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Government communication about potential policies: Public relations, propaganda or both?

Dave Gelders a,*, Øyvind Ihlen b

a Leuven School for Mass Communication Research / Public Management Institute, K.U.Leuven, Parkstraat 45 bus 3603, BE 3000 Leuven, Belgium
b BI Norwegian School of Management, Norway

Abstract

In this article, we discuss some of the arguments for and against government communication about potential public policies. This form of government communication is controversial, as it can be perceived as tax-financed propaganda for the politician or political party that is in power. Our basic argument here, however, is that an administration can communicate about potential policies in an ethical manner that also strengthens the democratic relationship between politicians and citizens by opening up the policy formulation process.

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1. Introduction

In this short article, we focus on a particular form of government communication, communication about potential policies, i.e., policies that have not yet been adopted by a higher authority, such as the government or parliament. The practice of politicians who are trying out ideas in the public sphere can be seen as part and parcel of the democratic process. At the same time, however, the practice can also pose a dilemma for public servants who work in government public relations, but risk being identified with partisan political communication (public/political propaganda). Communication about potential government policies is thus prone to accusations of merely being a form of government propaganda whereby politicians use the state apparatus (normally considered to be non-partisan) to promote a particular politician or party policy. In this article, we consider the arguments for and against such government communication after delineating the two key concepts ‘government public relations’ and ‘propaganda’.

2. Government public relations versus propaganda

The word propaganda has obvious negative connotations of deceit and lies. The literature on propaganda, however, often contains definitions that are stripped of many of the most glaring ethical violations. In Propaganda and Persuasion, Jowett and O’Donnell (1999) define propaganda as “the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (p. 6). Taylor (2003) similarly sees propaganda as “the deliberate attempt to persuade people to think and behave in a desired way” (original emphasis) (p. 6). Ellul (1965/1973) argued that “in propaganda we find techniques of psychological influence combined with techniques...
of organization and the envelopment of people with the intention of sparking action” (p. xiii). At the outset then, this seems to be what every public relations practitioner – outside or inside government – engages in. On the other hand, Jowett and O’Donnell (1999) differentiate between white and black propaganda. The former identifies its source and the message contains accurate information. Black propaganda typically has a false source and contains lies and deceptions. The typology also makes room for a mixed category of grey propaganda where the source is not correctly identified and it is uncertain if the information is correct.

While public relations pioneer Bernays (1928/2005) embraced the concept, later public relations practitioners and theorists alike have attempted to distance themselves and the field from propaganda. Typically, scholars will point to how public relations practitioners will foster dialogue between the organization and its publics, and seek mutually beneficial outcomes and relationships. Public relations is painted as a socially responsible function (L’Etang, 2006). It has, however, been pointed out that the distinction is not that clear-cut and critical scholars often place propaganda and public relations on a continuum. Using discourse theory Weaver, Motion, and Roper (2006), point out that what is considered as truth is highly problematic and not necessarily something that will always help to distinguish ethical from unethical practice. In their view, “whether propaganda is ethical or not has to be assessed in relation to the context which it is practiced, the ends to which it is used, the quality of transparency in terms of the persuader’s openness about the ‘ends’ they are seeking to achieve, and, as far as one is able to judge, the consequences of those ends” (p. 13).

Ellul (1965/1973) writes that propaganda is obviously a “necessary instrument for the State and the authorities” (p. 121). Given the baggage of the concept, however, many governments have latched upon the concept of public relations. In addition, however, the concept of political communication also surfaces in the literature. Vandebosch (2004) seeks to differentiate the concepts and defines government public relations as “communication efforts in which the government/administration tries to be non-partisan, balanced and concise. These efforts are not aimed to put a political party or politician in the picture, but focus on the interest of the receiving citizen who needs to be informed” (p. X). Political communication, on the other hand, is defined as “persuasive communication coming from politicians explicitly or implicitly striving for political, image and electoral points” (p. X). We would, however, argue that government public relations just as likely aims to be persuasive and tries to influence the knowledge, attitude and/or behavior of citizens, for example, to avoid driving when drinking. In addition, more and more definitions and ethical guidelines about government public relations and propaganda recognize that ministers are allowed to score political points in secondary order by using government public relations, as long as this is not the main goal of the communication act. The British government communication guidelines, for example, state: “The publicly funded government communications machine cannot be used primarily or solely to meet party-political ends, though it is recognised that the governing party may derive benefit incidentally from activities carried out by the Government” (cited in: Turpin & Tomkins, 2006, p. 159).

