

## Dutch government communication professionals X-rayed: Their role and attitude in public communication about policy intentions

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**T**HIS article analyzes the role and attitude of Dutch government communication professionals regarding external public communication about policy intentions, or "policy that has been considered or adopted by a minister of a Government but that has not yet been adopted by a higher body such as the Government or the Parliament". Our research is conducted in the West European context with parliamentary governments in which the Executives are composed of teams of Prime Ministers and ministers that emanate from Parliament.

There are some relatively recent developments in citizenry with politics and the media clearly indicating that a preliminary information provision is highly relevant and a delicate issue that merits close consideration. Let us note some of the most important and relevant developments.

First, political attitudes and affiliations previously thought to be strong anchors are dissolving (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995); the voting behaviour of the citizenry is less predictable and the citizenry is more demanding. Politicians and political parties are involved in permanent campaigning (Norris, 2000) during which the techniques of spin doctoring, opinion polls, and professional media management are increasingly applied to routine everyday politics. It has become common practice to float trial balloons in order to know the policy intentions that will be accepted and that will be appreciated by the public. Arguing that the policymaking process should be less secretive and more transparent to the public, politicians of today often discuss their policy intentions freely before the camera.

Second, interpretive reporting is nearly as old as journalism itself but has only recently become the dominant model of news coverage; reporters question politicians' actions and commonly attribute strategic intentions to them giving politicians less chance to speak for themselves (Patterson, 1996). Being story driven, the media do not always give the complete picture or exact status

of policy issues (i.e. Is it about a policy intention or a policy decision?). Consciously or not, the media supply biased information to citizens whose reactions to policy decisions and policymakers are based on what the media choose to communicate and the manner in which they communicate it. This can influence the probability that the policy measure will be adopted and implemented successfully (Cobb and Elder, 1981).

The developments mentioned above illustrate the importance as well as the delicate characteristics of governmental communication regarding policy intentions such as if the Government uses so-called paid publicity (such as newspaper ads, governmental leaflets,...) to communicate about policy that has not yet been adopted by the legislative assembly. Discussion then arises about the thin line between a neutral public information provision and political propaganda. The particular position of a minister may cast a shadow over the exact aim of the message: is it propaganda (personal or political) and therefore a misuse of public money or is it supplying transparent information in a democratic state aimed at informing and involving citizens and societal organizations regarding the formation of a policy?<sup>1</sup>

The campaign regarding reform of the Post Office raised similar questions in the United States (Linsky, 1986). Leaflets on *Operation Rescue* and *Paying for Local Government: the Need for Change* did the same in the United Kingdom (Scammell, 1999). Other pre-eminent examples include the dissemination of leaflets on the introduction of toll-roads by the Dutch Government (Kranendonk, 2003), the dissemination of flyers on drug policy (Gelders and Van Mierlo, 2004), and governmental newspaper ads on 'working longer' in Belgium (Gelders, 2005a).

There is limited research on the role and attitude of government communication professionals with regard to policy intentions. Besides recent Belgian data on this matter (see Gelders, De Cock, Roe and Neijens, 2006), there are

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<sup>1</sup>In public communication about policy intentions, several types of actors such as Members of Parliament, pressure groups, and the media are and/or can be involved. However, we focus on communication coming from a Minister of the Government about non-adopted parliamentary policies. This type of communication is the most controversial. The recent Dutch Advisory Committee on the Future of Government Communication (the Wallage Committee) (CTO, 2001) gives a strong interpretation of the guidelines regarding informing the public about policy intentions. The Wallage Committee states that the citizen has the right to know the government's intentions as well as its motives. The citizen receives contradictory information via news and paid information by critics of the government's policy. As a result, it is absolutely reasonable that the government can also use similar information channels in the formulation stage of policy making (CTO, 2001).

some data from the Netherlands. The Netherlands is known for its long tradition of state committees on government communication (Katus and Volmer, 2000).

We now map the relevant material about the role and attitude of Dutch government communication professionals regarding communication about as of yet unadopted policies.

This study is interesting given the relatively important role of civil servants in Dutch policy-making processes (Brans, Facon and Hoet, 2003) and given the increased importance of public communication about policy intentions in general (see above).

The Dutch research considers public communication about policy intentions as one theme within broader studies on the tension between government communication and political party communication or as one of the functions of policy communication. The methods and questions in these studies are somewhat different.

