

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24297/jssr.v14i0.8180>

Under Critical Scrutiny A Normal Task for Swedish Executive Municipal Healthcare Managers

Maria Wramsten Wilmar¹, Christian Jacobsson¹, Jeremy Ray¹, Lotta Dellve² & Lena Låstad¹

¹Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg

²Department of Sociology and Work Science, University of Gothenburg

Psymawra@psy.gu.se, christian.jacobsson@psy.gu.se, jeremy.ray@psy.gu.se, lotta.dellve@socav.gu.se ,
Lena.lastad@psy.gu.se

Abstract

Swedish Human Service Organisations (HSOs) operate under high demands of transparency. In this study, executive municipal healthcare managers' dealings with the Media were mapped. 81% had experiences of dealing with the Media under critical scrutiny. 20% of the respondents were aware of whether their organisation had a media strategy. The respondents received support during media scrutiny mainly from their management team, subordinates, family and friends. The respondents who received support from their management team or the communication department felt that the depiction of their organisation was more correct. The results indicate that a strategy including activities from the management team or the communication department would contribute to managers feeling more satisfied with media depictions of their organisation.

Keywords: Hso Managers, Media Interaction, Strategies, Support, The Media

Introduction

The Media has a greater influence on the management than was the case before as a consequence of the increased demands from the public for transparency in HSO [1,2,3]. This exposure is often two-sided, with the organisation on the one hand wanting to be visible in the Media, but on the other also wanting the media coverage to be positive [4]. One researcher who has described the downside of this is Alvesson [5]. He claims that leadership in HSOs is influenced by a so-called representation- and window-dressing logic, where too much emphasis is placed on how one is perceived as a leader and organization. According to this logic and dynamic, he states, structures are based on norms governing how the organization should be presented to achieve a desirable portrayal by the Media. According to Power, Scheytt, Soin & Sahlin [4] as well as Alvesson [5] the Media has a major influence on organizations, both in terms of their decisions and their development. Both Power, et al. [4] and Strömbäck [6,7] think decisions are not taken as an effect of negative media publicity. Grafström, Petrelius Karlberg and Windell [8] maintain that the Media as a moral court sometimes has a greater effect on steering organizational decision making than organizational needs. Additionally, according to Strömbäck [6,7], the Media logic of Swedish media has changed during the past few years. As competition in the media industry has increased, journalists find themselves fighting for the attention of their consumers. The narrative style to capture the reader's attention has increasingly come to be characterized by personification, dramatization and simplification. Strömbäck [6] maintains that the greater the opportunity a journalist has to use one of the aforementioned techniques, the greater the chances are that their story will be published. Wendt [9] speaks of an even more market-controlled journalism where the market increasingly dictates the focus of the Media. According to this reasoning, the roll of the Media for Swedish HSO has changed, where the HSO are more dependent of the Media portrayal.

Wramsten Wilmar, Ahlborg, Jacobsson and Dellve [10] as well as Duckert and Karlsen [11] describe in their studies how managers are affected by being the object of media focus. Most of the managers in these studies describe that they experience difficulties in not letting media stories affect their self-confidence, motivation and decisiveness. Duckert and Karlsen [11] maintain that the perception of an absence of support and strategies

creates strong feelings of helplessness, which in turn eventually leads to feelings of inadequacy. At the same time, the vast majority of managers enter dealings with the Media with the attitude – based on their positions in the organisation – that they should be able to cope with the Media on their own [12]. The reasons behind this attitude can be found both in personality and style of leadership, but also in the management model that the managers' organisations operate under.

New Public Management

One management model that has had a large impact in Swedish HSO is New Public Management (NPM). It is a model that has been developed and implemented incrementally in Swedish Healthcare since the 1980's. The aim of NPM is to emulate private businesses to achieve greater efficiency and create organizations with a more clearly delineated management process [13,14]. NPM describes how an organisation can strengthen the position of users and patients to a higher degree by opening up to competition and increasing transparency [15,13,14]. The NPM model emphasizes responsibility on a personal level and freedom of action among managers, which facilitates individual accountability [1]. In addition, the conditions for leadership involving the political system has been pointed as being substantially different in the public [15,13,14]. An example of these differences is that managers in the public Healthcare sector have multiple managerial levels above them.

