

Government Communication as a Normative Practice

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Abstract

The network society is generally challenging for today's communication practitioners because they are no longer the sole entities responsible for communication processes. This is a major change for many of them. In this paper, it will be contended that the normative practice model as developed within reformational philosophy is beneficial for clarifying the structure of communication practices. Based on this model, we argue that government communication should not be considered as primarily an activity that focuses on societal legitimation of policy; rather, it focuses on clarifying the meaning of the actions of the government. If the government can convincingly answer the question about the reason for their actions, societal legitimation will subsequently follow. Hence, it is argued that government communication is primarily linguistically qualified.

Keywords

government communication – normative practice model – reformational philosophy

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1 Introduction

Our network society requires that governments increasingly interact with their stakeholders.¹ The predominant concept of communication has evolved from one-way communication to a situation in which each participant is simultaneously a sender and receiver (Jansen, Van der Stoep, and Jochemsen 2017). For that reason, Van Ruler and Verčič (2005) speak of a paradigmatic change from a sender/receiver orientation—e.g., public information campaigns that in the Netherlands up to 2012 were known as *Postbus 51*—to an actor orientation—e.g., participatory processes and co-creation of policy. In response to the protests and critique of stakeholders that they are not involved enough in policy making, most governments have switched their approach over the past decades from centralist and top-down to participatory (cf. Fischer 2007).²

In the Netherlands, this switch could be observed, for instance, in the implementation of a national nature network.³ Nature policy “should not be regarded as a fixed programme for ecological improvement that ‘only’ needs to be implemented,” as Hajer (2003, 92) argues. As a consequence, the consultation practices during the process of nature policy making and implementation currently include a broad range of stakeholders. Hence various parties with wide-ranging interests, ideologies, and visions about nature are involved in the achievement of a national nature network (cf. Jansen et al. 2016), which makes the implementation of it complex (cf. Aarts et al. 2015).

The switch also indicates that stakeholders are progressively becoming co-creators and co-communicators of that (nature) policy (cf. Middel 2002; Jumelet and Wassenaar 2003). This implies that government communication is not just received, but also discussed, and even challenged.⁴ The sender is

1 This article accords with Freeman (2010) who defines *stakeholders* as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” (2010, 46). In the context of this article, this means that when the word *stakeholder* is used, citizens are included.

2 The literature speaks for that reason about *responsive* democracy (Bekkers 2001) and *participatory* democracy (Fischer 2007).

3 An important element of the Dutch nature policy is the achievement of a national nature network, which was known before 2013 as the Ecologische Hoofdstructuur (EHS). Within this national nature network, the conservation, restoration, and development of nationally and internationally important ecosystems are given shape.

4 In reformational philosophy, the state is generally a public legal community of government and nationals (cf. Zwart 1994; Chaplin 2007; Strauss 2009). The need for communication is part of the well-functioning of this community. However, the focus is on the level of ministries, departments, etc. At this level, it is beneficial to make a distinction between internal

never in complete control of the reception of the message. More precisely, stakeholders increasingly become co-subjects and actors rather than mere objects of communication. This can generally be considered as a transition from *allocution*—where the sender determines what, when, and by which medium messages are communicated—to *consultation*, in which the sender makes information available to a variety of public entities and the receiver determines what, when, and by which medium that information should be accessed (Jansen, Van der Stoep, and Jochemsen 2017).⁵

The current situation entails a general challenge to today's communication practitioners.⁶ They are no longer the only entities responsible for organizational communication. For many communication practitioners, this is a major transition that involves a mentality shift. Rather than a transmitting of information, communication is currently considered a two-way process for creating and exchanging meaning, preferably interactive and participatory at all levels (Servaes 1999; Blokhuis 2005). These changes have caused "widespread uncertainty" in the context of "who we are and where we should go with our profession" (Aarts 2012, 18). In particular, is the communication practitioner of the government foremost a formal representative of the government equipped to defend their policy? Is this person the primary individual that relates information from outside the organization to the boardroom, or does this person create the preconditions for the sharing of stories between the government and its stakeholders? These types of questions create uncertainty as to how to behave in a specific professional situation. However, they also afford an opportunity for deeper reflection on the structure of the communication practice.

Based on the model of normative practice as developed within reformational philosophy, this paper intends to clarify the structure of communication

communication—for instance, between management and employees—and external communication—i.e., communication with stakeholders (cf. n. 1). Glennly (2010) defines *government communication* as the apolitical and non-partisan communication of policy by the executive arm of the government. This definition shows that government communication is about communication of policy. With regard to the topic of this article, we would like to add the phrase "in which communication practitioners are involved."

- 5 *Being accessed* is also *being assessed*: consultation implies an evaluative response, not just freedom concerning what, when, and how to access the information.
- 6 In this paper, the term *practitioner* is preferred over the term *professional*. As Jochemsen (2006) argues, the term *practitioner* suggests that the (professional) practice is the primary focus.

practices.⁷ Because communication is always embedded in a certain context, delimitation is needed. The primary focus of this paper is government communication (as explained in n. 4). Hence, we seek to answer the question of whether the model of normative practice is beneficial for clarifying the task of government communication practitioners.

This paper will, first, briefly present the model of normative practice in general. Second, this model is applied to government communication. Finally, the model of normative practice is discussed in terms of its potential assistance in avoiding confusion about the role of government communication practitioners.