In spite of these restrictions (which can be argued as the studies are more general), the research findings give insight into the role and attitude of Dutch government communication professionals with regard to public communication about policy intentions.

Until now, the relevant Dutch material has neither been mapped nor compared. We aim to do that in this article. We do not discuss the Belgian data as the most important similarities and differences are described in Gelders, De Cock, Roe and Neijens (2006).

## **Role**

Given the relatively important role of Dutch civil servants during the policy preparation stage, given the fact that public communication has become increasingly important (Pandey and Garnett, 2006), and given the increased importance of public communication about policy intentions (see above), we expected that Dutch government communication professionals (government information officers) played an important role in the stage of the policy preparation. As far as we know, there is no specific, large-scale study on the role government information officers play in public communication about policy intentions and what role the so-called political assistants (politically appointed ministerial assistants) play in this matter. However, there are global studies

on the role and position of government information officers within the Dutch central government giving insight into their role in the policy preparation stage.

A study has been conducted by Stappers and Nillesen (1985). They demonstrate that the job of government information officers during the eighties focused on the classic function of 'informing' citizens / subordinates within the context of freedom of information acts as described in the report of the then-called Committee Biesheuvel (1970). Later, public information provisions were increasingly considered as policy instruments to help realize policies and to promote accepted policies. The concept of 'communication' set in (Van Ruler, 1996).

According to Van de Poel and Van Woerkum (1996) communication professionals think they can be valuable additions to an organization due to their profession, function and position in the organization by doing such things as increasing the communicative characteristics of policies and signaling what lives among citizens. Supposedly, communication professionals take 'the citizen' more into account. However, it is long before this task of government communication professionals will be recognized (although there are important internal differences between departments; Van de Poel and Van Woerkum, 1996). Geul (2001) states that public communication has become increasingly important but that this is not the case for the communication professionals. Most government information officers focus on informing, or one way communication. Van Ruler and De Lange (2002) concluded in their research on the trends of professional communication that two out of three government information officers fulfill an executive job. They communicate already accepted policy to targeted groups and/or the general public. In other countries it is also concluded that only the traditional field of communication is growing significantly as was illustrated by the 2000-2001 study on behalf of the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (cited by Van Ruler and De Lange 2002: 381-382). Another field within communication management can be seen as 'communication preceding policy'. This would be the research on and reflection of the developments in norms and values and the public issues and public opinions. There is a great deal to do about this kind of communication management but in practice, this is not a structural part of the profession (Van Ruler and De Lange, 2002). According to Van Ruler (2005), this kind of communication is not expected from communication professionals.

This is confirmed by a series of interviews conducted by Rijnja and De Bruijne among 17 policy professionals and communication professionals in-

involved in nine policy cases within the Dutch central government (see Meuleman and Rijnja, 2004). Conclusion: government information officers play a unambiguous and uncontroversial role in the policy implementation stage of policy-making but not in the policy preparation stage. When compared to policy professionals, communication professionals are seldom seated at the table in the beginning of policy-making process except when dealing with a politically sensitive policy issue, policy priority or so-called interactive project. Although government information officers do not usually play a large role in policy preparation, they do have an interest in the entire process as they often support the interaction with the stakeholders. Rijnja and Meuleman point out that the concept of 'communication' is clearer during the stage of policy implementation than in the policy preparation stage. In the former, it mainly deals with helping to realize policy (communication as a policy instrument) while in the latter, there is much discussion with other governments, stakeholders,... Most of the time, these discussions are conducted and supervised by policy professionals who feel responsible for every aspect: a good policy-making process, good communication, good financing, etc. The initiative of cooperation with communication professionals seems to be the prerogative of the policy professionals.

Rijnja and Meuleman indicate an important element in the discussion: do we increase the input of communication professionals in the initial stage of policy-making or do we have to strengthen the communicative skills of policy professionals?

While government information officers traditionally try to communicate policy in an *understandable manner*, it is necessary that policy makers first *make understandable policies*. The Dutch central government aims to stimulate and operationalize this idea by organizing trainings and publications on behalf of policy professionals.

According to Smits (2001a,b), government information officers have become more well-known, visible civil servants. Smits interviewed the dircoms of the 13 central government departments. These officers are in a difficult position as Smits shows: on the one hand, they are expected to serve the media and to give them reliable information but, on the other hand, they are expected to protect their political superiors. The dircoms are usually tasked as the 'political' spokesperson. They coach the Minister for interviews and are present during parliamentary discussions (Vancoppenolle and Brans, 2003).