Strategies and Support

The studies of Wramsten Wilmar and colleagues [10] and Wramsten Wilmar and colleagues [12] indicate that managers supported by their organizations experience lower levels of uncertainty when meeting the Media than those receiving less support. The research of Choi, Sung and Kim [16] show the extra importance of support from the superior managers as being extra important when meeting greater challenges. One reason for this could be that the sense of internal legitimacy experienced increases with support from superiors, which in turn is associated with resilience [17]. The results of the study of Wramsten Wilmar and colleagues [12] show that the managers would have wished for support and accepted it were it to have been offered as a natural part of an organization-wide strategy. They also describe that having a strategy in place prior to meeting the Media can increase the feeling of being in control when dealing with the Media. Similarly, Folkman and Moskowitz [18] maintain that having clear and well developed organizational strategies improves the possibilities for handling and building resources for future challenges.

Skagert, Dellve, Eklöf, Ljung, Pousette and Ahlborg [19] describe HSO managers experiencing a lack of support and communication with superiors amongst others built on mutual trust in dealing with everyday challenges. The complex and sprawling leadership situation described above, with command and control being exercised both by politicians and upper management is a further complicating factor that, along with a heavy workload can make a managerial position in HSO a highly demanding task [19,20,21]. At the same time, several studies have shown that HSO managers hesitate or even refrain from asking for help and support due to fears of this being detrimental to their career development [12,21]. Managers do not wish to be perceived as weak and incapable. Instead, managers choose to handle the Media themselves, in the belief that it is what is expected [12]. In the opinion of Thylefors [22,23], this can contribute in the long run to managers feeling used to protect the organization's reputation. The level of experienced support co-varies with the level of pressure experienced [24,25]. The higher the level of support, the less insecurity is experienced by the people who received support. Receiving support from colleagues and other supporters influences the perception of being in control of a situation. Less support, according to House [24] leads to situations being perceived as more demanding.

The aim of the present study was to outline the occurrences and frequency of Swedish HSO managers contacts with the Media. How common is it that the HSO managers meet with the Media? In addition, the aim of the study was to map out meetings where the Media were critical.

Research questions: "How often do managers in HSO organizations meet the Media and to what extent do they have a strategy for these encounters? To what extent do the managers experience being offered support in connection to media attention? Did the respondents feel that the picture painted by the Media was correct?"

Methods

Participants and Data Collection

The present study was a census questionnaire where all of Sweden's municipal care HSO managers were invited to participate. In total 268 questionnaires were sent, accompanied by a letter informing prospective participants of the purpose and that the study was being conducted within the framework of a project of managers and the Media. In total, 144 completed questionnaires were returned, which amounts to a response rate of 54%. The respondents had worked in HSOs as a manager for an average of 7.7 years. 65% of the respondents were women.

Out of these 144 respondents, 117 had themselves experienced being spokespersons while their organization was under critical media attention. The questionnaire was designed in such a fashion that the respondents themselves were allowed to judge whether they fulfilled this criteria. The following results are based on the answers from these 117 respondents.

The survey contained questions on the experience of media contacts, strategies and organizational support. The questionnaire was comprised of both open and closed questions.

As there were no validated measures to be found on meeting the Media, the questions in this survey were generated specifically for this study. Examples of questions were; "how often does somebody from the part of your organization for which you are the manager make statements in the Media? How often do you yourself make statements to the Media? The response alternatives were never, sometime per year, several times a year, monthly, several times a month, every week and several times a week. Examples of further questions include; did you receive support from different parties, and in that case from whom, during periods of negative media scrutiny?" With the response format ranging from 1= Yes, to a large extent to 5= not at all. The questions in the questionnaire survey were pilot tested on individuals with similar roles albeit not in HSOs using a think-aloud protocol. These individuals were asked to read the questions and reflect on how they perceived them. Minor adjustments to the questions were made based on their feedback.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics of meetings with the Media, strategies and organizational support are presented. All data was processed using SPSS version 24.

Results

Frequency of media contacts

Media contacts are common among respondents, with a slim majority answering that a representative of the organization speaks to the Media once a month or more. Almost as many respondents, 45%, stated that they speak to the Media themselves on a monthly basis or more often. All respondents stated that they speak to the Media at least once a year.

Perceptions of Media portrayal of the organization

The 117 respondents assessed how accurately and objectively the Media usually are in their portrayal of the organization the respondents work for under critical portrayal. Of the 117 respondents, 32% consider that during times of critical media coverage a correct and objective image of the organization is given more than 80% of the time. Roughly an equally large proportion of respondents found the media portrayal in these circumstances to be objective and accurate only 40% of the time or less.

Respondents were also asked how they feel the Media portrays them in terms of whether the image is positive, neutral or negative. A majority, 54% of the 117 respondents, perceived that their organization was mainly portrayed in a negative light by the press. Around 20% of them however, felt that their organization was usually portrayed in a positive light. The remaining respondents described media coverage as being neutral.

