

The Public Image of the Government

Abstract

Government organizations in the Netherlands worry about the decline in public appreciation. Many initiatives were undertaken to make government institutions more responsive to societal needs, but this is not reflected in the image and trust of the government. How can the distance between the government and citizens be bridged and how may various public groups be more involved in policymaking processes? In this paper the answers to these questions found in literature will be brought together and considered further.

Research results suggest that a majority of citizens is satisfied with the direct contact with government agencies. The municipal authority does better than the national government on performance. The overall appreciation is not high and it is particularly confidence in politicians that is low. The contribution of communication to government organizations is further explored.

Introduction

In the Netherlands there are many sources that try to explain why public appreciation of the government has decreased in recent years (Bakir and Barlow, 2007), although much has been done by government organisations to counteract this development. For years the Dutch government has been renewing administrative processes in a bid to close the gap between itself and the electorate and to improve efficiency at the same time.

It has been said for some years that the government is out of touch with the electorate. But to what extent is there a decrease of appreciation and, if so, what has caused it? We begin by examining various factors which shape the public image of the government. We then look at how communication as a functional area can help to build trust and a good relationship between the government and the electorate.

Attitudes to the government have been changing for some time. In the Netherlands the construction of the welfare state in the 1960s and 1970s went hand in hand with such high hopes and expectations (Ringeling, 2004) that disillusionment was more or less inevitable: many problems were too intractable and too widespread to control. The environment and unemployment, for example, are both complex issues with international ramifications and virtually impossible to solve by government efforts alone. Any progress that was actually made in these years was under-publicized. People stopped believing that society could be re-moulded in order to simply solve such problems and as a result lost respect for the government (Vermeulen, 1993).

Government bodies tried to enhance the effectiveness of their policies by joining forces with other parties to tackle problems. Initially, these partnerships took the form of covenants; later, they were dubbed co-productions. One classic

example is the collaboration between the national government and several branches of industry to save energy. Meantime, *partnership* was also gaining importance at regional and local level. All kinds of participation projects are implemented, ranging from referenda to various forms of interactive policy making. As local cooperation involved an intensive dialogue with citizens and organisations, the municipalities had to find new working methods. They had to think more in terms of client groups like local businesses and inhabitants of neighbourhoods. Some local authorities adapted their organisational structure as they felt that the Concern Model, the basis for many municipalities, was too introspective. Their new structure was geared towards client groups. Others worked hard on changing their culture and work methods to become more interactive (Dijkgraaf, 1999). All these efforts were undertaken in the hope of being able to respond better to developments in society.

But these innovations did not reap any rewards in terms of government image. In times of crisis it was still the government who was blamed and not, for example, the owners of the fireworks factory in Enschede or the pub-owner in Volendam, who were both directly responsible for a huge fire with many casualties. The media homed in on inadequate supervision and lack of government action. This response suggests that *expectations* of the government are still high.

Ringeling argues that society is getting tougher all the time. The electorate wants a firm government which understands that people have to work for a living (Ringeling, 2004). He also says that we are witnessing the brutalisation of power in businesses and organisations (the scramble for monetary reward and as a result growing income differences), and in politics (the blatant play of interests within the EU). This changes the communication climate. The tone of voice in communication with citizens is not always so friendly. Benefit agencies seem to assume in their paperwork that the burden of proof rests squarely with ordinary citizens. Control and efficiency come first, sometimes at the expense of customer relations.

Image problems, endemic in government, are inextricably tied in with the relationship with *politics*. After all, politicians make plenty of promises, but once in power, they have to make concessions – so many of the promises fall by the wayside. Often the ambitions are far too high and there are long lists of good intentions which are hard to quantify; sometimes policy-making seems more of a challenge than policy implementation – so implementation doesn't get enough attention (Aardema, 2005).