All dircoms in Smits' study want to be informed as soon as possible about policy developments. But they differ in opinion about their specific role in policy development. Most of the dircoms in Smits' study can be described as 'advisors'. Several consider their task to give advice about publicity matters (timing, framing, etc.) as well as the content of the policy arguing that content is as important a factor as the manner in which the policy is communicated.

Smits (2001a, 115-116) does not expect that the trend of spin doctoring in the Netherlands will be as intensive as in the US or the UK due to differences within the parliamentary system. In a majority system, such as the US and the UK, the governing party is able to take liberties to use public information provisions in service of the policy goals and the Government (Smits, 2001). In the Dutch politically broadly composed governments (coalition governments), it would be hard to imagine that a departmental dircom identifies with the political color and policy baselines of one specific political party. In addition, Smits refers to the political culture in the Netherlands as "one more of pacification than confrontation. Communication professionals and ministers search for problems if they use aggressive communication techniques". However, Smits expects more proactive public communication about policy intentions. Smits predicts that the Government will react more and more to an increasingly aggressive media coverage style. He thinks that there will be more 'enterprising officers' among the dircoms. They are information officers who strategically cope with information on behalf of their Minister (Smits 2001b). The current and future profile of the Dutch dircoms is subject to debate within the central government. The question is to what extent the dircoms are allowed to be the spokesperson of a Minister rather than a manager of the organization's communication (Voorlichtingsraad, 2004). Top policy professionals and the dircoms both plead for more focus on the managerial function. But whereas the top policy makers argue that such a profile is not to reconcile with the (primary) spokesperson task, the dircoms believe that both functions can be handled by one person.

Regardless of the future direction of this discussion, one can conclude that public communication about policy intentions shows the tension between the current tasks of the dircoms making further reflection necessary.

We now focus on the attitude of Dutch government information officers regarding public communication about policy intentions.

## Attitude

There are some studies on the attitude of government information officers regarding public communication about policy intentions. These studies deal with the profile and the role of government information officers and with the tension between public communication and party political communication. In this context, public communication about policy intentions is one of the subsidiary issues rather than the key issue of the studies. Nevertheless, it is interesting to describe and compare the most relevant aspects of these studies: Stappers and Nillesen (1985), Neijens (2002), Van Vugt (2002), and Smits (2001a,b).

### Research of Stappers en Nillesen (1985)

In 1984, Stappers and Nillesen conducted a pilot study using the Delphi-method.<sup>2</sup> They examined the way government information officers (N=27), journalists (N=17) and advertisers (N=17) see their own professions and those of each other. The government information officers were selected from a member list of the Dutch government information association (VVA, later VVO, now Logeion).

As did Stappers and Nillesen, we focus on the answers of this specific profession. 90% of the government information officers agree with influencing communication about accepted policies; 10% do not agree. The reverse is true for influencing communication about as of yet unadopted policies: 10% agree, 90% do not agree with such communication in the preparation stage of the policy-making process.

Stappers and Nillesen conclude that their findings are "not more than cautious indications of direction for further research: it deals with opinions of those directly involved given their own job situation and it deals with a small sample of those working mainly for local governments"(translated).

Fifteen years later, Neijens started from this research gap and conducted a large-scale survey that we discuss now.

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<sup>2</sup>Developed by Helmer, Dalkey, Gordon and Kaplan (Rand Corporation, US), the Delphi method is used to make predictions (Stappers and Nillesen, 1985). Typical of this method is the use of several phases in which questionnaires are distributed to a series of individual experts (respecting the anonymity of the respondents/experts). After each phase, feedback is given to the respondents. This process is continued until there is a convergence of opinion or no significant changes of opinion occur. Normally, this process ends after two to five phases and results in a consensus of the experts including their comments on the questionnaires. In the study of Stappers and Nillesen three phases were organized.

### **Research of Neijens (2002)**

In 2000, Neijens asked 363 government information officers using a mail survey. The members of the Dutch government information association (VVO) were contacted. The response rate was 51%: 363 out of the 711 VVO members participated. Referring to research of Van Ruler (1996), Neijens concluded that the non response was not selective and, consequently, cannot lead to biases. Most of those questioned worked for local governments while 6% had a job in the central government and 6% in the provincial government. The communication professionals were 41 years old on average and had 10 years experience in that kind of job.