Strategies Dealing with The Media

The respondents replied that it was less common that the organization had some kind of documented strategy when meeting representatives of the Media. Of the 117 respondents, 20% were aware of their organization having a documented strategy. Roughly half of them, 51%, stated that they had their own strategy, but that it was not documented or a common strategy for the entire organization. 23% answered that they had no strategy. Others answered that they did not know if their organization had a strategy.

As to the contents of the strategy, respondents answered that it concerned: who is responsible for media contacts and how both internal and external communication surrounding the meetings is to be handled. A clear majority stated that they in the interaction with the Media were available for questions (93%), tried to have an open approach (91%), looked into the problems within the organization and answered questions (86%), were well prepared (74%) and followed organizational guidelines for communication (71%). Only a very few (1%) stated that they took an evasive approach, trying to avoid interviews.

Support During Meetings With The Media

As Table 1 shows, half of the respondents were supported to a large extent or a fairly large extent by the management team (i.e. the group one was a member of), subordinates and colleagues. 38% of the respondents stated that they were supported by family and friends, while 35% were supported by the communication department and 30% by their manager. Only 13% described being supported by Human Resources department (HR), while 6% noted having been supported by others.

Table 1. Percentage answering to a large extent or a fairly large extent to the item which actors have been supportive when the organization has been under critical media evaluation.

Actors	%
Management team	54
Subordinates	52
Colleagues	51
Family and friends	38
Communication department	35
My manager	30
HR	13
Others	6

Among those who received a lot of support from the management team, the majority were satisfied with how the Media described their organization. Out of the respondents who perceived they received little support a

majority were not satisfied with how the Media portrayed the organization, shown in Table 2. The difference was significant ($\chi^2 (1, N= 108) = 5,14, p < 0,05$).

Table 2. Percentage satisfied with how the Media portrayed the organization and support from management team

Perceived support from management team	A lot of support	Little support
Satisfied with how the Media portrayed the organization	57,8%	42,2%
Not satisfied with how the Media portrayed the organization	32,0%	68,0%

The relationship between a lot of support and little support from the communication department and the satisfaction with the portrayal of the organization is demonstrated in Table 3. A majority of the respondents who perceived they received little support (59,5%) were not as satisfied with how the Media portrayed their organization, comparing to those who got much support. Among the respondents who felt they received a lot of support a majority were satisfied with how the Media portrayed the organization (61,4%). The difference was significant ($\chi^2 (1, N= 99) = 4,25, p < 0,05$).

Table 3. Percentage satisfied with how the Media portrayed the organization and support from communication department

Support from communication department	A lot of support	Little support
Satisfied with how the Media portrayed the organization	61,4%	38,6%
Not satisfied with how the Media portrayed the organization	40,5%	59,5%

Discussion

The overall aim of the present study was to outline the occurrences and frequency of Swedish HSO managers' meetings with the Media. In addition, one part of the purpose of the study was to map out meetings with the Media where the Media was critical. Furthermore, we were interested in how the respondents perceived the Media's portrayal of their organization and the occurrence of strategies and support in the face of critical media evaluation was assessed.

The results showed that the respondents experienced more or less continuous media coverage of the HSOs. A majority had experienced meeting the Media while their organization was the object of negative media scrutiny. These results are in line with the findings of Johansson and colleagues [1], Johansson [26] and Strömbäck [6] that tax-funded HSOs frequently have meetings with the Media.

Since previous studies by Duckert and Karlsen [11] among others, show that the managers acting as spokespersons describe it as a lonely experience, and that support is a factor that curtails the stress reported by respondents, support was a factor that was examined. The question asked was whether they are being offered support, and if so, from where support was forthcoming during critical media evaluation. The results showed that the most common source of support was the management team (of which the respondents were members), subordinates and colleagues.

The respondents were more satisfied with how the Media portrayed their organization when they were supported by their management team or the communications department. Judging from this finding, one can speculate that more respondents might have expressed greater satisfaction with the Media's portrayal of their organization (and perceived it as correct to a greater extent) if they had been better supported by their management team or communications department. This result can be connected to the studies by Wramsten Wilmar and colleagues [12] as well as Duckert and Karlsen [11] based on interviews with managers dealing with the Media while under critical Media scrutiny. Both studies report similar phenomena, with the informants describing that they would have wished for support when being confronted by the Media in these situations.