2 Normative Structure of Practices

According to MacIntyre's (1984) theory, in general, a practice is a socially established and complex (human) activity designed to work together to achieve the objective or destination of the practice.⁸ Examples are education, medical care, and government communication. First of all, this description demonstrates that a practice presupposes an institutional framework and social embedding; it does not function in an isolated position. Joining a practice implies that an individual participates in a social activity that already exists and is embedded in a broader social and historical context. The individual becomes immersed in an ongoing tradition and becomes part of it—a practitioner becomes a “carrier” of the practice, as Reckwitz (2002) argues.⁹ Or as MacIntyre (1984, 194) notes:

7 Although several authors have written about the structure of communication (cf. Blokhuis 2005), in our opinion, analyzing (government) communication in terms of a normative practice model offers an important contribution to this discussion.

8 His full description is as follows: “By a ‘practice’ I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended” (MacIntyre 1984, 187).

9 Jochemsen (2006, 103) speaks about a sort of initiation: “The individual practitioner is initiated into the practice by learning a certain way of doing things. The practice shapes the behaviour of individual practitioners before they can begin to reshape the practice. The practice influences the way practitioners interrelate as well.”

To enter into a practice is to enter a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have preceded us in the practice, particularly those, whose achievement extended the reach of the practice to its present point.

Subsequently, a practice must have a specific purpose. This suggests that the activities of a practice are not chiefly characterized by technical skills but by their aim to achieve the “finality” of the practice—i.e., the reason or core value for which the practice exists. Here, we speak of the *telos* of a practice (cf. Jochemsen 2006).¹⁰ MacIntyre (1984) speaks in this context about “goods internal”; “internal good,” according to Van der Stoep (2011, 6), is “an inalienably [*sic*] part of that specific type of profession and cannot be achieved by professionals of another type.”

Finally, it is indicated that MacIntyre’s (1984) definition is associated with “standards of excellence” for achieving the internal good. These standards of excellence—i.e., quality criteria—determine whether an individual is a good practitioner. In addition, a good exercise of a practice includes striving for improvement in order to better achieve the internal good or *telos* of a practice. By participating in a practice, practitioners grow systematically in the capacities they need for realizing the internal good or *telos* of a practice, thereby continuously improving a practice.

Inspired by MacIntyre’s definition of practices, reformational philosophers developed the *normative practice model* (NPM). An advantageous distinction within reformational philosophy is the distinction between *structure* and *direction* (cf. Glas 2012). The structural dimension refers to the aspects in which something functions and the order and coherence between these aspects. The directional dimension concerns our attitude towards the structural dimension. Applying this distinction, the NPM presents a (normative) model of practices. The constitutive side, or structural dimension (sec. 2.1), is about “the architecture of a practice” (Jochemsen 2006, 106) whereas the regulative side, or directional dimension (sec. 2.2), relates to the practitioners’ interpretation of the rules.

10 Jochemsen speaks about the *telos* of a practice: “Probably the Aristotelian term *telos* suits best here.... The activities making up a practice are directed at the realization of this finality, this *telos* of that actual practice. It is important to distinguish this finality from goals that individual practitioners may have. Goals set by individual or collective actors ... do not necessarily contribute to the realization of the *telos* of ... [a] practice simply because one is practitioner The *telos* of a practice belongs to the very nature of the practice and is not founded in the intention of the practitioner or client/patient/user” (2006, 103).

2.1 *Constitutive Side*

Inherent to the concept of NPM is that rules, or norms, constitute a practice. “Norms belong to the practice itself in an intrinsic way,” Glas argues, “such that, when these norms are violated, the identity of the practice itself is threatened” (2012, 4).¹¹ These norms “show a certain order and qualify the practice in distinct ways” (ibid.). Otherwise stated:

These rules have an intrinsic normative nature in the sense that they prescribe a certain way of performing a practice and at the same time constitute the possibility to evaluate the correctness of the actions performed within that practice.

HOOGLAND AND JOCHEMSEN 2000, 463

Hence, such constitutive rules can be considered as quality standards. In general, it can be concluded that norms “make a practice recognizable as a specific practice” and that this “normative structure ... can be considered the ‘playing field’ for concrete goals and actions within that practice” (Hoogland and Jochemsen 2000, 464).

According to Jochemsen, Kuiper, and De Muynck (2006), the following three categories of norms can be distinguished: qualifying norms, foundational norms, and conditional norms. Qualifying norms, first, are derived “from the normative principle of the aspect that gives a particular practice its own typical character, the qualifying aspect” (Hoogland and Jochemsen 2000, 465).¹² They characterize the practice as it is and, therefore, are strongly related to its

11 It is important to note that the word *norms* here does not just refer to explicit but also to implicit norms or rules regarding how to do something. Jochemsen (2006, 106) speaks in this context about the tacit character of rules: “This means that rules can be followed even without a conscious decision of the practitioner at each moment they are applied.” He further contends that “in this context, the concept of ‘rule’ does not so much refer to rules in the sense of ‘knowing that’ which implies the ability to explicitly formulate the applied rules. Rather, it also includes knowing rules in the sense of ‘knowing how’ in which the rules are embodied in professional conduct consisting of the ability to act according to rules and to assess the correctness of this application even without making the rule explicit” (ibid., 104).

