

Keeping the Discussion Among Civil Servants Alive: 'Platform of Values' as an Emerging Genre Within the Public Sector in Sweden

Catharina Nyström Höög and Anders Björkqvall*

Catharina Nyström Höög
Department of
Scandinavian Languages,
Uppsala University
catharina.hoog@
nordiska.uu.se

Anders Björkqvall
School of Humanities,
Education and Social
Sciences, Örebro University
anders.bjorkqvall@oru.se

Abstract

A defining feature of contemporary public authorities in Sweden is the production of texts labelled *platform of values* or *core values*. Previous research points to three main factors contributing to this development: an increased interest in ethics in the public sector, new forms of management and control, and the importance of the external promotion of public authorities. This paper focuses on the perspective of civil servants when addressing the research question: What are the most important functions of 'platform of values' texts? The paper draws on two types of data – a focus group of senior HR officers and a quantitative survey for civil servants. Critical Genre Analysis is presented as a methodological framework for understanding 'value texts' as social actions. The results show that 'platform of values' practices are connected to the creation of the "ethically aware" civil servant; that neither their connection to control over civil servants nor to the external promotion of the authority are directly recognised, whereas their connection to goal achievement is; and that the role of the 'value texts' as such has been somewhat overrated in previous research – it is the dialogue about the values that matters.

Introduction

Significant transformations in the public sector have been discussed extensively in research relating both to New Public Management (NPM) and post-NPM paradigms (Wällstedt & Almqvist, 2015; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011; Karlsson, 2017). One way in which such transformations manifest themselves is in alterations of the text repertoires and writing practices of the public sector: old genres become obsolete and disappear while new genres emerge. This paper takes its starting point in such an emerging genre: the 'platform of values'. The 'platform of values' (henceforth PV) is a type of text that is increasingly well known in Swedish society. Many first-time readers of a PV text may find the text pointless or ridiculous, with its use of stock images and rather stereotypical phrases relating to positive qualities, such as "we are trustworthy" or "we are reliable". In this paper, we aim to make sense of these seemingly pointless texts, using the concept of *genre*, and relating the texts to *social actions*, particularly focusing on how different groups of civil servants in Sweden perceive and use platform of values texts as part of their professional practices.

Previous research offers a range of plausible explanations for the pervasiveness

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* **Catharina Nyström Höög** is professor of Swedish at Dalarna University (Högskolan Dalarna) and associated to Uppsala University, Department of Scandinavian Languages, as a researcher in charge of the project "The archaeology of a new genre. Platform of values texts at public authorities in Sweden", a project founded by The Swedish Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences 2016-2018. Her previous research include projects on the comprehensibility of public sector texts, and studies of genre repertoires in upper secondary school writing.

Anders Björkqvall is Professor of Swedish at the School of Humanities, Education, and Social Sciences (HumES) at Örebro University, Sweden. His research interests range from multimodality, social semiotics, and discourse analysis to the ethnography of artefacts and texts. Anders has also published in the fields of literacy and learning, often with a focus on children's semiotic uses of technology.

of PV practices in today's public administration. For the purpose of this paper, we have divided these explanations into three, partly interrelated, themes: changed patterns in governance and organisation, an increased interest in ethics, and finally, external communication. Pollitt & Bouckaert (2011: 42) point towards regulation of staff behaviour as an important aspect of the changes in governance and organisation referred to as NPM, which corresponds well with the emergence of texts attempting to regulate personal behaviour. A pan-European increased interest in ethics in public administration during the 1990s put ethical issues on the agenda in Sweden. Repeated incidents relating to the trustworthiness of civil servants also seem to maintain the pertinence of the issue of ethics (Maesschalk, 2004: 466). A third factor that has been discussed as promoting policy texts is external communication and competition between authorities (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2013; Wæraas, 2010a). Textual features in PV texts (Björkqvall, 2018) make it plausible that the texts are related to one or all of the above mentioned trends in the public sector. With Critical Genre Analysis (cf. Bhatia, 2017; Björkqvall, 2018) as an overarching framework for analysing texts and practices in the public sector, we aim to contribute to the discussion of 'platform of values' and to present a more precise answer to the question of why PV texts have been produced on such a large scale in Sweden in recent years.

In their comparative study on management reform, Pollitt & Bouckaert (2011) identify salient features of the Swedish adaptation to NPM, such as emphasis on transparency and an orientation towards digital solutions. They also describe Sweden as a country with strong confidence in the state. Wockelberg (2015) contributes to the discussion of NPM in Sweden by claiming that *adaptation* is a typical Swedish feature. The fact that national patterns in international management reforms are identified in previous research makes nation-specific studies, such as the one presented in this paper, relevant. In the case of Sweden, PV texts are striking examples of how the public administration responds to trends, and the rapid development of the genre calls for attention. In 2017, the Swedish Government's Council on Basic Values announced that every public authority in Sweden is obliged to have a 'platform of values' document (*Att säkerställa en god statsförvaltning*, 2017).

This paper is based on data from a major research project: a collection of approximately 230 PV and related texts from 154 different Swedish public authorities (as of late 2016) has been established.¹ The number of texts shows that a majority of public authorities produce these texts, while none was produced prior to 2005. The texts vary in design (an example – designed as a poster – is shown in Figure 1), but they have many features in common, such as the use of photographs or other images. The textual elements are often organised as groups of bullet-point lists and there is a frequent use of positive words (particularly nouns and adjectives) presenting the core values. In the text in Figure 1 that is typical of the genre, these are 'beneficial to society', 'impartiality', 'quality', and 'respect' ("samhällsnytta", "opartiskhet", "kvalitet", and "respekt"), while other frequent core values are 'openness' and 'professionalism' (cf. Lerøy Sataøen, 2014; Nyström Höög, 2016).