Slangen and Mateusen (2004) explicitly link government public relations with ‘decided policies’. Slangen and Mateusen state that in the case of ‘potential (not yet decided) policies’ only press coverage generated by the minister or his/her spokesperson should be allowed. We think that the limitation of government public relations to only ‘decided policies’ is both unrealistic and may be unfortunate. Public sector organizations also have a need to ensure that government listens to their views, “but that it must be remembered that sometimes determined politicians do not want to hear strategic views from state organizations (Harris & Fleisher, 2005, p. xxxiii). The public sector practitioner aims, however, to obtain, maintain and strengthen political support. This raises the issue of whether a public administration should serve as a vehicle for government propaganda or whether it is possible to separate politics from the administration (Altheide & Johnson, 1980; Graber, 2002; Rosenthal, 1997). There is a delicate balance between being a public servant and being a spin doctor (Aasum, 2001).

The latter point also begs a discussion of our premise: We write about government public relations as practiced in a peculiar type of Western style democracy where the citizenry ideally is involved in political processes and where the administration is a politically detached instrument that will help which ever political party that is in government to implement its decisions. In many Western style democracies the bureaucracies have developed strong dual identities as non-partisan civil servants, but also as professionals with a particular expertise within an area. Obviously, there are other forms of government where the bureaucracies sees themselves differently or do not have the power or inclination to pursue this type of civil servant ideal. The different conceptualizations of democracy and the role of civil servants will also influence the way that the public perceives government public relations. In countries with weak bureaucracies or authoritarian rules, it could be expected that the citizenry perceives all government public relations as forms of propaganda and fundamentally distrust all the communication efforts.

In summary, however, government bodies in Western style democracies have to build relationships with their constituencies in order to survive (Avery et al., 1996). We concur with Lee (2007) that communication is a tool that is on par with the other management tools that a government may choose to use. In the literature, as well as among practitioners, however, there is a propensity to focus on public communication from the efficiency perspective (Kjellgren, 2002). Kjellgren (2002) points out that public information is often seen as an inherently ‘good’ policy tool that is useful for promoting certain core values and that is supposed to increase the ability of citizens to participate in public life. In line with Kjellgren’s (2002) arguments, however, it should be noted that public communication is also clearly a form of ideology production that should be discussed carefully. Public relations can be used and misused. It becomes unethical, for instance, when it “undercuts our powers of conscious choice making” (Johannessen, 2002, p. 115). A dialogical view of ethical communication would build on conditions of, for instance, mutual respect, sincerity and honesty and a “willingness to admit error and allow persuasion” (p.


3. Arguments for communication about potential policies

First of all, government communication about potential policies can be defended as being part of a democratic process whereby the government learns about citizens’ views and needs with regard to a particular policy issue. Politicians typically want to float ideas in the public sphere to assess whether to proceed with them (Gelders, Bouckaert, & van Ruler, 2007). Interacting with the media and floating ‘trial balloons’ can help to reveal the extent to which the citizenry is for or against an idea or whether it is willing to accept policy changes. Doing so is also a cheaper and more flexible alternative to ‘interactive policy-making’. Interactive policy-making can be defined as: “situations in which the government involves citizens, societal organizations, corporations and/or other governments as soon as possible in policymaking processes in order to prepare, define, implement and/or evaluate policies” (Pröpper & Steenbeek, 1999, p. X). Interacting with the media and floating trial balloons make it easier to deal with the shortcomings of representative democracy and with more complicated and expensive interactive-policy making tools (Louw, 2005).