12 Hoogland and Jochemsen argue that, in every practice, a number of aspects can be distinguished. They define *aspect* as follows: “The concept of ‘aspect’ refers to an irreducible mode of human experience that at the same time constitutes a way of evaluating human activity, e.g., the performance of practices Each of the modal aspects has a core meaning that is a normative principle. These normative principles can be used as criteria in the evaluation of a particular performance of a practice” (2000, 464).

telos. Everything that the practitioner does is directed towards this telos. The other normative principles “should be under the guidance of the qualifying principle” (Jochemsen 2006, 105). Interestingly, Van der Stoep (2011, 5) argues:

Being a professional is a way of living that is worthwhile in itself, with its own intrinsic value. Professionals are not just driven by economic interests but also by the intrinsic good of the profession itself... Their profession provides them with a sense of dignity and pride that goes beyond their material concerns.

Second, to achieve the telos of a practice, professional skills and typical professional techniques are required. In these skills and techniques, a specific profession has its basis: “The founding constitutive rules prescribe the activities that give a particular practice its characteristic content” (Jochemsen 2006, 105). This basis is normative, according to Jochemsen:

There is a need for action and this acting gets a specific form through profession-typical techniques. A practitioner needs to control them if he wants to be able to fruitfully join a practice.

JOICHEMSEN, KUIPER, AND DE MUYNCK 2006, 11¹³

Finally, conditional norms are the norms that must be observed in some way but do not inherently define the typical character of the practice. They define conditions that must be taken into account during the performance of a practice, “but they neither define the ‘technicalities’ of the practice nor its finality” (Jochemsen 2006, 105). This involves norms that are a component of the broader normative framework—e.g., the economic and legal aspects. In the case of medical care, for instance, the economic aspect refers to “efficiency and effectiveness of the use of health services in general and professional conduct in particular” (Jochemsen, Kuiper, and De Muijnck 2006, 31; cf. 43–44), and the legal aspect refers to the entitlement to information, the *toestemmingsbeginsel* (consent principle), rules about privacy, etc.

2.2 *Regulative Side*

While the constitutive side describes the profession in its structure, the regulative side shows “in which direction the practice is moving, on the basis of

13 Jochemsen, Kuiper, and De Muijnck argue that each profession comes from what they refer to as a *cultural impulse*: “something must be done to a recognized problem, a shared need or interest” (2006, 11). In response to this impulse, a certain action must be taken.

values and beliefs” (Jochemsen, Kuiper, and De Muynck 2006, 12). In other words:

The constitutive side of a practice ... embodies the normative constitutive principles and rules that should guide the performance of the practice and provide norms required to assess that performance. However, any performance and assessment involves a specific *interpretation* of the rules.... Such interpretation departs from a wider interpretative framework concerning the meaning of that practice for human life and for society and, hence, on the *direction* performances of the practice should have.

JOICHEMSEN 2006, 106¹⁴

Values and beliefs “reflect the worldview and, if they are religious, the religious beliefs of the people involved” (Jochemsen 2006, 107). Therefore, Jochemsen argues that any performance of a practice is regulated by world views and that “there is no ‘neutral’ performance of a practice” (ibid.): “depending on their view on the meaning and coherence of reality, people act differently in concrete practices” (Hoogland and Jochemsen 2000, 466).¹⁵

3 Structural Analysis of Government Communication

In this section, the theoretical framework of normative practices is applied to government communication, following the structure of the previous part of this paper. But there is a preliminary question that must first be addressed—i.e., the question of whether communication is a practice. When thinking about this question, the first point to make is that communication does not

14 Jochemsen argues that the values and beliefs with regard to the regulative side of a practice also function as a sort of reference point “for a critical assessment of existing ways of performing practices by practitioners and of innovation and improvement of practices” (2006, 107). In his opinion, this is an important function of the regulative side because “the fact that a certain community of practitioners accepts certain standards of excellence does not mean that those standards are the best possible” (ibid.).

15 For example, a liberal worldview does not allow the government to be the moral judge of the behavior of its citizens except when the actions of one individual impose upon the interests of others. That may lead, for instance, “to a governmental advocacy for use of condoms, but not for monogamy” (Klop 1996, 312). However, promoting the use of prophylactics implies certain values and beliefs. Hence, a policy on condom use illustrates that there is a directional dimension in government communication.

exist as an independent practice: it is always connected and subservient to one or more other practices. Expressed in reformational philosophical terms, communication is *enkaptically intertwined* with other practices.¹⁶

However, communication is more than a set of skills and habits utilized in the servicing of other practices. As mentioned above, both the concept of telos and the idea that constitutive rules should be observed to achieve its telos are central to a practice (cf. MacIntyre 1984). Thus, we contend that professionals engaged in activities aimed at the communication of their organization with other actors are performing a practice because those activities have coherence and are collectively aiming at the realization of a value typical for communication. Otherwise stated, the practice of communication has its own telos, and certain constitutive rules must be observed in order to realize it. The second part of this article will seek the telos of the governmental communication practice. The following elaboration of the normative practice model to governmental communication will begin with the constitutive side, or structural dimension (sec. 3.1), and subsequently discuss the regulative side, or directional dimension (sec. 3.2).