Image of government organisations

But how do the Dutch see their government? Research findings suggest that most people are happy with the greenery, the maintenance and the amenities in their neighbourhood, but they do have concerns about safety. The majority are also satisfied with the direct contact with government agencies (Bleijenberg et al.,

2005). The municipal authority does better than the national government on performance. Seventy-five percent of people are satisfied with the information they receive on major issues and with the local municipal services. Opinions are less positive when the topics are more general and abstract (Bleijenberg, 2005).

The overall score is not high (Galjaard, 1992). Confidence in politicians is particularly low (VNG, 2002). People do not always feel closer to local than national politicians; local politicians are, after all less well-known. Tops says that close personal involvement in the ups and downs of the local neighbourhood or municipality tends to be expressed in membership of social rather than political organisations (Tops, 1991). There is a small group who feels closely allied with the municipality and the council, a large group who feels only moderately allied, and a small group that is totally indifferent (Ringeling, 2004).

It appears that people do actually *delegate* power to the government. Many voters prefer to leave policy to the elected authority. If they have a problem they know where to find the politicians. Around fifty percent have taken action in past years to draw the attention of the municipal council to some issue or other and a large majority feel they were taken seriously (Tops, 1991).

Several public groups were identified with a different attitude towards the government. Motivation mentioned inactive outsiders that are not involved in the government and focused on own interests, dependant traditionalists that acknowledge duties and may do volunteer work but do not feel connected to the modern complex society, pragmatical conformists that are many and feel somewhat involved albeit at a distance, and societal responsible people with an ideological motivation (Commissie Toekomst Overheidscommunicatie, 2001). This indicates that not all groups feel the same distance towards the government and that different approaches may be initiated towards the various public groups.

Mental picture

How do people build up a mental picture of a situation, institution etc? Human memory works on the basis of schemas, or interconnected associations (Vos en Schoemaker, 2005). Certain factors can dominate a schema and thereby colour perception in such a way that an event is perceived in a particular perspective. This process is known as '*framing*' (Hallahan, 1999).

Governments are closely intertwined with politics, which is all about interpreting facts and shaping interpretations (Stone, 2002). People feel distanced from politicians and governments, so they follow events through the media. This phenomenon is known as 'spectator democracy'. What happens is that the political debate moves to the media. All the parties in this debate engage in framing – consciously and unconsciously. The effects of the framing process are then highlighted in the media so that certain elements dominate the story. This is known as '*priming*'.

One interesting advisory report claims that the logic of the *media* shapes

the course of the public debate (Raad voor Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling, 2003). Speed is a key factor; in the scramble to attract the attention of the public the race for scoops is getting faster. Journalists fit the news into a context which accentuates contrasting elements and often focus on personal conflicts or power struggles. Negative news prevails. The focus is on people and emotions. Television images gain impact if frequently repeated. Journalists take their cue from one another. They create hypes, which tend to marginalize other views. Press interpretations are taking over and journalists sometimes seem to do more talking than the interviewee. These factors influence the public debate in the media and public perception of government performance.

It is impossible to understand the mental picture formed by the public without insight into the various roles an individual citizen assumes in relation to the government: voter, co-producer of policy, subject and customer (Commissie Toekomst Overheidscommunicatie, 2001). These roles might lead to different points of view. As a *voter* one might find that building regulations are good for the appearance of the neighbourhood, but as a *subject* they might seem an obstacle to personal renovation plans. Other roles can be explained as follows. A citizen might be asked to *co-produce* policy by, for example, voicing ideas on traffic and other local services. Last but not least, one is also a *customer*, a purchaser of municipal services, such as waste collection and passport administration. Municipal services act primarily as ‘dissatisfiers’ (Figuee, 2001): people regard an efficient service as self-evident and do not think twice about calling the municipal authority to account when things go wrong. But anyway, as mentioned earlier, the Dutch are generally satisfied with these type of services. The citizen is addressed in his various roles and in different tones according to the situation; for example, as a subject when one has to pay taxes, or as a customer when one can express wishes on how the waste at ones home is to be collected.