The extent of support by and resistance from the public, as well as the importance of citizens’ counterarguments, may be clarified through communication about potential policies. Such communication creates opportunities to fine-tune policy and/or strengthen the arguments for a particular intended policy. Seydel, van Ruler, and Scholten (2002) state that the openness and freedom of information – crucial conditions for the provision of public information in the service of democracy – have evolved over the past few decades and have now been expanded to include the openness and transparency of the policy-making process itself. Organizations today must be effective in the traditional sense of producing results, but they must also be transparent with regard to procedure: that is, they are held accountable for the often-complicated working and policy-making procedures that provide the basis of their qualitative products or services (Bouckaert, 1995).

4. Arguments against communication about potential policies

As described, there is a fine line between non-partisan public relations and propaganda. The position of a particular minister may cast a shadow over the exact aim of a message: is it propaganda (personal or political), and therefore a misuse of public money, or is it the provision of non-partisan information in a transparent democratic state with the aim of informing the citizenry and societal organizations and involving them in the formulation of policy? Such a question was raised by a public campaign for the reform of the United States Post Office (Linsky, 1986) and by leaflets distributed in the United Kingdom on Operation Rescue and Paying for Local Government: The Need for Change (Scammell, 1999). Other pertinent examples include the dissemination of leaflets on the introduction of toll roads by the Dutch government (Kranendonk, 2003).

Critics consider it dangerous for the government to use tax money to communicate policy intentions, unless such communication is explicitly meant to stimulate participation in the interactive policy-making process (Volmer, 2000). There is a risk that the government becomes too powerful and that its voice is privileged in comparison with that of the opponents of a particular policy.

Some critics also believe that prematurely publishing policy intentions may disturb the formulation or development of a policy, and eventually its success. The government will have wasted time and money if the policy is not implemented. Moreover, the internal deliberative processes between politicians and civil servants may come under pressure, thus hampering the operations of the latter (van Gisteren & Wassenaar, 2003).

Another important argument against governmental communication about policy intentions lies in the democratic characteristics of the policy-making process. The parliament is no longer the first government body to be informed of the administration’s intention, but rather parliamentary adoption is over-anticipated.

Finally, there is the risk that policy intentions will be confused with policy decisions, as has been demonstrated in several empirical studies (e.g., Gelders, 2005). Even highly educated and politically involved individuals have been shown to be confused in certain instances when such communication has been unclear.

5. Conclusion

Despite the aforementioned counterarguments, we believe that governments should not only use public relations to publicize decisions, but that public relations is needed throughout the policy process (Gelders et al., 2007; van Ruler & Verčič, 2005). Our discussion indicates that government communication about potential policies is a bit of both government public relations and propaganda. To conclude, we launch some ideas for further discussion about the basis for practice of ethical government public relations in relation to potential policies.

We would first of all argue that governments should systematically assess the communication needs of citizens and their preferences about potential policies. This would entail answering questions about how frequent citizens would like to communicate on the issue, as well as which medium they would prefer, the length and style of the messages, and so forth.
Secondly, we argue that governments need to stipulate the relevant criteria for good communication specifically and discuss them with all relevant actors, including journalists and citizens. These communication standards need to be met on a daily basis.

Thirdly, governments must clearly communicate the manner in which they intend to communicate about potential policies. In this, governments must take care not to create too high expectations among the citizenry as to, for instance, the frequency of dialogue meetings.

Although it may be idealistic to specify guidelines for effective and efficient communication with citizens in a strategic party political context, it is worthwhile to do so. Communication between citizens and the government is negotiated rather than absolute (Grunig, 1992). Therefore, it is extremely important to develop policy while maintaining ongoing dialogue between the actors involved in communication needs and standards. Gelders (2005) showed that such dialogues are currently limited to discussions within closed groups (i.e., between communication advisors within one political party or within an association of civil servant communication professionals) but that these groups seldom discuss deontological dilemmas about the tension between government public relations and propaganda with each other. Therefore, think tanks and universities can be involved in the role of ‘honest brokers’ to facilitate this dialogue.

References