Figure 1: Platform of values text of a Swedish authority (published with permission from the Swedish Geotechnical Institute)

SGI Värdegrund för
Statens geotekniska institut

Statens geotekniska institut är en expertmyndighet och arbetar för att byggnader och infrastruktur byggs säkert, effektivt, hållbart, på ren mark och med klimatanpassning i fokus. Vår verksamhet präglas av ett förhållningssätt med en gemensam värdegrund: samhällsnytta, kvalitet, opartiskhet och respekt. Värdegrunden är framtagen av våra medarbetare och genomsyrar vår verksamhet. Vår värdegrund bygger på den gemensamma värdegrunden för all statlig verksamhet: demokrati, legalitet, objektivitet, fri åsiktsbildning, respekt, effektivitet och god service.

SAMHÄLLSNYTTA

- > Vi utgår från samhällets behov.
- > Vi verkar för ett säkert och hållbart samhälle.
- > Vi använder vår kunskap så att den kommer samhället till största nytta.
- > Vår verksamhet präglas av helhetssyn.

Hur försäkras vi oss att det vi gör verkligen är till samhällsnytta?

- > Genom dialog med regeringen, andra myndigheter, länsstyrelser, kommuner, högskolor, universitet och högskolor.
- > Genom en fortlöpande bred omvärldsanalys.
- > Vår forskning och utveckling är inriktad på väsentliga problematik och implementeras tillsammans med användarna.
- > Genom kontinuerlig uppföljning av vår verksamhet, implementering av ny kunskap, i regelbunden uppföljning, genom publicerade artiklar, publikationer och vägledningar, utbildningar från webbplatsen och behandlade remisser.

KVALITET

- > Våra uppdrag genomförs på rätt nivå och med rätt innehåll.
- > Vi har rätt kompetens och god service.
- > Vi är pålitliga, tillgängliga och resultatorienterade.
- > Vi utvärderas löpande utifrån uppdrag och förmedlar kunskap baserat på vetenskapliga grunder.
- > Vår forskning genomförs enligt god vetenskaplig sed och med vetenskapligt verifierade metoder.
- > Våra slutsatser presenteras så att de är lätta att tolka korrekt.

Hur försäkras vi oss om att vår verksamhet präglas av kvalitet?

- > Vi levererar i rätt tid.
- > Vi redovisar pålitlighet och osäkerhet i våra slutsatser och resultat.
- > Vi genomför regelbunden uppföljning av våra uppdrag.
- > Vi har mycket höga krav på kundnöjdhet och prestation.
- > Alla yttranden, rapporter och ärenden utvärderas.
- > Genom att uppdragen utvärderas enligt gällande allmänna bestämmelser för kursutvärdering.
- > Genom att vi följer vårt kvalitetsystem, rapporterar avvikelser, förbättringsförslag och genomför revisioner.
- > Genom ackreditering av våra laboratorier.
- > Genom strategisk kompetensutveckling och kontinuerlig förbättring av verksamheten.
- > Vi säkrar den vetenskapliga kvaliteten genom publicering av vår forskning i internationellt granskrivna vetenskapliga tidskrifter.

OPARTISKHET

- > Verksamheten vilar på vetenskaplig grund och beprövad erfarenhet.
- > Arbetet bedrivs neutralt utan att ge någon ensidig part.
- > Vi är en myndighet i medborgarnas tjänst.

Hur försäkras vi oss att vi agerar opartiskt?

- > Våra slutsatser, vägledningar och rådgivning bygger på kunskap och resultat som baseras på en vetenskaplig grund.
- > Alla yttranden, rapporter och ärenden utvärderas.
- > Vi skapar mötesplatser i syfte att diskutera och ta fram gemensamma underlag, policyer och rekommendationer.
- > Genom kundenkäten.
- > Genom att följa lagar, förordningar och vår instruktion som styr vårt arbete.

RESPEKT

- > På SGI stöjer vi varandra och bemöter vår omgivning med hänsyn.
- > Likvärdighet gäller för alla.
- > Allt arbete är värdigt och värdetullt.
- > Vi tar tillvara varandras talenter och olikheter.
- > Vi ger varandra konstruktiv återkoppling.
- > Vi ger varandra beröm och uppsäntningar.

Hur försäkras vi oss att vår verksamhet präglas av respekt?

- > Vi genomför regelbundet medarbetarundersökningar och följer upp dem.
- > Vi har regelbundna utvecklingssamtal.
- > Vid granskning av varandras arbeten ger vi både positiv och negativ kritik.
- > Genom kundenkäten.

The Common Basic Values for the Public Sector (henceforth The Basic Values), coined at state level by the Swedish government's project on public ethos (*Den gemensamma värdegrunden för de statsanställda – grundläggande rättsliga principer*, 2013) differs in character from the PV texts at public authorities. It includes the following six principles, based on legal foundations: *democracy*;

legality; objectivity; free formation of opinions; respect for equality, freedom and dignity; and efficiency and service. The argument behind The Basic Values is concern for the citizens' trust in the administration, and the effort the government has put into the project emphasises The Basic Values as an important project. What is striking, though, is the difference between The Basic Values and the individual PV texts. This difference tells us that there is another regime in operation within the public sector, one that – judging from the vocabulary of the PV texts – relates more closely to ideal human behaviour than to legal principles. These PV texts, produced locally at individual public authorities, and the rationales behind the production and use of them, are the focus of the present study.

The problem addressed in the paper is the fact that, in previous research, the role of the PV texts as such has not been sufficiently analysed. Several different explanations have been given related to the rapid development of PV practices at public authorities, though it is reasonable to assume that they are not equally significant. This paper approaches this problem by treating the PV texts as related to practices and, importantly, by focusing on the perspectives of the key players in PV practices: the civil servants. Thus, the research question addressed in the paper is the following: Which are the most important functions of PV texts from the perspective of civil servants in Sweden? A key contribution of the paper is that our results indicate that, in previous research, external communication and promotion may have been overrated as an explanation for this particular type of policy text. Further, the genre approach to PV practices introduced in the paper highlights the important function of PV texts to promote internal discussions *about* values among civil servants.