The government also plays different roles and is not particularly skilled at clarifying the capacity in which it is acting. To many, the government is a *multi-headed monster* (Scholten, 2001). Various public agencies and departments use their own distinctive tone when addressing members of the public. Consistency over time is not as good as it could be (Rijnja, 2002) because of, for example, policy changes due to new political shifts or insights. The Dutch government has initiated projects to coordinate the communication of the different ministries and to strengthen the cooperation with other public bodies such as provinces and municipalities (e.g. Gemengde Commissie Communicatie, 2005).

What can communication offer?

According to Van Woerkum (1977), the main task of communication experts is to help break *self-reference*, a psychological phenomenon that makes people and public institutions perceive the environment (and themselves) in terms of what they see as obvious priorities. Not everyone shares their view, of course: to others,

the world may look different. One step towards breaking fixed mindsets is a realization of dependence, as legislation could never be effective without the support and cooperation of the public. Policy cannot be effective unless policymakers understand how target groups think. To break self-reference they need to tune into and learn from the target groups. That way, the dominant rationale can be incorporated in the policy (Van Woerkum, 1998). To govern nowadays is to communicate (Van de Poel and Woerkum, 1996).

As a functional area, communication *promotes interaction between public institutions and the social environment* (Vos en Schoemaker, 2005). Communication channels need to be kept open so that the institution can interact with other parties, e.g. to support problem solving that requires cooperation. Information exchange will moreover promote internal cooperation. Finally, communication can be applied jointly with regulations and services to enhance an effective implementation of government policies. The core competences are (Middel, 2002):

- To continually confront the institution with the thoughts and ideas of the public (outside-in communication);
- To give meaning to information, which often needs to be adjusted before it can be used by public groups (inside-out communication).

It is not just the communication department that needs to be able to communicate well; the organisation and its staff must be able to communicate in their own internal and external networks (Galjaard, 1997). Important are *affinity with recipients* and attention for *contact moments and information bearers* (Middel, 2002). Communication experts formulate communication policy in support of the general policy and implement the tasks that require specialist skills because much is at stake (e.g. media contacts and crisis communication).

Communication experts can monitor the opinions and concerns of target groups and members of the public and help ensure that their expectations receive attention in the various policy stages. They also formulate core messages to make policy more effective and comprehensible.

The quality of communication is determined by the extent to which it contributes to the *relationships* with citizens and organisations and the *effectiveness* of government policy (Vos, 2003). This requires a constant search for ways to upgrade and improve the overall communication strategy of the organisation. For this purpose a balanced scorecard has been developed for government bodies, and especially municipalities, in the Netherlands. It is based on criteria such as accessibility of information, responsiveness to the opinions and concerns of public groups, and interactivity meaning involving people in policymaking (Vos, 2004). These criteria have been converted into *performance indicators*, which can be measured on scales. The aim is to improve the quality of the communication and hence contribute to the performance of the public

institution.

Conclusions

Research shows that a majority of citizens is satisfied with the direct contact with government agencies. The municipal authority does better than the national government on performance. The overall score is not high and it is particularly confidence in politicians that is low. In the past efforts were undertaken to work in a more client-centred way and to involve citizens in policymaking, this was not reflected, however, in the appreciation for the government. A differentiated approach may be needed to involve people with different attitudes towards the government.

Citizens mainly learn about government organizations via media attention. There the logics of the media shape the public debate causing an emphasis on negative news and e.g. personal conflicts. Furthermore, citizens have various roles and are addressed as voter, subject, co-producer or customer. Accordingly, the tone of voice differs, also, various public agencies and departments use their own style. As a result government often seems like a multi-headed monster.

Communication can help to bridge the gap between government organisations and citizens. This must take place in the realization that good communication can shape the electorate's vision of the government only to a certain extent. Building public appreciation requires more efforts, but initiatives to improve communication quality contributes to this.

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Track 2: Regions, Communities and Social Capital*

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