The most relevant question from Neijens' research is to what extent government information officers agree with one specific objective of public communication: influencing not yet adopted policies.

The agreement was measured through the question to what extent the respondents find 'increasing public support for the policy plans of the government' important. Neijens speaks about agreement if his respondents call this objective 'important' or 'very important' on a 5 point scale starting from very unimportant to very important.

Four out of five government communication professionals (81%) consider influencing not yet adopted policies as a (very) important objective of public communication. Our secondary analysis of Neijens' dataset demonstrates that government communication professionals from the three government levels do not significantly differ in opinion regarding this question ( $p=.05$ ). But, the longer the respondent does his job, the less important he considers this objective ( $r=-.169$ ;  $p=.00$ ).

### **Research of Van Vugt (2002)**

In 2001, Van Vugt asked via a mail survey of 207 government information officers of national departments, provinces and cities about their deontological dilemmas about government communication and party political communication. Public communication about policy intentions is considered to be an issue that clearly symbolizes this tension.

Van Vugt selected the government information officers in two ways. On the one hand he used the website of the VVO (see above) mentioning the member list along with their employers. Van Vugt then sent the VVO members of the national departments, provinces and cities a questionnaire to them individually.

He also sent questionnaires to 95 of the largest Dutch cities, all the provinces, and the national departments asking them to distribute these questionnaires at random to increase the random characteristic of the study ('not on personal name'). The response rate was low at 30%: 207 out of the 699 contacted persons participated. The government communication professionals were 40 years old on average and had 9,5 years experience in that kind of job.

Van Vugt found that, in general, government communication professionals are not inclined to serve party political interests within government communication practice. However, in two specific situations they are 'sensitive' (expressed in values from 1 to 5) to the political interests - if it concerns the image of the Minister, Mayor,... (mean=3,47; SD=1,10) or if it concerns public communication about policy intentions (mean=3,62; SD=1,13). According to Van Vugt (2004), a possible explanation is that respondents consider public communication about policy intentions more important or necessary for good policy-making than they consider the possible political characteristic (Van Vugt, 2004). This explanation is not yet empirically tested.

Van Vugt presented three statements regarding public communication about policy intentions (translated):

- "I do not feel comfortable with public communication about policy intentions";
- "I follow the guidelines regarding public communication about policy intentions as stipulated by the Committee on the Future of Government Communication";
- "If I collaborate with public communication about policy intentions, this will have positive consequences for my career in the public sector".

The respondents were asked to indicate on a 5 point scale to what extent they agreed with these statements, going from 'do not agree at all' to 'definitely agree'.

(1) 61.2% of the respondents feel uncomfortable with public communication about policy intentions; 20.6% are neutral and 18.1% feel (definitively) comfortable with such communication. The more respondents are confronted with political party communication, the more uncomfortable they feel with public communication about policy intentions.

(2) 42.4% of the respondents state they follow the guidelines of the Committee on the Future of Government Communication regarding public commu-

nication about policy intentions. 43.9% are neutral and 13.6% say they do not follow these guidelines (at all).

(3) 62.1% (totally) disagrees with the statement that collaborating in communication about policy intentions has positive consequences for career development in the public sector. 32,5% are neutral while 5,4% agree.

### **Research of Smits (2001)**

In 2000, Smits interviewed the 13 dircoms of the Dutch central government regarding their conceptions and attitudes regarding their job (see above). Only 2 out of the 13 dircoms (15%) are clearly positive towards public communication about policy intentions. They argue that in the current 'aggressive media democracy' the Government has to be strong and should be allowed to use 'tricks'. These dircoms argue that the Government may be unsuccessful if they are not allowed to communicate about policy intentions using paid publicity such as newspaper ads or leaflets in the preparation stage of the policy-making process. A minority is clearly against public communication about policy intentions. They state that such communication should only be allowed if the Parliament has adopted the governmental announced policies. Most of the dircoms are situated between these two points of view or do not take a clear position in this discussion.

