

# **Media strategies of supervisory organizations in health services in Europe:**

## **Impact enhancement and damage control through media management**

Research proposal

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### **1. Supervisory organizations and media are increasingly intertwined**

Mass media are important sources of information in matters beyond people's own experience (Strömbäck and Kiousis, 2011); they mediate the indirect contacts between public organizations and their stakeholders. The majority of people have no direct experience with actions of supervisory organizations. Although people use products and services which are monitored and certified by supervisory organizations, these supervisory activities usually take place beyond their own direct experience. Cases in which supervision does intervene on an individual level are extraordinary cases within the sector. These cases are about *real* experiences of *real* people: like a patient that is not treated well or an inhabitant of a care institution who is detained against his will. These cases have a high probability of being covered in media reporting. Such cases, in which patients are not treated well, are newsworthy as they involve much drama, human interest and negativity. Media strongly contribute to the knowledge and judgments people have about supervision, since they generally have no direct experience with supervision. Information around supervisory organizations can therefore be seen as at least in part *mediatized*.

This mediatization means that supervisory organizations cannot control the actual information which is reported by journalists. Journalists select events they find newsworthy and decide on how they frame the news story. While journalists report on actions of supervisory organizations or individual inspectors, they often focus on problems, incidents and failures in relation to supervision.

Positive publicity cannot be enforced. Journalists work with a professional autonomy and hold public organizations to account (McNair, 2003; Davis, 2009). Moreover, news is created in a certain media system, with its own logic (Altheide and Snow, 1979). Journalists' news decisions depend on news values they ascribe to events or viewpoints, as importance, deviance, timeliness, proximity, human interest and controversy. News decisions are furthermore influenced by perceived audience interest, production routines and economic considerations (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996; Strömbäck *et al.*, 2012). Media outlets are increasingly commercialized, resulting in more *infotainment* – a mixture of news and entertainment – and less time for journalists to create their news items. This leads to several information biases that simplify complex public issues: personalization, dramatization, fragmentation and an authority-disorder bias (Bennett, 2009). News stories increasingly concentrate on emotional elements, personalities, conflicts and failing authorities when they discuss public issues. A serious incident in a hospital which has led to human victims, resulting in a negative judgment on supervisory activities, satisfies many of these determinants of news content. Such an incident covers most of the news values, has some sensational elements and because a press conference is probably organized it is even an efficient news story.

### *Anticipatory media strategies*

It seems that news reporting is just something that can happen to organizations, but this is quite a fatalistic approach towards media. It is not the case that content of news reports cannot be influenced at all. In fact, governmental organizations spend more and more money on the professionalization of their public communication, aiming to influence news reporting (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999; Tenscher, 2004; Cook, 2005; Neijens and Smit, 2006; Bennett, 2009). Positive publicity is crucial for their political image and public support. This also holds for supervisory organizations. Moreover, positive publicity on actions or reports of supervisory organizations can considerably increase the impact of these. The publicity may not only lead to more positive evaluation of the supervision by citizens and political actors, but may also lead to effects on practices in the health sector itself.

The professionalization of public communication means that pro-active and defensive media strategies are practiced. Pro-active activities principally aim to attract positive publicity on the organization. By press releases, press conferences, pre-arranged interviews and press tours governmental information is made easily accessible to journalists; this is referred to as information subsidies (Davis, 2002; Lieber and Golan, 2011).

Defensive activities intent to protect the organization against negative publicity, for instance by the spinning of potentially damaging stories or the suppressing of potentially damaging information (McNair, 2003). Half or even a majority of the activities of communication professionals concerns the restriction of reporters' access or attempts to suppress negative stories (Davis, 2002).

### *Paradoxes in the context of media and supervision*

Fact is that media are never completely controllable. Nevertheless, when communication professionals take media's concerns, interests and needs into account media reporting can be influenced to some extent. This is not a simple task in the context of supervision: the logic of supervision and the media logic differ considerably.

The confrontation between these logics leads to several paradoxes (Van Twist c.s., 2012):.

- 1) *Good supervision is usually invisible.* In general, people do not have direct experiences with supervisory organizations. People can therefore only base their judgments on media reporting.
- 2) *Supervision in media reports is often 'failing supervision'.* Supervision particularly comes in the news when problems and incidents occurred in the concerning sector of supervision. The question whether supervisory organizations have failed in preventing this problem or incident is then often asked in media reports.
- 3) *Reassuring messages from supervision are suspicious.* When supervisory organizations in the context of mediatized incidents or problems communicate reassuring messages about the whole sector, they become part of the problem in media reports. Denial or efforts to tone down the media debate often have problematic consequences for the image of supervision.
- 4) *Proving the reliability of the health sector is often related to the exposure of problems.* The most important interventions of supervision is to deal with incidents or problems. While communications aim to show the sector is generally performing well, people seem to remember the excesses and incidents.

It might be valuable to establish or maintain a certain distance between supervision and media (and the citizens they report to) in order to preserve trust, authority and the power, in comparison to staged openness and proximity in media performances. Nevertheless, as media reporting on supervision has important consequences and enormous potential in terms of impact enhancement and damage control, it would be valuable to develop anticipatory media strategies. These media strategies should not only be focused on dealing with incidents, but also on pro-actively building frames to influence the explanations and meaning giving regarding such incidents later on.