3.1 *Constitutive Side*

To trace the telos of the communication practice, we will examine literature regarding the core of communication. Research conducted by Jeffrey and Brunton (2011) indicates that practitioners and academics define two superordinate goals associated with the practice of communication; to wit, strategically managing the communication process and managing relationships.¹⁷ This is illustrated as follows:

The first superordinate goal reflects the need for CM [communication management] practitioners to manage all aspects of the communication process, including the integral role of the dynamic context in which the process occurs. This involves evaluating, controlling and using the communication process to achieve pre-determined objectives. As CM also endeavors to enhance the communication process with varied audiences, relationships with members of these audiences are also central. Accordingly, the management of relationships, the second superordinate

16 The term *enkapsis* is used within reformational philosophy to indicate cases where two or more different structures are interwoven in such a way that each retains its own internal structure.

17 Their research shows that managing the communication process was evaluated by practitioners as being more important.

goal, focuses on the participation perspective of the parties involved in the communication process. It is concerned with representing, understanding and advising members of both internal and external audiences.

JEFFREY AND BRUNTON 2011, 65

Tench and Yeomans also emphasize the aspect of relationships with regard to communication. They conclude that “public relations is about building and maintaining relationships” (2006, 290; cf. Carey 1992). Communication is defined elsewhere more as a way in which people convey meaning (cf. Jansen, Van der Stoep, and Jochemsen 2017). This raises the question of what is primarily the telos (intrinsic meaning, purpose, etc.) of communication—or, more precisely and in terms of reformational philosophy, the question of how (government) communication is generally qualified. The next section will more structurally explore how government communication can be interpreted from a reformational philosophical perspective.

3.1.1 Qualifying Aspect

In our view, three (modal) aspects used within reformational philosophy play a special role: (1) the juridical aspect, (2) the social aspect, and (3) the linguistic aspect.

(1) *Juridical Aspect* As mentioned above, communication is connected and subservient to other practice(s), including public policy. This indicates that government communication is a component of the broader practice of government actions. More precisely, government communication belongs to the practice of public policy that is institutionalized in government. Chaplin (2007) argues that the government is authorized by the motive of public justice (telos). In terms of the modal aspects as distinguished within reformational philosophy, this signifies that the government is juridically qualified and founded in the formative (or, historical) aspect. However, the observation that government communication is serving the telos of government does not rule out that communication by the government can simultaneously be perceived as a subpractice with its own telos. In other words, the governmental communication practice in its entirety is guided by the general telos of government, to wit, public justice; but at the same time, it has an internal normativity of its own.

(2) *Social Aspect* Government communication does not occur in an isolated situation. As explained earlier, it always happens within the context of the government and is connected to other practices that are part of the policy process as well—e.g., relationships with political parties, the press, other departments, etc. But government communication in itself serves the organization and is

related to stakeholders. One could say that government communication is embedded in the social relationships between ministries, departments, etc., and stakeholders.

In reformational philosophy, however, the word *social* is hardly ever used in this sense; the word *societal* is more suitable in this case.¹⁸ Within reformational philosophy, the basic point regarding the social aspect is more about the social intercourse between human beings, or, as otherwise referred to, the social aspect within relationships. From the perspective of reformational philosophy, a more fundamental understanding of *social* is that *being human* means “being radically a *fellow* human being” (Van Woudenberg 1992, 101). According to Van Woudenberg (*ibid.*),

The human being is at the root of his existence connected with his fellow man. It is not that the fellow man first appears in the perspective of the modal theory and only then in the social aspect. No—the human race as human community consists of an entity structure containing, among others, a social aspect. “Social” here does not carry the broad meaning of “humanity” but a more specific modal meaning: it is the aspect of *omgang en verkeer* (social intercourse). That aspect is not concerned with “intersubjectivity,” but with “interaction.” Within this interaction, norms of tact, politeness, amiability, courtesy, etc., apply.¹⁹

Or in the words of Strauss (2009, 97):

It is impossible to assume that human beings function first in some aspects and later in others. For example, it does not make sense to start a reflection about the nature of the “social” by first contemplating a supposedly lonesome individual, for it belongs to the very constitution of

18 It is good to be aware of the connotation of the word *social* within reformational philosophy. In a broader sense it refers to human relationships which can have all kinds of modal qualifications. However, the term *relationship* (or *relations*) is rather a complex term in reformational philosophy—it is also used with regard to the theory of modal aspects. All modal aspects in reformational philosophy imply relationships, namely, subject-subject and subject-object relations. For example, the linguistic aspect implies lingual subject-subject relations—people who speak with each other—as well as lingual subject-object relations—people who speak about something.

19 The word *interaction* is easily misunderstood: as if *interaction* as such is *social*. See n. 18 above: in reformational philosophy, all modal aspects include a subject-subject relation, and from the physical aspect this implies interaction. In other words, human interaction is implied in all typically human aspects as they all include subject-subject relations.

every individual human being that it functions *at once* (*simultaneously*) within every modal aspect, including the social aspect.... A person is not an “abstract individual” that has a “social function” only in the second place.... Social interaction within human society gives expression to phenomena such as *courtesy*, *tact*, and *politeness*. Within this aspect, we find a point of orientation for a first classification of different kinds of social intercourse between human beings.

