewee mentioned that his organization has the freedom to have an opinion that is different from its home ministry, but that at the same time, if an issue is related to the political process, tuning with the ministry will always be necessary (large organization, low media visibility, direct services to citizens). Consequently, the media form a subject of strategic action that is discussed in this stakeholder

relation, and a managers' media orientation can be considered as influencing how this negotiation is approached.

There is, however, one common "rule" that holds across the communication managers: As an IAB, you should not cause trouble for your minister. Many communication managers recognized the impact of an issue or incident—and its coverage by the media—on this stakeholder relation. In the case of sensitive issues or crises, the department tries to intensify the relation. Some interviewees indicated that as soon as issues are related to the political realm, the core department takes the lead at the expense of organizational autonomy.

Parliament: From Informing to Lobbying

There is quite some diversity in how communication managers employ external communication strategies toward members of Parliament. Some communication managers stressed their independence from the political environment. This applied especially to organizations with specific legal regulations regarding their independence. Interviewees from a second group of organizations described merely using one-way communication to inform MPs about their organization and its issues. They send newsletters and press releases without the core department being involved and serve as a source of expert knowledge. This relationship also works the other way around: Organizations monitor "The Hague," the city where Parliament is located.

On the other end of the continuum are communication managers who use strategies that can be considered lobbying to put their issues forward. This is rather sensitive, as one of the interviewees noted. IABs can be considered an extension of government, but they also have organizational interests. Some interviewees mentioned having direct contacts with MPs "if they want something." In addition, they described that their organizations engage in network-like activities: The organization's president and a spokesman meet MPs that have their domain in their portfolio, but it is important not to overdo that. Others explicitly indicated that they do not "lobby" and also consider it as a bad thing to do.

Regarding relations with politics, some interviewees mentioned that becoming a politically sensitive issue has implications for the communicative autonomy of their organizations: the relations with the ministry intensify.

Communication managers indicated that they are aware of media attention being noticed by politicians (in general), so there are always political considerations in the background: "Our stakeholders [the ministry, the minister, and members of parliament] also decide about us based on what they see in the news" (medium-sized organization with low media visibility, no direct services to citizens). Depending on strategic considerations, political objectives ("informing The Hague") can become an explicit intermediate goal of media coverage. Thus, interestingly, interviewees indicated that media coverage forms a mutual source of information for both the organization and the parliament about each other, but in managing their relations with members of the parliament, communication managers reported as mainly relying on personal communication or directly targeted communication. Media orientations thus seem to play a rather limited role in this stakeholder relation. Table 1 summarizes the perceptions and motives discussed above.

Table 1. Communication Managers' Guiding Perceptions and Motives Toward Key Stakeholders.

Key stakeholder	Perception	Motive
Intraorganizational	▪ Crisis situations/media incidents ▪ Importance of strategic communication	▪ Professionalization ▪ Integrated communication
Media	▪ Commercialization/declining function as fourth estate ▪ Relevance of social media	▪ Media attention seeking ▪ Strategic impact
Public	▪ Negative perceptions ▪ Changing expectations	▪ Public service principle ▪ Positioning of organization
Core department/politics	▪ De facto autonomy struggles ▪ Impact of incidents	▪ Balancing autonomy and political dependencies ▪ Balancing interests

Discussion:
Media Orientation as a Factor Influencing Understandings of Stakeholder Relations

Following the complex nature of strategic communication in the public sector, the aim of this study was to better understand the role of the media as specific stakeholders that interconnect an organization with its complex environment. To this end, we further explored the concept of media orientations and its consequences for communication managers' understanding of key stakeholder relations. We conducted and analyzed qualitative interviews with strategic communication managers in IABs in the Netherlands. The concept of media orientation allowed us to look at individual perceptions and interpretations that precede any media-related strategic communication efforts (Marcinkowski, 2014; Pallas & Fredriksson, 2013). Following Fredriksson and Pallas (2017), we have argued that the role of the media for an organization is most prevalent in the way organizational actors decode and translate media or media-related aspects for their organizational environment. Based on our findings, we propose three dimensions, with subdimensions, of media orientations: the perceived function of media coverage for the organization, the relevance of a specific medium type for the organization, and the evaluation of organizational media coverage and the media environment (see Figure 1). The exploratory approach followed here allowed us to refine earlier conceptualizations of media orientation (Jacobs & Wonneberger, 2017; Kohring et al., 2013). Specifically, our findings reveal a more differentiated notion of the aspect "attention seeking": The perceived relevance of media attention for an organization comprises considerations concerning specific media types as well as different organizational goals concerning media coverage. In addition, the previously described aspect of "media hostility" is now integrated in the three subdimensions composing the evaluations of organizational media coverage: perceptions regarding the (1) presence and (2) valence of organizational media coverage and (3) more general perceptions of the quality of journalism. Together, the three dimensions of media orientation reflect that making sense of organizational media environments is a complex process involving internal and external as well as micro- and macro-level considerations. This conceptualization enables us to examine individual interpretations of the organization's media environment in more detail. Integrating the concept of media orientations in media relations research

can enhance our understandings of strategic preferences and behavior of communications managers and journalists (Verhoeven, 2016).