The questionnaire data used in the present study is based on the respondents' own subjective judgements of events, which must be considered [27,28]. Studies by Wramsten Wilmar and colleagues [12] showed that superior manager and communications departments felt they had given more support than the managers felt they had received. Another question is whether the result was an effect of the respondents' dissatisfaction with how the Media described their organizations, which in turn led to dissatisfaction with the level of support received? The results of this study do not allow for any evaluations of these components or answers to these questions.

This study showed that only 20% of the respondents had any knowledge of whether their organization had a documented organization-wide media strategy. The majority responded that they had their own individual strategy and that they tried to maintain an open attitude in their dealings with the press. A large number of respondents reported that they tried to be well prepared when meeting the Media, which could lead to a greater sense of perceived control and limit stressful experiences. Folkman and Moskowitz [18] showed that organizational strategies that contribute to the employee being clearer about what is expected of him or her can increase their sense of control, which in turn improves their chances of proactively handling and building up resources to meet upcoming challenges.

Not having a common documented policy or strategy for handling the Media in combination with working within the framework of an NPM as an organizational model may further reinforce the image of personal responsibility [13,14]. Wramsten Wilmar and colleagues [12] showed in their study that managers with experience of critical press coverage accept support when it was part of an organization-wide strategy, but found it hard to ask for support if it was not part of a preconceived plan.

Methodological Challenges

A strength of the study is that it is a census survey – i.e. all executive managers within municipal care were sent the questionnaire and were given the opportunity to respond. The response rate can, however, be considered somewhat low, which might mean a risk of non-response bias in the results. The present study was based on self-reports, which can be affected by motivation, impression management and response style [27]. However, Chan [29] maintains there is no alternative superior data collection method for studying peoples' subjective experiences. Others may have judged the situation differently or perhaps not even judged the organization as being the object of negative press evaluation or perceived the individual respondent in question as acting as a spokesperson. Still, for the purposes of this study, it has been of value to capture the respondents' subjective experience.

Practical Implications

An organization-wide strategy would enable increased proactive work in preparation for meetings with the Media. Extrapolating from the results concerning how organizational support influenced perceived the satisfaction with how the Media portrayed the organization, one part of this strategy could be clarifying roles in contacts with the Media. This might create a sense of predictability and security in the spokesperson. Some of the roles that need to be clearly defined are that of the spokesperson's superior manager, management team and that of the communications department.

Conclusions

All respondents in this study dealt with the Media directly at least once a year in their role as executive municipal healthcare managers. A majority had met the Media while their organization was the object of negative media scrutiny. Respondents receiving support from their management team and the communications department were more satisfied with the outcome of press contacts. The majority had no common strategy for the organization when dealing with the press. This could make meeting the Media more uncertain than it needs to be.

Founding Statements

We are grateful for financial support from AFA Insurance (an organization owned by Sweden's labour market parties). We are grateful to the participants for sharing their experiences presented in this study.

Conflicts of Interests

There are no competing interest to declare, either financial or non-financial.

References

1. Johansson, S., Dellgran, P. & Höjer, S. (2015). Människobehandlande organisationer: villkor för ledning, styrning och professionellt välfärdsarbete. [Human Service Organizations: the conditions of control, management, and professional welfare work] Stockholm: Natur och Kultur.
2. Levay, C., & Waks, C. (2006). Strävan efter transparens: granskning, styrning och organisering i sjukvårdens nätverk. [The Aim for Transparency: Assessment, Management and Organization of Healthcare Networks]. Stockholm: SNS Förlag.
3. Klijn, E. H., van Twist, M., van der Steen, M., & Jeffares, S. (2016). Public managers, Media influence, and governance. *Administration and Society*, 48(9): 1036–1058. doi: 10.1177/0095399714527752
4. Power, M., Scheytt, T., Soin, K. & Sahlin, K. (2009). Reputational risk as a logic of organizing in late modernity. *Organization Studies*, 30(2–3): 301–324. doi: 10.1177/0170840608101482
5. Alvesson, M. (2013). *The Triumph Of Emptiness: Consumption, Higher Education, and Work Organization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
6. Strömbäck, J. (2004). *Den Medialiserade Demokratin: Om Journalistikens Ideal, Verklighet och Makt*. [The Medialised Democracy: Ideals of Journalism, Reality and Power]. Stockholm: SNS förlag.
7. Strömbäck, J. (2014). *Makt, Medier och Samhälle*. [Power, the Media and Society]. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
8. Grafström, M., Petrelius Karlberg, P., & Windell, K. (2013). *Föredöme eller fördömd? [Role Model or Damned?]* Stockholm: SNS förlag.
9. Wendt, M. (2012). *Politik som spektakel: Almedalen, mediemakten och den svenska demokratin*. [The spectacle of politics: Almedalen, the power of the Media and the Swedish democracy]. Stockholm: Atlas.

