



Role conceptions of public affairs practitioners in The Netherlands



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ABSTRACT

Public affairs (PA) practitioners play an important role in political decision-making in modern democratic societies. This study gives a first insight in how these practitioners themselves perceive their role. Based on findings from previous empirical studies and normative democratic theories, three ideal type role conceptions are constructed: shared ways in which PA practitioners see and make normative sense of their profession. Next, these role conceptions are investigated with an online survey among 100 public affairs practitioners in The Netherlands. Findings confirm that the proposed *advocate*, *expert* and *mediator* roles indeed represent different ways in which PA practitioners conceptualize their jobs. The advocate and expert roles are relatively dominant among the sample, while female practitioners tend to subscribe more to the mediator role. The implications of these findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In 2013, a team of young Dutch TV journalists went undercover to explore “the world of lobby” (Rambam, 2013). They pretended to represent a commercial sperm bank that was looking for ways to lift the legal ban on sperm trade. A lobbyist recommended them to establish a foundation so they could hide their commercial interests while lobbying for their cause. In a few months, the team successfully got their topic on the political agenda and the responsible minister announced an investigation into the issue. But the Beroepsvereniging voor Public Affairs (BVPA), the professional organization of PA practitioners in The Netherlands, officially reprimanded the lobbyist for recommending a course of action (hiding the commercial interest of the company) that is prohibited by the organization’s charter (BVPA, 2013).

“Public affairs and lobbying”, as this documentary illustrates, “is a field of PR practice that generates high levels of both scholarly and public concern” (Davidson, 2014, p. 1). Important criticisms target the overrepresentation of corporate interests by PA professionals, the resulting imbalance in political representation between powerful and less powerful actors in society, and the perception that lobbyists exercise undue influence on policy makers (Davidson, 2014; Hamilton & Hoch, 1997; OECD, 2009; Smit, 2014).

To counter these criticisms, PA practitioners and their professional organizations, including the BVPA in The Netherlands, call for more professional transparency and accountability (BVPA, 2007; OECD, 2009). “Increasing the familiarity of public affairs to a broader audience” is one of the stated objectives of the BVPA (2014). From a scholarly perspective, however,

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relatively little is known about PA practitioners (Berg, 2012; Davidson, 2014; Terry, 2001), especially in relation to their prominent role in democratic decision-making. In The Netherlands, public affairs is even less researched than in other countries (Timmermans, 2014).

In this paper, we want to start filling this gap, and contribute to a better understanding of the role that PA practitioners play in society. We investigate how PA practitioners themselves see their role in democratic decision-making. For this, we borrow the notion of *role conceptions* from journalism studies. Role conceptions essentially describe how professionals understand their work and their function in society, in terms that reflect professional values and that are morally acceptable to both the profession and the public at large (Beam, Weaver, & Brownlee, 2009; Donsbach, 2008). Our research question is: *What are the role conceptions of Public Affairs practitioners in The Netherlands?*

After introducing the notion of role conceptions, we review previous research on PA practitioners and normative democratic theories, to construct a typology of three ideal type role conceptions. These propose to think of PA practitioners as *advocates* (representing the interests of their clients), *experts* (delivering quality information to politicians) and *mediators* (aiming to align private and public interests). A survey ($n = 100$) shows that all three conceptions are recognized by Dutch PA practitioners, although the advocate and expert roles receive much more support than the mediator role. In the final section, the implications of these findings are discussed.

2. Literature review

2.1. Role conceptions

Role conceptions describe how professionals “understand their work and its social function” (Donsbach, 2008, p. 2605) and how they think “they ought to do their work” (Mellado & van Dalen, 2014, p. 861). Although these conceptions are held by individuals (Holsti, 1970), they are not individual constructs. They are shared by members of a profession (Donsbach, 2008; Janowitz, 1975). They reflect and express the professionalization of the job. Hence, they describe the institutional role of the profession in society (Hanitzsch, 2007; Mellado & van Dalen, 2014); they reflect “occupational values that influence [...] professional practices and decision-making” (Beam, Weaver, & Brownlee, 2009, p. 279; also Donsbach, 2008); and they express the public service that the profession arguably provides (see Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2000; Singer, 2003). A role conception thus is both a descriptive and normative concept. It describes “good practice” from a professional and social point of view: actually existing professional behavior that is considered appropriate (Turner, 1978) for professionals that want to play the role in society that is normatively expected from them.

Role conceptions have been frequently investigated in journalism studies.¹ A large body of literature shows how journalists, across time and countries, have subscribed to different and partly conflicting ideas about the role of the press in society and, in relation, to partly different professional values (e.g., Beam, Weaver, & Brownlee, 2009; Janowitz, 1975; Johnstone, Slawski, & Bowman, 1972; Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996). Additional studies have shown how these journalistic role conceptions are shaped by organizational and social factors, and in turn influence the day-to-day behavior and choices of journalists (Meyen and Riesmeyer, 2012; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; van Dalen, de Vreese, & Albaek, 2012).

In this paper, we intend to make a first step in identifying the role conceptions of PA practitioners in The Netherlands. These professionals are an integral part of the democratic political system (Karr, 2007). Hence, we define their role conceptions as their understanding how they (ought to) perform their function in a democratic society. To develop a tentative typology of role conceptions, we review previous empirical research and normative models of democracy. This enables us to identify the roles that PA practitioners defined themselves, as well as relevant ideas about the potential contribution of PA practitioners to society.

2.2. The roles of public affairs practitioners

Available empirical studies suggest distinguishing between three different role conceptions of PA practitioners. One important role described in previous research by practitioners themselves is advocating the clients' interests in the political arena (Berg, 2012; Lange, 2000; Terry, 2001). In this context, PA practitioners named coaching and educating clients, and also fighting on their clients' behalf in the political arena, as common activities (Terry, 2001). Some PA practitioners even use martial themes to describe this role. By comparing themselves to soldiers or gladiators, these PA practitioners adopt a strong competitive approach to their work (Terry, 2001). Others compare their work to that of lawyers, and describe their job in terms of advocacy (Berg, 2012; Terry, 2001). The overarching concept in all these studies is the high client orientation of practitioners. This means that practitioners feel obliged to serve first of all their clients. They consider their clients' interests as predominant in their work. Also in The Netherlands, research revealed a strong client orientation among practitioners (Lange, 2000).

¹ In research in PR, the same concept has been applied in a different way, with a more exclusive focus on the tasks that professionals perform within their organization. For example, Zerfass et al. (2014, p. 16) distinguish four PR roles, depending on whether professionals help to define the business strategy, and aim to support the business strategy with their communication activities.

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