It can be concluded that in reformational philosophy, the social aspect revolves around social intercourse (cf. Dooyeweerd 1969). However, does social intercourse capture the core of (government) communication? We believe that it does not. Imagine two people sitting at a table who do not speak the same language. They can have a beer together and share a meal, but the communication will be rather basic. Or imagine someone giving a presentation. When he/she receives generous applause, does that mean that the audience has understood what has been said? What matters is that what the speaker says is correctly understood—i.e., that the message is conveyed and its meaning is captured. Meaning is central in the linguistic aspect (Basden 2008; Strauss 2009). Therefore, although social norms play an important role, it is opined that communication is linguistically rather than socially qualified—or, in other words, communication is a disclosed lingually qualified phenomenon, anticipating the social aspect (Strauss 2009).

(3) *Linguistic Aspect* Van Woudenberg (1992, 98) contends that the linguistic aspect is about *clarity*,²⁰ saying that “clarity is not the only, but the central norm for language.”²¹ However, when it comes to the use of signs and symbols, clarity is a precondition but not the reason for their use. Signs and symbols are used to convey meaning. Hence, we believe that the normative principle of the linguistic aspect is *meaning* and that communication, being qualified by the linguistic aspect, is also qualified by meaning (cf. Basden [2008] and Strauss [2009]; both speak of “signification”). However, meaning takes shape between human beings in a process in which social norms play a role. Expressed in reformational philosophical terms, the linguistic aspect anticipates the social aspect. According to Van Woudenberg, the linguistic aspect is not equal to the social aspect; in the use of language, the social is supplementary—i.e., “*adherent*, not *inherent*” (Verburg [1962], cited in Van Woudenberg [1992, 101]).

20 In a general sense, this also means *intelligibility*; i.e., “being able to use the proper grammatical rules” (Burkart 2009, 146) and a correct use of a profession’s own terminology.

21 Cf. Strauss (2009, esp. 320–341) for a more analytical overview of communication from a reformational philosophical perspective.

Taking into account the three modal aspects mentioned above, we conclude that government communication in itself is linguistically qualified, and the normative principle (i.e., the telos of the linguistic aspect) can be defined as *conveying meaning*. In government communication, the social aspect—as approached in reformatory philosophy and, consequently, used in the modal sense of the term—is supplementary, or, even better: the linguistic aspect *anticipates* the social aspect. Finally, the entire government communication practice is guided by public justice.

The conclusion above is beneficial when addressing the topic of societal legitimation, which is an urgent issue in government communication (cf. Ihlen and Van Ruler 2007; Van Ruler 2007). Societal legitimation appears to be generally considered as the primary goal of government communication. However, as mentioned previously, what matters in communication is that the message is correctly understood. Hence, government communication should primarily be perceived as a (linguistic) activity that focuses on conveying the meaning of the actions of the government (cf. Middel 2002; Jansen, Van der Stoep, and Jochemsen 2017).²² This means that the government should unambiguously express what they consider meaningful in relation to the reason for these actions. The government have a reason for their actions, and this reason is connected with what they consider to be their core responsibility. If they can convincingly and truthfully answer questions about the reason for their actions (cf. Aarts 2012; Van der Stoep 2016), societal legitimation will subsequently follow. If they cannot, the government will lose their reliability and, with that, societal legitimation. Thus, societal legitimation is an intended effect, and not the primary goal, of communication. Otherwise stated, good communication means that all the parties are involved and treated in a correct manner, and that the actions of the government are correctly understood. However, understanding something is not the same as agreeing with it, although social legitimation frequently has that connotation.

3.1.2 Founding Constitutive Rules

In order to realize the telos of a practice, professional skills and profession-typical techniques are required. The comprehensive knowledge and skills, in terms of the NPM founding constitutive rules, define the field of competence of the communication practitioner. This section elaborates on these rules.

²² Middel (2002) argues that a communication practitioner working in the field of the government has two tasks (or competencies, as he calls them): confronting the government with the perspective of the outside world and attributing meaning to existing information provided by the government.

Professional skills and profession-typical techniques are often transcribed in profession profiles which are composed of core tasks and levels. According to Logeion, the Dutch organization for communications professionals, six key tasks are important for communication practitioners. They must

1. be able to identify and analyze (observe, identify, and interpret things);
2. be able to advise and represent (represent the organization both internally and externally, and provide advice about communication forms and strategy);
3. be able to integrate (bring together input from inside and outside the organization in a coherent story);
4. be able to create (developing communication forms);
5. be able to plan and organize (working systematically and arranging meetings); and
6. be able to supervise and manage communication processes in general (improving people's communication skills and leading and monitoring communication processes).²³

To perform these tasks, several competencies are required. According to Jeffrey and Brunton (2011, 60), competencies could be considered “the underlying foundational abilities that are integral to successfully carrying out the tasks and responsibilities and thus remain a stable blueprint for practice over time.”²⁴ When asked to rate the importance of the competencies required to attain the two superordinate goals of the communication profession mentioned above, Jeffrey and Brunton, drawing from their quantitative research, conclude that six major areas emerged. The first is “managing stakeholder relationships” which “involves using communication to foster and maintain diverse, but significant, relationships” (ibid., 67). Second is “managing the external interface” which entails “the ability concerned with managing the client's appearance in, or interaction with, the external environment, from dealing with a crisis to presenting their client's reputation in the best light, often in the media” (ibid.). Next come “socially responsible communication” and “evaluation management,”