### **Comparison**

The Dutch studies described above used differing research methods and measured different aspects of the attitude regarding public communication about policy intentions. This is summarized in the following table:

	year	method	N	item	answer (%)
Stappers & Nillesen	1984	Delphi panel	27	influencing as of yet unadopted policy through communication is allowed	10
Neijens	2000	postal survey	363	public communication about policy intentions (very) important as objective of government communication	81
Van Vugt	2000	postal survey	207	not uncomfortable with public communication about policy intentions	18,1
Smits	2001	in-depth interviews	13	clearly pro public communication about policy intentions	15

*Table 1: Overview Dutch studies on the attitude of government information officers regarding public communication about policy intentions*

In the study of Stappers and Nillesen (1985), a minority of government information officers (10%) were positive towards influencing public communication about policy intentions. This result is typical in the context of the eighties in which many discussions dealt with the allowing influencing communication.

The other studies (Neijens, Van Vugt, and Smits) were conducted about 15 years later (2000-2001) during a period in which the Dutch Committee on the Future of Government Communication is more open to influencing communication in the preparation stage of the policy-making process. Neijens concludes that his research shows support from the government communication professionals for this new, more offensive point of view and that much has changed when compared to the research Stappers and Nillesen conducted in the eighties. However, these results do not show that the current government communication professionals are (very) comfortable with influencing public communication about policy intentions as is demonstrated below in the comparison of Neijens' data on the one hand and that of Van Vugt and Smits on the other.

(1) In Smits' qualitative research, few dircoms are clearly for or against public communication about policy intentions. This opinion differs from the results in the other studies and is most likely due to the (qualitative) face to

face interview technique of Smits' research. Interviews are useful to register non-verbal behavior and spontaneous reactions. At the same time, there is less impression of anonymity. Consequently, the respondent may feel less free to openly answer on threatening questions. The answers may be partly a function of the behavior of the interviewer (Billiet, 1996). According to Smits (2001a), the chance of socially desirable answers was low as he promised anonymity to his interviewees and that they did not feel the need (according to Smits) to be reserved with the (unknown) interviewer.

(2) The studies of Neijens and Van Vugt were conducted among relatively comparable groups. At first glance, the two studies seem to measure 'agreement' of the respondents regarding public communication about policy intentions. It seems that there is a big difference between the results of Neijens and Van Vugt (respectively: 81% and 18,1%). But they measure two different aspects that can explain the differing percentages. Neijens asks the extent to which the respondents consider 'increasing public support for policy plans of the government' *important* while Van Vugt asks to what extent his respondents *feel comfortable* with public communication about policy intentions. As Neijens (2005) comments, one can consider a task as important (e.g. firing someone who does not do his job well) but may feel uncomfortable about that. This difference in questioning may partly explain the differing percentages. We believe that the positive versus negative loading/framing of the question is another possible explanation for the different results. Neijens' questioning leads the respondent towards more positive answers and the questioning of Van Vugt leads the respondent towards more negative answers ("I feel uncomfortable...") and to answers that are socially desirable ("I follow the guidelines..." and "If I collaborate...").

The following two final remarks must be made.

Firstly, it is a negative aspect of the (general) mail surveys (Neijens and Van Vugt) that they could not ask more specifically why respondents had difficulties with public communication about policy intentions or not. For example, what is the usefulness of the question if the respondents follow the guidelines of the State Committee if there is no test of the respondent's knowledge of these guidelines.

Secondly, in spite of the possible disadvantages of in-depth interviews (used by Smits), it seems to be advisable to choose this kind of research if one would like to gain insight into the attitude about such a sensitive issue as public communication about policy intentions. Van Vugt (2002, 54) himself

remarks that qualitative research methods are more advisable than quantitative postal surveys. That is the reason why Gelders chose interviews for a recent Belgian survey (Gelders 2005, 2006).

## Conclusion

In this article we first presented studies about the role of communication professionals of the Dutch (central) government during policy-making processes. Although Dutch civil servants play an important role in the policy preparation stage and public communication has become increasingly important, government communication professionals play a smaller role than expected in the policy preparation stage.

Then we presented some available studies in which the attitude of Dutch government communication professionals on this topic has been studied. As public communication about policy intentions is only one of the many aspects, this issue is not broadly studied. Other aspects are examined and differing methods and forms of question are used. Most of the current government professionals consider influencing public communication about policy intentions as an important task for government communication (Neijens, 2002) while government information officers did not agree with such communication twenty years ago (Stappers and Nillesen, 1985). However, many government communication professionals feel still uncomfortable with public communication about policy intentions (Smits 2001; Van Vugt 2002). There is clearly a new professional field in which 'communicative jurisprudence' should be elaborated.

A critical success factor is the successful interaction between communication professionals and policy professionals.

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