A genre approach to PV texts and practices

The term *genre* is often used in relation to texts as instantiations of textual patterns (Swales, 1990), or in prescriptive discussions on texts in relation to fixed genre norms (for a discussion on genre as concept, see Ledin & Berge, 2001). Our approach to genre is a different one, focusing on function, or – in the words of Miller (1984: 151) – on the “action it [the genre] is used to accomplish”. Our analysis of professional perceptions and understandings of ‘platform of values’ as genre draws on Critical Genre Analysis (CGA, see Björkvall, 2018; Bhatia, 2017), where the focus is on texts as – or as part of – social action. The concept of genre thus bridges the gap between the text and professional practice, focusing on patterns in human activities and placing the analytical focus on the practice. A key term here is *social practice*, drawing attention to practices of values work in the public sector where a particular kind of text, often referred to as ‘platform of values’, is a salient feature. In Critical Genre Analysis, the question is not primarily which *discourses, knowledge, or epistemologies* a specific text draws on, even though such aspects may also be relevant; rather, the fundamental question is always which social action the text is used to accomplish. In this research tradition, “critical” above all refers to an *understanding* of how genres emerge, change, and function in organisations and professional contexts. More

precisely, CGA becomes the lens through which observed changes in the textual repertoire of public authorities can be connected to macro-level descriptions of organisational change such as performance management and the fostering of ethical organisational cultures.

CGA, as it is applied here, is *practice-oriented* in the sense that the critical understanding is based on analysis of the practices, following Miller's insight (1984: 151) that the relationship between the text and potentially different social actions cannot be identified by analysing the text alone. Additional methodological tools are needed, for example ethnographic tools like interviews or focus groups, but also more quantitative surveys and questionnaires. Thus, the main analytical effort is directed towards the persons and groups – for example civil servants – that use and act through the texts in different ways.

Previous research: Factors that promote PV practices

As briefly discussed in the introduction to the paper, previous research of relevance to PV practices can be described as having three main themes. Firstly, research points to the fact that organisational changes have led to a disaggregation of the public sector, and thus to a wider gap between different units, which calls for different technologies for management and control. Secondly, ethical issues are a permanent concern for the public sector, and of vital importance to keep the trust of the citizens, which makes any practice keeping up the ethical awareness of the civil servants of interest. The third theme, a perceived need for external promotion of authorities, can be related to the marketisation aspect of public management reform, and makes beautifully designed texts, publicly exposed on websites, a useful tool. All these themes are discussed in more depth below, before we turn to research design.

Management reform and new forms of governance

New Public Management is a highly contested concept (e.g. Maesschalk, 2004: 465). Pollitt & Bouckaert (2011: 12) describe the fact that so many management reforms are attributed to NPM as partly related to a language bias: people in the media and researchers of management reform are predominantly readers of English and tend to attach the label NPM (Hood, 1991) to a variety different reforms popular in OECD countries during the 1980s and 1990s. In a study of NPM in the Swedish setting, Karlsson (2017: 42–43) discusses a division between management-based and market-based reforms to create an overview. In focus here are the management-based reforms leading up to new forms of organisation, including a more disaggregated public sector (Hood, 1991; Karlsson, 2017), creating a need for new forms of governance.

One aspect of management reform is the transformation from rule-based bureaucratic organisations (RBOs) to post-bureaucratic (PBOs) or neo-bureaucratic organisational forms (NBOs) (cf. Farrell & Morris, 2013; Clegg, 2011; Reed, 2011). Even though there is always a risk of underestimating complexity when working with ideal-type-based theorising of organisational change, Reed (2011)

presents an overview of key characteristics of PBOs, such as individualisation and flexibility. However, several researchers seem to agree that today's organisational life has not taken the full step into PBO (cf. Maesschalk, 2011 on overlapping interaction patterns). In many organisations, a meso-level stratum of managers and control mechanisms has been removed, resulting in a gap between the top management stratum of organisations and the front-line workers, who in many cases are highly educated and professionally independent (Reed, 2011: 242–243). In this type of situation, Reed argues, the subtler and more recently developed control mechanisms of PBOs lack the “ideological, discursive and emotional power” (2011: 245) to fill such gaps. Thus, features of RBOs tend to remain important, and the hybrid types of organisational control that arise are better described as NBOs. Based on insights from previous research (e.g., Farrell & Morris, 2003; Miller, 2005; Newman, 2005), Reed (2011: 243) claims that “neo-bureaucratic control regimes work through a deft combination of remote strategic leadership and detailed operational management” in a situation of increasing instability, complexity, and diversity.

Typical features of NBO control regimes (Reed 2011: 243–244) are demonstrated participation and discursive identity (cf. *identity regulation*, Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Demonstrated participation has to do with how employees publicly expose their involvement in the routines and modes of operation that are required for membership in an organisation. It requires self-surveillance, which, in turn, needs the “material and ideational technologies through which it is realized” (Reed, 2011: 244). This is connected to discursive identities: “cultural frameworks developed through the enactment and inculcation of shared symbolic values and linguistic understandings communicated through key textual materials and forms” (Reed, 2011: 244). The focus on discursive identities requires committed subjects among the employees, which points to a need for peer group regulation practices (Reed, 2011: 245; cf. Sewell, 1998; Clegg, 2011; Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Barker, 1999).

It has been argued that changing management practices in the public sector are connected to a type of discursive turn (Karlsson, 2017) through which new texts emerge. Texts as concrete tools for governance has been studied by Mulderrig (2011), who argues that policy discourse is “intrinsically hortatory” (2011: 53) and designed to direct specific actions or behaviour. Further, she argues that the soft power of policy texts operates through “attraction and persuasion” (2011: 52). In a similar vein, Rehnberg (2014), who has studied *storytelling* in Swedish public administration and in the private sector, to some extent relates this practice to governance and to a new role for managers, where influencing attitudes is more important than direct orders. In Danish public administration, Åkerström Andersen & Born (2012) identify a shift of focus in civil servant identity, from a professional role to more of a personal identity, in a move towards Human Resource Management (HRM). Today, NPM is moving into a new phase, and researchers talk about post-NPM or a “phase of paradox” (Wällstedt & Almqvist, 2015) where dealing with contradictions is a central task

for managers. Such contradictions call for flexible solutions, where policy texts or other discursive solutions might be useful tools.