23 See <http://www.logeion.nl/beroepsniveauprofielen>.

24 Based on research conducted in the UK, Jeffrey and Brunton (2011, 60) note that communication practitioners must also understand the fundamental theoretical frameworks of professional competency in order to improve and develop practice: “As the very nature of being ‘professional’ assumes knowledge underpinned by specific skills and abilities, then professionalism must be judged according to the ability to achieve a particular standard in those skills and abilities.”

which are rated as equally important. “Evaluation management is the ability to plan, measure, monitor, and evaluate all aspects of the communication process while socially responsible communication is concerned with sustaining ethical and acceptable behavior by all stakeholders.” “Environmental monitoring,” in fifth place, is “actively monitoring the environment for early detection of changes or trends which may impact on key stakeholders” (ibid.). In sixth place, “lobbying” is “concerned with strategically advocating or lobbying for a particular point of view with both internal stakeholders and public policy groups.” Jeffrey and Brunton noted that the first five competencies, “although able to be ranked, were relatively close in importance”; however, lobbying “was rated as being much less important” (ibid.).

The question arises as to which of these competencies are relevant in the field of government communication. Although the rating may differ, all of them are also important for government communication practitioners. More precisely, with the transition mentioned in the introduction in mind, these competencies probably become more important, especially the first (managing stakeholder relationship), the fourth (evaluation management), and the fifth (environmental monitoring). In addition, at the end of 2015 the Dutch government published a document with the basic principles of their communication to ensure that all departments communicate according to the same principles. They list the following six basic principles for government communication:

- Ministries will observe a number of basic principles in their communications with the press and public. These principles are entirely related to the Dutch constitutional system and the relationships within it between government and opposition and between government and the citizen.
- Government communications must satisfy the citizen's entitlement to communication with and information from central government and the support of good democratic governance. Government communications will always be recognizable as such, relate to policy and organization and not be aimed at the personal image building of members of government and of other government organizations.
- The government will actively bring its policy and the reasons and considerations underlying it to the attention of the widest possible audience and will always specify the policy phase to which the information relates. At an early stage it will be indicated whether the government wishes to involve citizens in the preparation of plans and measures and if so, then how.

- The government will ensure that it can be easily contacted by the citizens. Furthermore the government will respond quickly and adequately to requests for information and to complaints. Communications will be truthful, sufficiently accessible both in terms of technology and content, understandable, timely and as focused as possible.
- Communications “overkill” will be avoided at all stages of the policy process. In principle the government must not employ so many means of providing information that an imbalance arises with respect to the possibilities of other parties.
- Central government communications will not become interwoven with party political interests.

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The constitutive side of a practice includes *conditional rules*—i.e., norms that must be brought to fruition in some manner but which have no defining meaning for a specific practice. They are only supportive to the telos of government communication. The next section will elaborate the conditional rules with regard to government communication.

3.1.3 Conditional Rules

Based on reformational philosophy, the following conditional rules (or norms) can be defined (cf. Cliteur 1983; Van Woudenberg 1992; Basden 2008; Strauss 2009).

The *sensitive* or *psychological aspect* involves empathy, i.e., being aware of the emotions in society, denoting them, and addressing them proactively. Consider, for example, the refugee crises, where feelings of fear, anger, grief, etc., prevail. A government communication practitioner can be expected to recognize these signals and act empathically—but also with due objectivity.²⁵

The *logical-analytical aspect* involves discernment—the thinking and reasoning with conceptual clarity and the ability to distinguish fact from fiction, primary from secondary issues, etc. It also involves a certain degree of professional rationality. As illustrated above, government communication is often accompanied by emotions, and a government communication practitioner

25 Tench and Yeomans argue that it cannot be denied that public relations people “have to justify the decisions and actions of their organization to a range of publics” (2006, 290). According to them, “they should have, therefore, an acute awareness of what their publics’ likely reactions will be and whether there will be a sense of moral outrage or approval” (ibid.).

should be aware of that; but he/she should not let the outcome of his/her actions be determined by these emotions.

The *economic aspect* refers primarily to efficiency and effectiveness in communication; i.e., possessing efficient communication tools for the different types of policy areas and their stakeholders, not using more words and images than necessary, and ensuring that the materials that are used achieve the intended results. The key issue in this aspect is communicative frugality (cf. Strauss 2009). In addition, it relates to finance: since government communication practitioners are paid by public funds, prudent behavior is required.

The *aesthetic aspect* is about harmony. This concerns not only a beautiful layout and well-constructed communication expressions, but also the right tone of voice.

The *legal aspect* indicates that, in legislation, policy, and governance, the government should seek to do justice to the different stakeholders in their respective positions and responsibilities. This is also relevant in the field of government communication in terms of the balance of interests—communication that is unilateral but does justice to each interest (cf. Verkerk 2014). Further, according to Glenny (2010, 1), “Laws covering freedom of information, privacy and whistleblowing ‘affects the transparency of the executive branch of government’ and lay obligatory standards for the acceptable conduct of government communication.”

The *moral aspect* is also involved. Krabbe concludes: “The old adage of public relations in the Netherlands is ‘open and honest’” (2011, 61). At the same time, he states that “Communication practitioners probably don’t lie roundly and flatly, but openness is hard to find and misleading is common” (ibid.). This aspect is related to what we said earlier about reliability in relation to societal legitimation.

