Much ado about media: Public relations in public agencies in the wake of managerialism☆

Magnus Fredriksson [a],[*], Josef Pallas [b]

[a] *University of Gothenburg, Sweden*
[b] *Uppsala University, Sweden*

ABSTRACT

This paper rests on an assumption that media is much more than a communication channel or type of organization and that we have to take media under consideration if we want to understand the conditions for public agencies and their public relations activities. This is very much due to the processes of *mediatization*; that is to say, the double-sided process through which media (a) emerge as an autonomous institution with its own set of rationalities that other institutions adapt to; and (b) become an integrated part of other institutions'.

A second assumption is that the extent to which public agencies adapt to media varies between different types of organizations, mostly as a consequence of an organization's management structure. Public agencies governed by career managers are more eager to get media attention and control the media image of their organizations compared to agencies governed by field professionals. Circumstances that position public relations at the centre within agencies governed by career managers, but with limited freedom of action.

This raises a number of questions concerning circumstances, motives and consequences for public relations and in this paper we suggest three propositions for how we can understand the interplay between media in its institutional form, public agencies and public relations (1) public relations professionals have limited control to what degree public agencies adapt to the media logic (2) public relations professionals have limited control over public agencies media activities due to their high level of formalization and standardization (3) public relations in public agencies is to an extensive degree limited to media activities.

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1. Introduction

If we want to understand the conditions for public agencies and how and why they work with public relations we have – to an increasing extent – take media into account. This is very much due to the processes of *mediatization* (Schillemans, 2012; Thorbjornsrud, Ustad Figenschou, & Ihlen, 2014). That is to say, the double-sided process through which media (a) emerge as an autonomous institution with its own set of rationalities that other institutions adapt to; and (b) become an integrated part of other institutions' (i.e. politics, business, health care, education and religion) operations (Hjarvard, 2008; Lundby,

2014). Mediatization is then a way to describe not only the way through which the norms, values, principles and working routines of the media have become central for the way public agencies are governed and organized (Pallas, Strannegård, & Jonsson, 2014). It also means that mediatization is a way to conceptualize how agencies relate to their public relations activities, how these activities are organized, what they communicate, to whom, when, why and how. This makes media to a central aspect of the agencies' public relations activities with much further consequences than just a strive for publicity or spin (Fredriksson, 2014; Fredriksson and Pallas, 2014).

In many ways mediatization is to be seen as a general process. But there is reason – both empirical and theoretical – to believe that the extent to which public agencies adapt to media varies between different types of organizations within the sector, and that mediatization unfolds unevenly when it is translated into specific contexts within and between organizations (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996). Such a contextualization of mediatization might lead to varying consequences for how agencies organize and perform not only their public relations activities but also their overall responsibilities (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2014b; Laursen & Valentini, 2015; Thorbjornsrud et al., 2014).

Following this view on mediatization the present paper focus on and theorize about the role management structures have on the organizing and performance of public relations in public agencies. The paper is built on an assumption that public agencies governed by career managers are more eager to get media attention and control media image of their organizations compared to agencies governed by field professionals (Fredriksson, Schillemans, & Pallas, 2015; Kunelius & Reunanen, 2012), circumstances that position public relations at the centre of public agencies but with limited freedom of action. This in turn raises a number of questions concerning circumstances, motives and consequences for public relations as a practice as well as a field of research.

Our stand point is that research on public relations tends to oversee the role of media as it tends to regard media as a channel and not much more than that. Due to this standpoint many scholars define media activities as common low undertaking without relevance for public relations as a management function or at least as a secondary aspect of public relations (Coombs & Holladay, 2013). Our argument is that media is much more than a channel or type of organization – it is an institution (Hjarvard, 2008). Among other things this means that organizations embedded in other institutions to an increasing extent – become dependent on and adjust their operations to the media and its logic. That is, organizations conduct a variety of their activities on the basis of taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions about how media functions and operates—i.e. the principles, values and routines concerning among other things media-source interactions, news production and evaluation of news worthiness (Landerer, 2013). Hereby we also argue for an institutional view on organizations in general (Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008) and on public relations in particular (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2014c; Fredriksson, Pallas, & Wehmeier, 2013). A view, which in contrast to most research on public relations, points toward social structures as the major force of organizational governance.

To support our view this paper starts with a discussion on how media has become an institution in itself and how such a development affects organizations embedded in other institutional contexts, i.e. mediatization. Secondly, we discuss what it is that makes public agencies run by career managers more media-oriented compared to agencies run by field professionals. In our third part we present three propositions for how we can understand the interplay between media, public agencies and public relations. In the fourth and final section we conclude our argumentation by emphasize that mediatization is an example of an institutional processes that puts forward taken-for-granted norms, idea and values that constrain and subordinate public relations activities and that these processes have to be considered to a much larger extent than they usually are in the field of public relations research.

2. Mediatization in public agencies

The literature on mediatization is extensive and scholars in a number of different fields have been trying to grasp the transformations and thereby understand the implications of media as an essential aspect of society influencing areas such as politics (Landerer, 2013), business (Kjaer & Slaatta, 2007), religion (Hjarvard & Lövheim, 2012), law (Peleg and Bogoch, 2012) and every-day-life (Jansson, 2001). On a general level mediatization can be described as a process whereby media (and uses of media in communication) increasingly become relevant for the social construction of everyday life, society, and culture as a whole. Media thereby constitutes an institution in its own right (Hjarvard, 2008). Where institution is to be understood as a 'more-or-less taken-for-granted repetitive social behaviour that is underpinned by normative systems and cognitive understandings that give meaning to social exchange and thus enable self-reproducing social order' (Greenwood et al., 2008; p. 4f). As such media transforms the characters and functions of other institutions and actors within these by way of structuring and restructuring both the inner workings of other social entities and their mutual relationships (Couldry & Hepp, 2013; Kriesi et al., 2013; Kunelius & Reunanen, 2012; Lundby, 2014). At an organizational level, mediatization refers to changes in how organizations within different institutional contexts (i.e. fields, industries, sectors) conduct a variety of their activities on the basis of ideas about how media (as actors, technologies, working routines, preferences) should be addressed and related to.

Mediatization is evident in most types of organizations and it has extensive consequences on the way organizations and their members understand and deal with media and communication in general. Changes in resource allocations, recruitment of managers on the basis of media skills, media monitoring, media training, or the quest of communication departments to gain control over communicative processes in their organizations, are some of the ways in which mediatization comes to expression (Schillemans, 2012; Thorbjornsrud et al., 2014). In public sector organizations such a development is related not