An ethical bureaucracy

The integrity of the civil servant is one of the backbones of Weberian bureaucracy and a public service ethos can be seen as one of the key distinctions between the public and private sectors (Lawton & Doig, 2006: 13; Salminen & Mäntysalo, 2013: 168). However, there has been a significant shift in public service ethical standards and behaviour in our time (cf. Maesschalk, 2004: 465; Salminen & Vantysalo, 2013: 170; Brereton & Temple, 1999). Du Gay (2011), for example, notes that the past decades' change in public ethos is blurring the borders between person and office and promoting enthusiasm over discipline and self-denial.

Salminen & Mäntysalo (2013: 175) discuss the changes of public sector values in terms of *additions*, rather than *substitutions*. New ideals are added while traditional regime values prevail. Salminen & Mäntysalo (2013) find weak empirical support for entrepreneurial ethos and market orientation in the investigated part of the Finnish public administration. Similarly, Llewellyn et al. (2007) find an uneven expansion of an entrepreneurial ethos, and a lot of variation in attitudes among public staff in the UK. Van der Wal et al. (2008), in an empirical study from the Netherlands, distinguish between two sets of values connected to government and business, respectively, but also identify a common core of values for both cultures, which include *accountability*, *reliability* and *efficiency*. From an American viewpoint, deLeon & deLeon (2002: 240-241) point out that managerial control is still pervasive, despite rhetorical enthusiasm over entrepreneurship and the creativity of employees. Brereton & Temple's (1999) reflection that private and public sector values affect *each other* seems to be a relevant conclusion of public sector ethos in times of change: it is not a one-sided impact.

In their review of research on public sector ethics and corruption, Lawton & Doig ask for more comparative research, and call for a focus shift, in order to "escape the straitjacket of responding to developments in the values and techniques of public service delivery characterized as New Public Management" (2006: 29). Several researchers do seem to attribute ongoing changes in public service ethos to NPM. Carr (1999) sees features of managerial reforms, particularly risk-taking, short-term profits and efficiency gains, as threats to the public service ethos. He points to disaggregation, understood as the "de-coupling of policy and executive/delivery functions" (1999: 8) as a consequence of NPM and as one of the key factors that change the conditions for public servants. In a disaggregated public sector, shared values are not easily acquired by socialisation, which leads to a demand for different kinds of monitoring behaviour. Maesschalk (2004) analyses NPM as a process of several steps, and describes the "second wave" of NPM as "the coming of quality" with an emphasis on quality and customer service orientation (2004: 477). Rhetorically, this second phase of NPM often refers to citizen involvement or egalitarianism, and the relation be-

tween citizen and public sector moves into focus. Brereton & Temple (1999) also point to the increased importance of service, and claim that a *public sector ethos* is gradually being replaced with an emerging *ethos of public service*, more in line with the organisational structure of different public service actors.

PV practices and texts in Sweden have not been thoroughly researched, one exception being Philipson (2011). He discusses the phenomenon of platform of values in relation to corporate culture, and points to the importance of consonance between corporate values and PV texts and practices in order to build a strong corporate culture. In relation to the Swedish public sector, ethics have mostly been discussed in terms of increasing heterogeneity of public staff and in terms of NPM reforms, leading to increased responsibility for individual case handlers (Svensson, 2013). The need for a special set of rules or guidelines for civil servants in the Swedish administration, to distinguish them from other value systems, was identified by Lundquist (1997). As already mentioned, The Common Basic Values for the Public Sector was codified in order to strengthen citizens' trust in public administration and to increase its efficiency. This project has been described both as a result of national administrative and bureaucratic changes and as an attempt to join an international movement toward the formulation of a public ethos (Svensson, 2013).

External communication and (self) promotion

The shift to greater competition is mentioned as one of the doctrinal components of NPM (Hood, 1991), which could lead to external PR work promoting the image of authorities to the public, other public authorities, and political stakeholders. This need for public authorities to present themselves positively has been highlighted in previous research in Sweden. Fredriksson & Pallas (2013), for instance, have studied communication policies from different public authorities and conclude that such documents are characterised by one or more of four different principles. Dominating in today's public sector is the principle of *eminence* (Swedish "ryktbarhet"). Fredriksson & Pallas's study shows that it is important for a public authority to be seen and acknowledged in the public eye. Similarly, Waaranperä (2013) shows that public authorities tend to publish their vision texts on the external website, in order to make them accessible to the citizens. Fredriksson & Pallas (2014), in a later study of the public sector and its external communication, map the media work of the public authorities and conclude that a majority of Swedish public authorities adapt their work to dominant media logics in society at large. However, there are considerable differences both between different authorities and within individual authorities as to how this adaptation is performed.

The distinction between private and professional, not least when it comes to issues of identity, is diminishing (Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996) and public organisations appropriate new practices, like storytelling, for image-building, or branding (Rehnberg, 2014: 16). At least one of the four organisations in Rehnberg's study clearly frames its storytelling as a marketisation practice

(2014: 247). This organisation uses stories to create a background, or a heritage, and in that process creates connotations to desired values, such as trustworthiness or modernity. The study shows that storytelling helps to promote the organisation externally, partially through its values. External promotion, or reputation, has also been linked to crisis communication, and Frandsen et al. (2016), in an article on reputation management within the public sector in Scandinavia, show that strategic work on reputation in Danish municipalities coincides in time with the emergence of PV texts in the Swedish public sector: the early 2000s.