The third previously established aspect of media orientation "strategic impact" can now be conceptualized as a consequence—not part of—media orientation. Our interviews revealed media orientations as underlying media-related perceptions that guide and, at the same time, are shaped by (strategic) relationships to key stakeholders. Our analysis reveals, for example, how the public responsibility of this specific type of organization shapes the perceived relevance of media for their relationship to the general public as a means to obtain legitimacy through openness and accountability. The communication managers consider this "license to operate" a crucial aspect in their stakeholder relations and recognize its vulnerability in a volatile environment with a strong media presence. Their public function and special position toward the government also create an interdependency between organization and news media: Whereas organizations depend on public legitimacy, several IABs are attributed an expert role, granting them positive media attention. In sum, not only the three dimensions of media orientation are interrelated, but they are also intertwined with more specific stakeholder relationships as media attention often is an intermediate goal to establish or maintain stakeholder relations or follow other strategic organizational goals. Whereas previous stakeholder models have conceptualized the media as external stakeholder (Van Puyvelde et al., 2012), we propose a more nuanced view that accounts for the specific role of the media as stakeholder and stakekeeper (Fassin, 2009; Jacobs & Schillemans, 2016). Considering media as stakekeeper emphasizes present challenges of PSO communication, for instance, balancing competing values of diverse stakeholder groups. More generally, explicitly integrating stakeholder theory seems a fertile approach for studying mediatization of organizations. Whereas previous research has focused on the interrelationships between organizations and the media (Fredriksson et al., 2015; Thorbjornsrud et al., 2014), our findings emphasize the importance of taking the wider organizational environment into account to understand media relations and, assumedly, also mediatization processes.

The translation of the media logic farther up the organization—to the board—is an issue that most of the communication managers consider part of their personal mission. The perceived support of management seems to be a crucial factor and is also linked to the level of integrated communication in an organization that, in turn, can be considered a structural indicator of mediatization; mediatization of throughput (Schillemans, 2016). Whereas Fredriksson et al. (2015) identify "management structure" as a determining factor for organizational mediatization, our findings emphasize the interdependence of management support and the media orientations of communication managers. Moreover, the perceived level of management support for strategic communication or media relations is an important factor, or even crucial threshold, for communication managers to increase the perceived relevance of media also in other parts of the organization. This can be described as a mechanism of integrated communication: Once the board acknowledges the strategic importance of communication, media sensitivity and awareness of media logic can spread more easily to other parts of the organization because resources are reallocated following a media logic (Thorbjornsrud et al., 2014). Future research might shed more light on analyzing the specific dimensions of this management support and their role in mediatization processes.

Regarding stakeholder relations with the core department, we found varying levels of communicative autonomy. This points at different interpretations and enactments of the managerial autonomy of communication managers (Verhoest et al., 2004). This highlights the importance of distinguishing between

formal and de facto autonomy of and in organizations (Yesilkagit & Van Thiel, 2008). One might hypothesize that media orientations can function as an intermediate factor between formal levels of autonomy (e.g., on the policy, legal, or managerial level; Verhoest et al., 2004) and de facto levels of autonomy: Communication managers develop their media orientations "colored by" their organization's formal positions. Their subsequent behavior related to the media can be considered de facto managerial autonomy. Similarly, we saw high variation in the way communication managers inform and communicate with members of Parliament. This reflects the high diversity within this specific group of organizations (Schillemans & Van Thiel, 2009), but also emphasizes the active role of individual communication managers in positioning their organization. For both the relation to the core department and the parliament, we observed a transforming impact of incidents, interrupting regular interaction patterns: The contacts are intensified and, in some cases, the organizations are given less autonomy by the home department. If we relate this to the increasingly volatile environment in which PSOs operate, with a higher risk for incidents (Van der Wal, 2017), we expect that IABs could experience limitations to their communicative autonomy more often in the future.

Limitations and Future Research

It is important to emphasize that the accounts of the interviewees cannot be equated with actual organizational conduct but represent their perceptions and interpretations that constituted, in fact, the main focus of this study. Next to that, we applied maximum variation sampling to account for the diversity in the field. The analysis did however not focus on discovering patterns related to organizational variety. Therefore, as a next step, the consequences of the individual sensemaking processes described here could be studied by combining the individual and organizational perspectives, for instance, with a document analysis. Analyzing the relations between organizational characteristics and individual sensemaking processes could give insight in determinants of media orientations.

Research on media orientations and their consequences should be extended by comparing different types of organizations. With the public sector as the selected case for this study, media orientations were shown to affect how communication managers perceive interrelationships among the organization, public, and politics. How do the processes described here, for instance, differ for corporate organizations with different organizational goals and structures as well as a different positioning toward key stakeholders? In addition, other types of organizational actors, such as general management, can be studied with respect to their interpretations of the media environment and related professional attitudes and perceptions.

Conclusion

Recognizing the interconnectedness of media and stakeholder relations, this study explored how individual-level perceptions of the media in relation to the organization, on the one hand, and perceptions of relations to other key stakeholders, on the other hand, are interrelated. Most importantly, we identified three distinct but interrelated dimensions of media orientation, refining previous research on this concept (Jacobs & Wonneberger, 2017). In addition, we observed reciprocal relationships between media orientations of communication managers and specific considerations concerning key stakeholders. This actor-centered approach potentially broadens the scope of future mediatization research. Whereas previous research has acknowledged the constitutive role of actors in mediatization processes (Pallas & Fredriksson, 2013), studying

developments of media orientations as a mental form of mediatization (Marcinkowski, 2014) may expand our understanding regarding underlying perceptional and interpretive processes. In sum, individual-level perceptions and their interrelationships to the wider organizational environment should be taken into account to better understand relationships between media and organizations.

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