Finally, there is the *pistic aspect* that involves trust.²⁶ Public trust is closely related to societal legitimation and central to the practice of government communication. However, trust is not an independent goal but an intended effect

26 Krabbe (2011) states that trust is an overarching value of communication that is carried by other values and principles, such as honesty, reciprocity, autonomy, tolerance, caring/servanthood, visibility, utility, dialogue, and deliberation. Tench and Yeomans note that the notion of trust usually includes notions such as reliability, confidence, faith, and integrity. They further argue that trust depends, to a large extent, on the integrity of the individual practitioner, saying that “if a ... practitioner acts ethically and professionally they are likely to be trusted. They will be described as having integrity—there is something wholesome, honest, and trustworthy about them. Being ethical and professional is core to having a good reputation” (2006, 290).

of convincing and reliable communication about the why of governmental actions (cf. De Vries 2014).

3.2 *Regulative Side*

The regulative side concerns the practitioners' values and beliefs that often implicitly play a role in the practice. On the one hand, within a profession or organization, there is often consensus on values, whether or not recorded in a code of conduct (e.g., the Stockholm Accords). On the other hand, there are values and beliefs related to an individual's personal life as well as values that are embedded in the culture (Jochemsen, Kuiper, and De Muynck 2006).

For many years, the *instrumental approach* was dominant concerning government communication. Until the 1970s, people did not speak of communication but, rather, of information services that explained and clarified policies that were already adopted (Eberg 2006). This type of communication focused on the dissemination of "neutral" and objective information and amounted to communication about policy. But policy was often experienced as elusive, and a gap was felt between the government and its stakeholders. In response to the protests and the critique of interest groups, most governments switched from a centralist and top-down communication approach to a participatory approach.

Interestingly, Hajer (2003, 96) argues that "the established thinking focuses on the issue of how to represent a (given) community and how to come to a fixed system of legitimate decision-making on policies." In a network context, however, "policymaking leads to the creation of communities that for themselves have to determine what constitutes a legitimate decision in a particular instance" (ibid., 97). Hence, Hajer concludes that currently "politics is, first of all, a matter of finding and defining the appropriate setting in which to stage the discursive exchange" (96).

This is in accordance with Fischer's observations. With regard to policy, he discusses an "argumentative turn" that is rooted in postpositive thinking and brings in the (local) knowledge of stakeholders (especially citizens), both empirical and normative, "relevant to the social context to which policy is applied" (2007, 225). It focuses on "the crucial role of language, rhetorical argument, and stories in framing debate, as well as on structuring the deliberative context in which policy is made" (ibid.).

The word *framing* is crucial in this context. According to Van Gorp (2007), a frame exists more or less independently from the individual and is an element of a culture. Frames lead a person's thoughts and discourses by presenting the world in a particular way, and they are used consciously or unconsciously

when we communicate and when we interpret communication. As Jansen et al. (2016, 105) contend, such framing entails an interplay between surface frames and deep frames:

Surface frames function at the level of our daily language. For example, the words “dark forest” first of all have a descriptive meaning for a certain type of woodland and “wilderness” refers to a rugged place. Through their immediate meaning, surface frames identify the context of the discourse. However, these surface frames appeal to underlying values and convictions that can be communicated in deep frames and ground our daily language in our normative convictions regarding the world and our lives.

We see that regulative views can be expressed in the form of (deep) frames. It is important to explicate predominant regulative ideas and discuss them in society and within a profession. A practitioner in the field of government communication must be aware of deep frames in the communication with stakeholders. Put differently, each of the participants has an individual position, and awareness of the multiple perspectives and underlying assumptions—i.e., the normative choices of the various actors—is crucial. Without insight into these normative choices, a discourse about policy cannot be properly understood. This implies that the government must also be open about its normative convictions (cf. the third basic principle for government communication listed above).

4 Discussion

This paper began by arguing that the network society supposes a changing relationship between the government and its stakeholders, which creates uncertainty among practitioners about how to behave in a specific professional situation. The view expressed in this paper is that the NPM clarifies the structure of communication practices and is useful to the practitioner in his/her reflecting on the core value(s) of communication practices. The clarity achieved in this manner may decrease the practitioner’s uncertainty. By using the NPM, one can identify normative aspects in which practices function and that must be brought to fruition to ensure that the practice functions adequately. Distinguishing a constitutive and regulative side is beneficial for differentiating between the constellation of normative principles of a practice (structure) and the guiding beliefs (direction) as well as for formulating the significance of

both structure and direction for a correct understanding of the practice.²⁷ In other words, the NPM clearly constructs the framework that defines a specific practice and helps the practitioner to think systematically about required competencies. Also, it challenges the practitioner to reflect on individual beliefs in relation to that practice (cf. Jochemsen, Kuiper, and De Muynck 2006).²⁸ It is important to note that a practice is aiming foremost at the pursuit of its good (telos) rather than striving for success. All actions in which the good is sacrificed for (personal) success violate that practice.