The external promotion of public universities has been studied extensively. In Scandinavia, a number of studies have focused on how universities increasingly use vision and values texts to present a certain image of themselves in order to be competitive on the market for students and top-rated researchers (Lerøy Sataøen, 2014, 2015, cf. Ledin & Machin, 2016). Wæraas (2010a, 2010b) analysed core value statements of 25 public authorities in 11 OECD countries. All of them were published online by the authorities, and Wæraas concluded that “public organisations must demonstrate that they have an identity, delimited from other organisations, and that they stand for some abstract values and characteristics that are deemed appropriate by relevant audiences” (2010a: 528).

Research design and data

This paper is based on two different data sources – a qualitative focus group discussion and a quantitative questionnaire study. The two data sets represent different aspects of the social practice – initiating and producing PV texts on the one hand and receiving and reacting to such texts on the other. Critical Genre Analysis puts emphasis on what texts *achieve*, which makes it necessary to support the text analysis with data unveiling other aspects of the social practice. In this case, through the focus group and the questionnaire, civil servants partaking in the actions lead us to the core of the research question: what is the most important perceived function(s) of the PV texts?

During the collection of PV texts from Swedish public authorities, we had recurrent discussions with representatives from the authorities as regards the production of PV texts, and a vast majority of authorities referred the matter to the HR department. The websites of the public authorities also connect PV texts, and the process of identifying the need for them, with the HR department. Consequently, we invited senior HR officers to the focus group discussion, which took place in March of 2016. The choice of focus group discussion as a method for data collection (Fern 2001; Morgan & Krueger, 1993; Litosseliti, 2003) was based on our interest in PV as a genre as opposed to individual PV texts. Our intention was to get a broader understanding of the role of the genre and its implications for the civil servants, an intention better served by a discussion where several voices could come into play than by individual interviews. Following Litosseliti (2003: 32–40), who states that 6–8 participants is an ideal number of focus group participants, the focus group consisted of 7 participants, representing as many different authorities.

Morgan and Krueger (1993: 18) refer to the “friendliness” of focus groups as an important quality because equal interactions between participants are necessary for successful focus group discussions (cf. Fern, 2001: 157–158). Our aim with the focus group was to provide a relaxed atmosphere in order to gain access to the attitudes and “complex behaviour and motivations” (Morgan & Krueger, 1993: 16) of the professionals responsible for developing and implementing PV practices. As researchers, we participated in the discussion, taking the role of facilitators. Three different PV texts were used as prompts, but the continuous development of discussion was fuelled by the active contributions of the participants.

The focus group discussion was held in Swedish, as all participants were native speakers. The entire two-hour long discussion was video-recorded and also audio-recorded as a precautionary measure. In our analysis of the data, we moved through the following steps: 1) Repeated watching of the video (or listening to the tape) in order to establish sequences of the discussion and noting times for different sequences, thus facilitating further work with the data; 2) identifying recurring topics in the discussion, initiated by more than one participant on more than one occasion; 3) transcribing selected topics of interest for the participants and of relevance to the main focus of PV practices; and 4) organising the transcribed sequences into themes. Since we sought to perform content analysis of the data, we followed a simplified manner of transcription where the transcripts are written verbatim and without punctuation marks, following the nature of speech, but spelling is adjusted to written standard and pauses are not timed, only noted. In the presentation of the results in this paper, we use a thematic organisation, building on both the focus group discussion and the questionnaire study. Inserted quotations from the focus group discussion have been translated into English by the authors of this paper.

The questionnaire survey aimed at gaining an understanding of the extent to which PV practices and texts and their functions are recognised, accepted, encouraged, or criticised by Swedish civil servants. The survey was conducted during February and March 2017 and was distributed via email to all employees – including the top-level management – at three different public authorities. The rationale for a questionnaire survey was to reach larger groups of employees in the public sector regardless of their involvement in the process of creating PV texts. As with the focus group, the aim was to reach an understanding of PV as practice, genre, and text *in general*, not of specific PV texts of the participating authorities. However, a prerequisite for participation was that each authority had a PV text in use, thus ensuring that respondents were able to relate to the concept.

The questionnaire was distributed with a covering letter ensuring anonymity and stating that the questionnaire concerned PV practices. The overall response rate was 58% (N = 492), which is to be considered fairly successful in this context (Keenoy & Seijo [2009] for example, had a 45% response rate). A majority of the respondents had more than two years of working experience at their present appointment (84%). The most well-represented occupation (62%) was case

handler. In other words, the majority of the respondents belonged to the group of front-line workers discussed by Reed (2011: 242-243) as the public face of the authority.

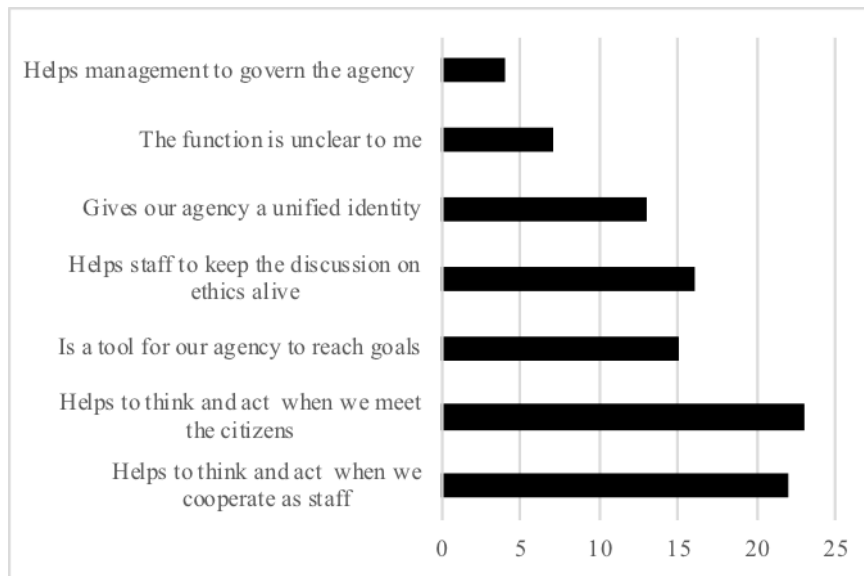
The 10 multiple choice questions in the questionnaire took approximately 5–10 minutes for a respondent to fill in. All of the questions were multiple-choice questions, but six of them allowed for further comments. The questionnaire was designed in such a way that it allowed for different opinions regarding PV practices. We did not explicitly invite critical comments; instead, we included response options such as “the function is unclear to me” as well as space for comments in the respondents’ own words to make sure that there was a possibility for criticism or praise of the practice.