## 2. Intentions of this international comparative study

In this study we explore the opportunities as well as the threats the media environment provides for supervisory organizations in different European countries. An international comparison offers much opportunities to learn from each other in this regard. How do the supervisory organizations in health services in different countries now manage the media and which threats and opportunities see these organizations regarding media?

Media management strategies can be categorized on two dimensions of legitimation and logic of human action. Media strategies for impact enhancement and damage control are discussed with respondents, using the following framework of analysis (based on: Hemerijk and Hazeu, 2004; Scharpf, 1999; Sabatier, 1999; March & Olson, 1989).

		Legitimation criteria	
		Output legitimacy	Input legitimacy
Logic of human action	Logic of appropriateness	<p><b>Feasibility</b></p> <p>Feasible in political-societal context? Attainable?</p>	<p><b>Acceptance</b></p> <p>Morally correct?</p>
	Logic of consequence	<p><b>Effectiveness</b></p> <p>Is it effective? Is it efficient?</p>	<p><b>Rightfulness</b></p> <p>Is it legal? Justified within the law?</p>

### *Impact enhancement and Damage control*

Activities with regard to pro-active and defensive communication through media are tested against four norms.

- I. Is it effective? (effectiveness)
- II. Is it workable? (feasibility)
- III. Is it legal? (rightfulness)
- III. Is it morally correct? (normative acceptance)

The data can be analyzed by using the following table, with the Netherlands and Belgium as example. In the boxes, we can fill in the perception of inspectors in the different countries about the impact enhancement and damage control of different media strategies.

	Netherlands				Belgium			
	Effectitive	Appropriate	Feasible	Legal	Effectitive	Appropriate	Feasible	Legal
<b>Impact Enhancement Strategies in relation to the Media: vignette 1</b>	<i>Yes/No</i>							
<b>Impact Enhancement Strategies in relation to the Media: vignette 2</b>								
<b>Damage Control Strategies in relation to the Media: vignette 1</b>								
<b>Damage Control Strategies in relation to the Media: vignette 2</b>								
....								

### 3. Research methods

We will combine the vignette technique with the semi-structured interview technique in this study. We reach our respondents by email (for the vignettes) and by telephone (for the interviews).

Our vignettes aim to deduct the beliefs and attitudes of our respondents towards pro-active and defensive media strategies. Vignettes are “short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond” (Finch, 1987:105, in: Barter and Renold, 1999). Vignettes are a less threatening way of exploring sensitive topics and clarify people’s judgments (Hughes, 1998; Barter and Renold, 1999).

The vignettes will address different examples of strategies. For instance, a pro-active strategy: offering opportunities for ‘embedded journalism’ during a intervention in a health organization. Or a defensive strategy: leaking a personal file in the context of a media hype on an incident where the supervision is unfairly blamed. We will ask respondents to reflect on these hypothetical situations of media strategies, using the above four norms (perceived effectiveness, acceptability, feasibility and rightfulness).

The following story can be an example of a ‘vignette’:

You are informed that there are bad conditions in one of the city hospitals. Your inspectorate will make an unannounced visit to inspect the actual conditions on-site. You also know that a famous singer is in the hospital and is willing to be visited by you and a journalist of a large television news channel, to show how bad the conditions are. This might be a chance for the inspectorate to show how effective it. What will you do?

- a) Not visit the hospital, there are more important issues to deal with.
- b) Visit the hospital, but without media, because you don't want to generate negative publicity for the hospital
- c) Visit the hospital, but without media, because this might interfere with your work
- d) Visit the hospital with media, this can be positive news coverage for the inspectorate

The stories in the vignettes must reflect the real dilemma's that inspectorates have to deal with in relation to the media. Therefore, we will develop the actual vignettes by collecting real cases in different countries of (international) boundary-crossing media strategies that are an expression of damage control or impact enhancement. These can be used as cases for the vignettes and the answers can be analyzed in our table on the dimensions impact enhancement and damage control.

As vignettes only address hypothetical situations, we want to use the information retrieved with the vignettes in semi-structured interviews with supervisors from different countries as a second step. In these interviews we can discuss bad and best practices of actual media strategies of supervisory organizations, expected challenges for the future and desirable media strategies. This way, we will be able to answer the questions on effectiveness, feasibility, rightfulness and normative acceptance.

#### **4. Budget plan**

This research is aimed at drawing lessons for the supervisory organizations that are members of the EPSO (European Partnership for Supervisory Organizations). Also, this research fits in a broader and ambitious research project of the Dutch School for Public Administration (NSOB) on the relation between media and supervision. Therefore, we are willing to account for part of the costs for this study. However, this research needs large investments, as we want to ascertain that the outcomes have practical relevance for the EPSO-members. On top of our own investments, we will need around € 20.000 to execute this project to make the outcome valuable for the EPSO members, including giving a lecture on the EPSO conference and a report for the member organizations. Our proposal would be a limited contribution by a few EPSO members, with the Netherlands (because of our earlier work with and for the IGZ) and Belgium (as organizing country of the upcoming EPSO conference) as most likely, main contributors.

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