Characteristic of the current times, however, is a lack of common values and beliefs. As a result, it is more difficult “to realize the load-bearing coherence of the institutions,” as Boutellier (2011, 29) puts it. He wonders how, despite the loss of traditional religion and moral frameworks, there is still belief in an ordered society,²⁹ and concludes that the absence of a coherent moral structure does not automatically lead to disorder. According to him, individuals are perfectly able to establish order in an improvising manner—not in a traditional sense, specifically based on shared values and beliefs, but centered on societal relevant features or themes (cf. Hajer 2003; Broer, Hoogland, and Van der Stoep 2017). This raises the question of whether common ground can currently be found at the constitutive side—i.e., a perspective on what a certain practice should be aiming at—rather than at the regulative side of a practice—i.e., the guiding control beliefs of the practitioners. Stated in this manner, this question seems to neglect the relationship that exists between both sides. That said, although the constitutive and the regulative sides of a practice are in fact inextricably intertwined, they are distinguished at the same time. Inherent to the concept of a practice is that it ensures “supporting cohesion”: it provides a common ground—for instance, shared ideas about how to act, and cross-links between practitioners with different value systems (cf. Broer, Hoogland, and Van der Stoep 2017).

It is argued in this paper that societal legitimation is crucial for government policy. However, we also contend that societal legitimation should not be the

27 Because these constitutive rules also function as quality standards, Hoogland and Jochemsen (2000) argue that NPM can serve as a basis for the integral quality management of a practice.

28 According to Hoogland and Jochemsen, a beneficial practice is impossible if practitioners do not reflect on their regulative ideas directing the particular practice. “It is part of the character of normative practices that they can only be ‘opened up’ by regulative ideas about the meaning and structural coherence of human experience” (2000, 466).

29 Boutellier distinguishes two perspectives with regard to regulation, to wit, “moral coherence” and “institutional organization of society.” About the first he says that “the moral perspective refers to the meaning that others have for us, for our self-image, for our intuitions about the good life ... and about what we perceive as evil” (2011, 28).

purpose of government communication. As discussed, the linguistic aspect is central to government communication that is about conveying the meaning of the actions of the government. If the government can convincingly and truthfully answer questions about the why of its actions, societal legitimation will subsequently follow. Stakeholders (especially citizens) expect the government to communicate in a convincing and truthful manner, which implies a positive response to the following three questions (a negative response to one or more of them will result in loss of reliability, which is counterproductive to societal legitimation).³⁰

- Is government communication consistent with the telos of the government?
- Is government communication in accordance with how they actually act?
- Is government communication in accordance with how they communicated earlier?

All of this requires communication practitioners to think structurally and systematically about their argumentation in order to provide convincing communication (cf. Aarts 2012). This is not a unilateral process but an iterative process of consultation—i.e., a dialogue with stakeholders during which arguments and counterarguments will be exchanged.³¹

In addition, rather than being primarily based on deductive logic, the process is about practical reason, as Fischer (2007, 229–230) argues:

Practical reason holds that a decision depends on the person making it, and that formal rules of decision-making cannot be abstracted for persons and their actions into formal systems of demonstration modelled

30 Jacobson and Kolluri (1999, 274) have formulated the following four questions in order to evaluate participatory communication—i.e., evaluate the interaction between experts and either an individual or a group: “(i) is the communicator’s communication correct, that is, is the information being offered undistorted and reliable?, (ii) is the communicator’s role legitimate given his or her role and the participation of other interested individuals, social groups, agencies, and nations who are party to the process of development?, (iii) is the communication offered sincerely in good faith without being manipulative either on the part of the individual or any organization from which the individual may have been sent? and (iv) is the communicator’s communication comprehensible to others, that is, are idiom, cultural factors, and/or message design adequately accounted?”

31 Tench and Yeomans observe that public relations people “have to justify the decisions and actions of their organization to a range of publics” (2006, 290). According to them, “they should have, therefore, an acute awareness of what their publics’ likely reactions will be and whether there will be a sense of moral outrage or approval” (ibid.).

on deductive logic as attempted by the methodologist of positivist social science. Reasoning refers here to a method for convincing or dissuading adversaries, and for coming to an agreement with others about the legitimacy of a decision.

He contends that motives that have passed the test of argumentation can be considered as “good reasons.” When seeking a decision regarding which action should be taken, “a practical argument begins with the norms to which the participants in the controversy are committed and then seeks, by means of argument, to ground the decision on them” (ibid., 230). By doing so, intuitions about (public) justice are strengthened and contextualized.

However, there is an inevitable moment of choice: intuitions must be weighed,³² and a decision must be made as to what exactly the government wants to communicate in a particular situation. Public justice is, therefore, not merely the outcome of a majority rule process: although stakeholders play an important role, the government has its own responsibility defined by its telos. At its core, government communication is for the benefit of the government’s telos. If government communication practitioners keep that in mind, they can contribute to the coherent and convincing communication of the government, reducing the confusion about their own role as a result.

To conclude, we believe the normative practice model is helpful in clarifying the task of government communication practitioners in that the NPM clarifies what the telos of a government communication practice should be. This may be important after the transition from *allocution* to *consultation* as described at the beginning of this article, because it helps practitioners find their focus; for instance, between the wide-ranging and mostly conflicting interests and visions about nature that are involved in the achievement of a national nature network (cf. Aarts et al. 2015). It is to be expected that, as a result, there will be less confusion about how to act in specific professional situations and more democratic decision-making processes.

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32 Cf. Verkerk (2014); he speaks about “justified interests.”

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