The civil servants’ perceptions of the main functions of platform of values

The platform of values is a way of creating a holistic view within the organisation (Focus group, 10 March 2016)

One of the questions in the questionnaire concerned the perceived functions of PV texts. In this case, the respondents could choose two alternatives, and most of them did so (for a total of 860 responses from 492 respondents). Figure 2 shows an overview of the responses. Answers such as “helps to think and act when we cooperate as employees” and “helps to think and act when we meet the citizens” dominate, along with how PV texts help the organisation to reach its goals and to keep the discussion of ethics alive. With regard to the most frequent response alternative – that the PV text “helps to think and act when we meet the citizens” – it is noteworthy that the undercurrent of concern for the public administration and its addressing of citizens, which is emphasised by the Swedish government’s council on basic values, is also given high priority among civil servants. On this issue, the government and civil servants seem to see eye to eye.

Figure 2: The most important functions of a platform of values (as a % of 860 responses)



In combination with the low frequency of responses stating “the function is unclear to me” (only 7%), the answers presented in Figure 2 indicate that PV is a well-known phenomenon and that the civil servants have a general idea of what its functions might be. At the same time, the results presented in Figure 2 support the idea that PV texts are multi-functional, and fuelling the discussion on ethical issues seems to be somewhat more important than promoting a unified identity for an authority.

The most complex results connect to the function of governing the authority. Only one response alternative was less frequent than the “unclear function” option – the perception that the PV text is a tool for the management to govern the public authority. Interestingly, this result does not mix well with the strong emphasis on PV issues as a management task voiced in the final report of the Swedish government’s council on basic values, or with the potential gap between management and front-line workers discussed above. However, both goal fulfilment and staff cooperation are rated quite high in Figure 2, and it could be argued that these two functions are closely related to management. The issue of PV practices in relation to governing the authority calls for further investigation and discussion.

Civil servants in a continuous value-based dialogue

What does this mean for us, what is the discussion in daily routines, and that is, I think, that is the important thing, that you have a unity around what we stand for. Then if that is represented by this word or that, that is really, that is not so important. (Focus group, 10 March 2016)

It becomes clear in the focus group discussion that one of the main social actions of PV texts, from the perspective of the HR officers, is to promote and generate continuous discussions among employees “at the coffee machine” (Björkvall, 2018: 64). One focus group participant summarised this as “if there is a conversation about [the PV] words all the time, about what they stand for, then it works, rather well maybe”. The questionnaire study confirms that this social action is indeed achieved, and a clear majority (79%) of the respondents state that they have discussed the PV text with colleagues or superiors during the last six months. More often than not, the context for that discussion has been an informal conversation as opposed to a planned discussion of the PV text. The (successful) objective to have employees talking about the PV in highly informal settings is an ambitious one; no one talks about issues or texts that are unimportant to them. In other words, even if the discussions were to be highly critical (which the questionnaire does not indicate), it seems that PVs have entered the realm of the coffee break of civil servants in Sweden.

An interesting aspect of the importance of informal discussions on PV texts emerged during the focus group conversation, which is reflected in the quotation above in which the social action of promoting discussions seems to be just as important as the content of the PV texts. In other words, just as much as PV texts are supposed to offer ethical and identity-related words and phrases to civil servants, the texts function as prompts for further discussions in the broader practices of PV implementation. In fact, some of the focus group participants actually suggested that, in practice, PV texts should remain unchanged over time. It does not matter whether they become aged or inaccurate as long as they continue to be fuel for discussions and debate.

To some extent, this result of the focus group is reflected in the answers to the questionnaire. Four response alternatives in Figure 3 relate more directly to the *content*, *wording*, or *design* of the PV text as a theme for PV discussions, but these responses end up at the lower end of the spectrum of topics for discussion. Thus, the results of the questionnaire seem to support the claim that the *existence* and *functions* of the document are more important than its content or design.

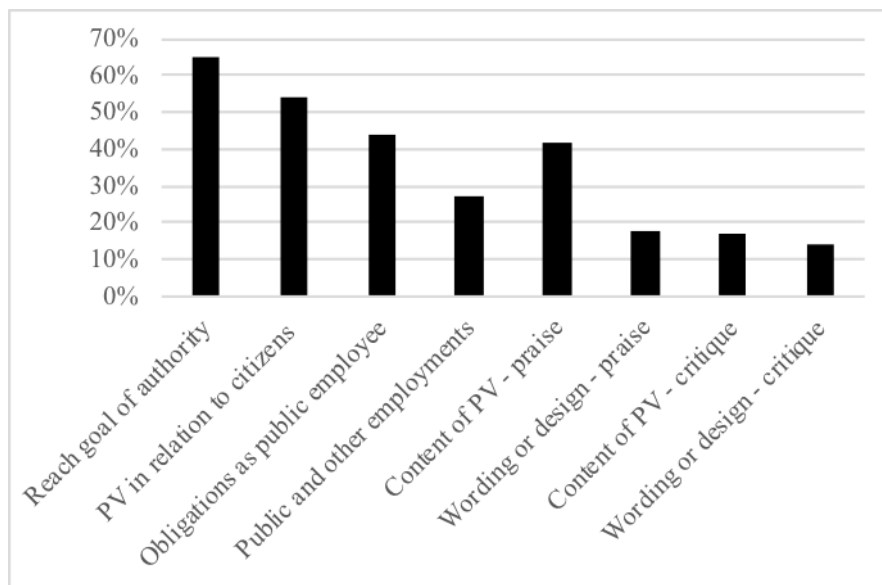
Platform of values and control through facilitating goal achievement