10. Wramsten Wilmar, M., Ahlborg, G., Jacobsson, C. & Dellve, L. (2014). Healthcare managers in negative Media focus: a qualitative study of personification processes and their personal consequences. *BMC Health Services Research*, 14(1): 1–12. doi: 10.1186/1472-6963-14-8
11. Duckert, K., & Karlsen, F. (2017). I medienes søkelys. [In the Media Spotlight]. Oslo: Gyldendal akademisk.
12. Wramsten Wilmar, M., Ahlborg, G jr. Dellve, L, Tidefors, I. & Jacobsson, C. (2017). Swedish Healthcare managers and the Media – A Study of Strategies and Support During Mass Media Attention *Scandinavian Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*. doi: 10.16993/sjwop.18
13. Almqvist, R. (2006). *New Public Management: NPM : om konkurrensutsättning, kontrakt och kontroll*. [New Public Management: NPM: Exposure to Competition, Contracts and Control]. Malmö: Liber.
14. Berlin, J., & Kastberg, G. (2011). *Styrning av hälso- och sjukvård*. [Healthcare Management]. Malmö: Liber.
15. Pollitt, C., & Bouckaert, G. (2004). *Public Management Reform: A Comparative Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
16. Choi, J. N., Sung, S. Y., & Kim, M. U. (2010). How do groups react to unexpected threats? *Crisis Management in Organizational Teams, Social Behaviour and Personality: An International Journal*, 38(6), 805–828. <https://doi.org/10.2224/sbp.2010.38.6.805>
17. Holahan, C. J., & Moos, R. H. (1986). Personality, coping, and family resources in stress resistance: A longitudinal analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51(2), 389–395. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.51.2.389
18. Folkman, S., & Moskowitz, J. T. (2004). Coping: Pitfalls and promise. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 55(1), 745–774. doi: 10.1146/annurev.psych.55.090902.141456
19. Skagert, K., Dellve, L., Eklöf, M., Ljung, T., Pousette, A. & Ahlborg, G. (2008) Leadership and stress in public human service organizations: acting shock absorber and sustaining own integrity. *Applied Ergonomics* 39(6): 803–811. doi: 10.1016/j.apergo.2007.10.006
20. Arman, R., Dellve, L., Wikström, E., & Törnström, L. (2009). What Healthcare managers do: applying Mintzberg's structured observation method. *Journal of Nursing Management*, 17(6), 718–729. doi: 10.1111/j.1365-2834.2009.01016.x
21. Tengelin, E., Kihlman A., Eklöf, M. & Dellve, L. (2011). Chefer i sjukhusmiljö: Avgränsningar och kommunikation av egen stress. [Hospital managers: Delimitations and communicating personal stress]. *Arbete och Hälsa* 45(1): 1–52.
22. Thylefors, I. (1999). *Syndabockar: om mobbning och kränkande särbehandling i arbetslivet*. [Scapegoats: on Bullying and Victimization at Work]. Stockholm: Natur och kultur.
23. Thylefors, I. (2007). *Ledarskap i human service-organisationer*. [Leadership in Human Service Organizations]. Stockholm: Natur och kultur.
24. House, J. S. (1981). *Work Stress and Social Support*. Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley.

25. Lindholm, M. (2006). Working conditions, psychosocial resources and work stress in nurses and physicians in chief managers' positions. *Journal of Nursing Management*, 14(4): 300–309. doi: 10.1111/j.1365-2934.2006.00636.x
26. Johansson, B. (2005). *Medierna, Politiska kriser och sjukvården [The Media, political crises and the Healthcare system. Swedish social organization in a state of change]* (p. Svensk Samhällsorganisation I Förändring, Västsverige Vid Millennieskiftet, 2005).
27. Podsakoff, P., MacKenzie, C., Lee, J-Y., & Podsakoff, N. (2003). Common Method Biases in Behavioral Research: A Critical Review of the Literature and Recommended Remedies. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 88(5): 879–903. doi: 10.1037/0021-9010.88.5.879
28. Spector, P. & Jex, S. (1998). Development off our self-report measures of job stressors and strain: Interpersonal conflict at work scale, organizational constraints scale, quantitative workload inventory, and physical symptoms inventory. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 3(4): 356–367.
29. Chan, D. (1998). Functional relations among constructs in the same content domain at different levels of analysis: A typology of composition models. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 83(2), 234–246. doi: 10.1037/0021-9010.83.2.234