As stated above, only 4% of the responding civil servants say that the PV text is a tool for governing public authorities. In the focus group, the function of PV

texts in relation to management strategies is present as a topic on and off in the conversation. Nobody articulates clearly that the PV texts are tools for organisational control, but there are definitely indications that PV practices are beginning to have an instrumental role in shaping workplace ideology. This is especially clear when one participant states, “We have included the platform of values in our staff policy and in the employee interviews, there are certain conditions that need to be fulfilled [...] as a foundation for the salary negotiations as well, it is important to know that this is the way we work”.²

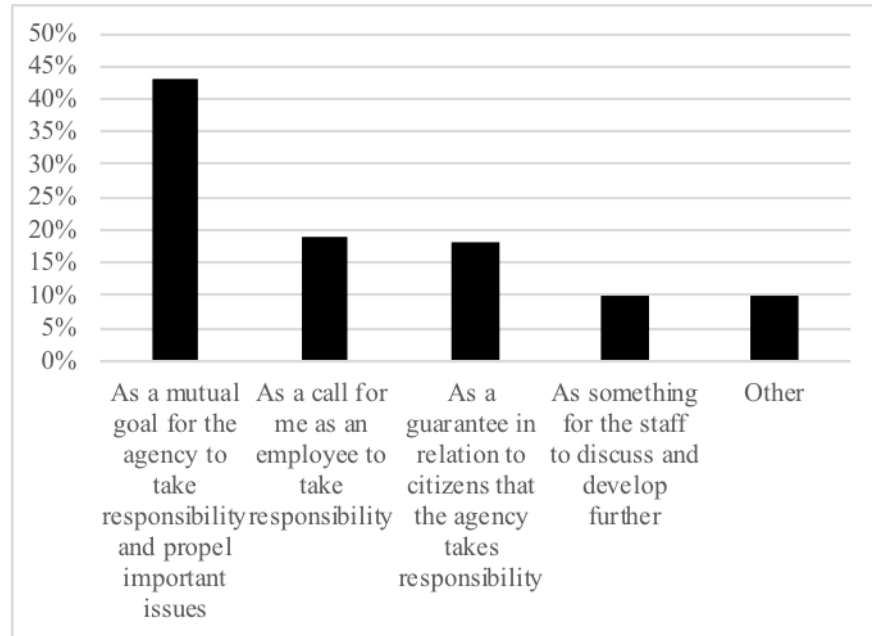
Whereas the data presented in Figure 2 indicate that the PV text is not perceived as a means of control, the connection between PV practices and goal achievement is obvious judging from both the questionnaire (see both Figure 2 and Figure 3) and the focus group. One question in the questionnaire concerned what aspect of the PV texts the respondents had talked about if they had engaged in conversation about it during the last six months, which 79% had. Out of these, 65% of the respondents indicate that they have discussed *how to reach the goal of the authority* in relation to the PV (Figure 3). This is the most frequent response (again, it was possible to choose more than one response alternative). It is clear, then, that PV texts do function as prompts for discussions in the workplace and that the goal fulfilment of the agency is the topic most widely discussed. Importantly, many of the civil servants do not see discussions about goal fulfilment as an obvious aspect of control and governance of their authority (cf. Figure 2).

Figure 3: What staff talk about when discussing the PV (as a % of 362 respondents)



A closer analysis of civil servants’ interpretations of some typical formulations in PV texts further supports this result. One of the questions in the questionnaire quoted a genre-typical phrase from a PV text: “We take responsibility and propel important issues”. The phrase is in fact part of a specific PV text in our corpus. The answers to the question are found in Figure 4.

Figure 4: How do you interpret a given phrase in a PV context (as a % of 493 responses)



As Figure 4 shows, the most frequent interpretation of the phrase is that the agency has a collective responsibility for fulfilling the promise of the phrase. However, from the perspective of grammar, constructs like “we take responsibility and propel important issues” are often interpreted as *metaphors of mood* (Halliday and Mathiessen, 2014: 698–707; Nyström Höög, 2017; Björkvall, 2018) in texts that are considered guidelines or instructions. If PV texts were interpreted as instructions, the majority of the respondents would, arguably, have answered “as an imperative for me to take responsibility”, which would also have been in line with the findings of Vaara et al. (2010). However, our results point in a different direction.

Further, it is rather striking that the question regarding the phrase “we take responsibility [...]” is the one that provoked the most critical answers of all the questions in the survey (Figure 4). The negative attitudes are not present in the choice between given alternatives, but in the comments to the question. Re-

spondents were by no means obliged to comment, but 23 (5% out of all respondents to the questionnaire) did so. Out of the comments, 19 can be boiled down to the proposition that “this is complete ‘mumbo jumbo’”. For instance, the comments include “words without any real meaning”, “nonsense”, “like a buzzword without any meaning”, and even “brain dead. Reasonably, a Swedish authority must engage in important issues, otherwise it should not exist”.

Conclusion and discussion

Returning to the research question, both the questionnaire and the focus group point to the action of promoting goal fulfilment as an important function of the PV texts, possibly *the* most important. Further, “softer” functions such as promoting cooperation and keeping the ethics discussion alive are explicitly recognised from the perspective of both the HR management and the employees. Functions not perceived as important, judging by the data sets, are governing and external communication, even though they could have been expected to be pivotal, based on the textual design of the PV texts and previous research.

In our data sets, both groups of informants bring forth collective aspects of PV practices such as informal discussions, cooperation, and collective responsibilities for goal-achievement – and ethical awareness appears to be the essence of these activities. The results show that Swedish civil servants with various professional roles agree on the fact that important functions of PV texts are to support ethical awareness and to promote ethical behaviour among public authority employees. However, the question of what exactly this ethical behaviour is and how it is represented in the PV texts of Swedish authorities must be further investigated, which will be the next step of the larger project that this study is part of. Connected to this is a need for further analysis of the values that this ethical behaviour is supposed to be based on: more precisely, which values are presented in Swedish PV texts, and are they different from the type of values that, for instance, Kernaghan (2003) found in his analysis of core values statements from four Westminster-style governments?

A clear majority of the respondents to the questionnaire had discussed the PV text during the past six months, something that corresponds to the focus group’s view that PV texts ought to prompt discussion. Apparently, the PV manages to centre everyone at the authority, regardless of position, on issues of policy, ethics, and identity. Relating the successful ambition to make people talk about PV texts to the linguistic design, it is striking that a grammatical construction, which in other settings would be interpreted as a demand, is seen in the questionnaire as a mutual goal description for the authority. This interpretation attests to the strong connection between PV texts and collective practices.

None of the focus group participants and very few of the respondents to the questionnaire explicitly describe ‘platform of values’ as a social action of governing or controlling the authorities and the civil servants. Instead, both groups of informants chose to relate their experience of PV practices to goal achievement, an aspect that perhaps aligns more naturally with the collective responsi-

bility activated by PV practices. The connection to higher-level social actions of NBO management through control of discursive identities and self-surveillance is not explicitly made. From a CGA perspective, it seems that PV practices and texts at Swedish public authorities have reached a type of hegemonic status through which they can operate as a means of control without being recognised as such. These developments and results point to a rapid change in the public sector in Sweden through which management and control come in the shape of something else, something “softer” and oriented toward ethics, everyday dialogues, and, as becomes very obvious in our data, goal achievement. Texts and practices that have reached this status within organisations might be difficult to criticise.

Previous research on management reform and public sector ethos points to a contemporary hybridity within the public sector. Management reform has not (yet) fully transformed the public sector into PBO, but features from RBO prevail, and create a different, disaggregated NBO. In a similar way, core values from the private sector add on to traditional public sector values, shaping a changed – but not entirely different – public sector ethos. When both organisational features and core values are in motion, it creates a space for practices uniting staff members otherwise ideologically or geographically distant from one another, and for discussions on what core values are the most important in the new, or semi-new, organisation. According to our focus group and questionnaire, PV practices seem to provide exactly these resources – ongoing and unifying discussions on core values. Herein lies the rationale for spending time and money on producing and receiving PV texts. The fact that governing is not acknowledged as a function of PV texts and practices according to respondents to the questionnaire is in line with research on public sector ethos. This research points to what could be described as a gap between rhetoric and reality. For instance, deLeon & deLeon (2002) point to the possibility of encouraging creativity and entrepreneurship of employees while at the same time maintaining managerial control. PV practices possibly maintain managerial control, while directing the attention of the civil servants towards mutual responsibility for goal achievement.

The social action of promoting the authority externally is not recognised by Swedish civil servants to the extent that we had expected (cf. Lerøy Sataøen, 2014, 2015; Wæraas, 2010a, 2010b). Instead, a large part of the focus group discussion was concerned with *internal* functions and PV as a *method* or *tool* for *goal achievement*. The HR officers mentioned external communication only once, when one participant downplayed the use of the PV text for external communication. This indicates that the importance of promoting an authority externally may have been overrated in some previous research on PV texts. One explanation to that misconception could be that the texts as such invite to a type of text-oriented analysis that, quite correctly, points to the potential of these texts to appeal to external audiences (Nyström Höög, 2017). The study presented in this paper, however, clearly points to the fact that this genre above all connects to authority-internal social actions. However, the question of why public authorities

tend to publish their PV texts on their websites, even though the majority of the civil servants perceive them as internal documents, remains unanswered.

Critical Genre Analysis puts the focus on texts as social actions, or as parts of social actions, which helps us to bring to the fore the hybrid and multi-layered functions of PV texts for civil servants: that the creation of “ethical” awareness among civil servants through dialogue is a social action connected to PV, and how control functions of PV practices are downplayed but to some extent formulated as “goal achievement”. The CGA perspective also enables a new understanding of what is potentially problematic with the PV texts. To formulate a critique of PV texts based on, for instance, vague use of stock images, fluffy and abstract value words, or as being managerial “mumbo jumbo” – the same features that are being criticised in the open answers in the questionnaire – might miss the target since “it is not the document that is important, it is our platform of values that is important”, as a participant in the focus group puts it. Instead, PV texts are *supposed* to be over-simplified, vague, and open for continuous re-interpretations. Herein lies part of the explanation to why these texts have spread so rapidly in recent years, and also their potential to avoid the type of specific critique that actually could be formulated toward more explicit bureaucratic rules and regulations of traditional RBOs.

A few concluding methodological comments are necessary. Through the application of CGA, this paper brings texts and social actions to the fore and relates to research on public policy texts (e.g. Hodge & Coronado, 2006; Vaara et al., 2010; Cornut et al., 2012; Talib & Fitzgerald, 2016). However, an analysis that does not take textual features like grammatical metaphors, the use of photographs, or the semiotic potential of bullet-point lists into account and only focuses on what, in this case, civil servants say about the texts and practices, might miss out on other aspects of the genre. For instance, semantic ambiguity, as with grammatical metaphors of mood and the use of positively connoted nouns, are not recurrently present in PV texts by chance. Text-oriented and compositional analysis of texts can thus play an important role in “demystifying” them (Bhatia, 2017).

CGA brings critical attention to the ongoing, fundamental changes in the role that texts play in the public sector. One conclusion is that PV texts are artefacts with a potential that can only be realised when there are specifically designed social practices in effect in the public authority. More precisely, the hegemonic impact of these social practices, which include meetings on PV texts, informal discussions, individual interpretations of key words, and so on, is a precondition for the meaningfulness of PV texts in organisations. This paper has pointed to a situation where ethical aspects are very important, both in the HR departments where policy texts are initiated and produced and in the broader groups of civil servants. To be a civil servant in Sweden today is to be loyal to the goals of the authority and to regard PV discussions as an integrated and vital part of the process of reaching those goals.

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Notes

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² The employee interview is a yearly conversation between an employee and the closest manager. It is not a legal requirement to have employee interviews, but it is a well-established practice among Swedish authorities.