

Hilde Bjørnå
The University of Tromsø,
Department of Sociology,
Political Science and
Community Planning
hilde.bjorna@uit.no

Heidi Houlberg Salomonsen
Aalborg University, Depart-
ment of Political Science,
Heidi@dps.aau.dk

¹Interest in the concept of reputation has increased dramatically in both the academic literature and the media in recent years (Barnett and Pollock, 2012). It has been argued that reputational concerns are the most important motivator for the behaviour of public organisations (Carpenter, 2004: 54), and reputational concerns and, subsequently, reputation and brand management have undoubtedly become a central element in contemporary public organisations over the last decade or so, as they and their political leaders find themselves in highly mediated environments. The reasons for engaging in and responding strategically to reputational concerns are multiple (e.g. survival, competition for residents or tourists, ensuring autonomy, attracting employees, political competition), however, they differ, not only across sectors and hierarchical levels of the public sector but also within the same type of organisation. Although an understudied topic, reputation and branding strategies have been included in the strategies used to influence the public perception of places, organisations, policies and politicians (Bennett and Savani, 2003; Klijn, Eshuis and Braun, 2012; Needham, 2006). This is also the case in the Nordic context, where most municipalities have become the arena for activities involving the definition and implementation of a coherent brand identity and/or reputation platform, although for different reasons and multiple purposes.

The variety of reasons for and ways of engaging in and performing brand and reputation management is also reflected in the variety of theoretical perspectives informing the increasing academic interest in reputational issues within the public sector. The suggestion has been made that this somewhat fragmented landscape of theoretical approaches to reputation management should be divided between political science and organisational approaches (Wæraas and Maor, 2015). Based on the assumption that organisations are rational actors, political science research typically investigates how organisations (rationally) perform selective responses to threats to their reputation in their environment to protect their reputation as an asset that can be used to ensure autonomy (e.g. Gilad, Maor and Bloom 2015; Maor, Gilad and Bloom 2013; see also Carpenter and Krause, 2012). The organisational approach takes a rather different point of departure in viewing organisations as institutionalised entities embedded in institutional environments capable of influencing and framing the managerial

* **Hilde Bjørnå**, Dr. polit. Professor, the Department of Sociology, Political Science and Community Planning, Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, University of Tromsø – The Arctic University of Norway. Research interests include local leadership in a comparative perspective, reputation management in the public sector, rural development and public management.

Heidi Houlberg Salomonsen is an associate professor of public organization and administration in the Department of Political Science at Aalborg University, Denmark. Her primary research interests are comparative research on the relationship between ministers, top civil servants and political advisers as well as strategic communication in the public sector, including reputation management, political communication etc., as well as case study methodology. Her research has appeared in international journals and books, such as *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, *International Journal of Public Administration*, *Scandinavian Journal of Public Administration*, *Journal of European Public Policy* and *Public Administration*.

choices and challenges facing public managers (e.g. Blomgren, Hedmo and Waks, 2015; Byrkjeflot and Angell, 2008; Luoma-aho, 2007; Moldenæs, 2011; Sataøen, 2011; Solbakk, 2011; Wæraas, 2013; Wæraas and Bjørnå, 2011; Wæraas, Bjørnå and Moldenæs, 2014; Wæraas and Sataøen, 2013). In this strand of literature, brand and reputation management is an institutional idea promoted as generic, globally relevant and hence objectified to enable travel across time and space. Brand and reputation management then become understood less as a strategic response to protecting reputation as an asset and more as a response to institutional pressures (either normative or mimetic). Furthermore, within the organisational perspective, we find contributions, albeit often emphasising the symbolic aspects of reputation management, addressing more normative aspects of democracy, transparency, openness and the other core values of public organisations contextualised within Western democracies (e.g. Byrkjeflot, 2010; Wæraas and Byrkjeflot, 2012; Wæraas, Byrkjeflot and Angell, 2011).

A challenge for both perspectives is the need to move beyond investigating communication responses (the political perspective) and symbolic management activities (the organisational perspective) towards opening ‘the organisational black box’ in order to identify how brand and reputation management responses are ‘endogenously constructed’, as argued by Maor (2015). It is important to identify how endogenic factors affect and are affected by reputation and brand management, as in how or even whether reputation management is strategically linked to other aspects of the organisations (Frandsen, Johansen and Salomonsen, this volume). It is important to identify how, within the same organisational context, the positions and motivations of different agents matter for the choice and performance of reputational strategies (Bjørnå, this volume), as well as how reputation management is performed by actors within and outside the organisational boundaries, such as how the organisation co-creates reputational values with important stakeholders (Kallstrom, this volume). However, paying attention to the endogenic aspects of brand and reputation management efforts is not to claim that such efforts result in unique brands and reputations. On the contrary, reputational efforts sometimes bear strong similarities across the field of similar organisations (Moldenæs, this volume) and can be seen as aggregate images that are constructed by a range of actors (Anttiroiko, this volume).

The empirical and theoretical diversity in public sector reputation and brand management also becomes evident in the investigations of the municipalities and cities in the Nordic countries presented in this special issue. The special issue entitled ‘Reputation and brand management in Scandinavian municipalities’ includes articles from Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland. The five articles have different perspectives and focuses, as they deal with the institutionalisation of crisis management, a policy perspective on the promotion of reputational policies, a service-based logics perspective and the need for a resident focus, the uniqueness in the story of municipal reputation films and the aggregate images in Nordic city rankings. However, as indicated in the section above, they all contribute to opening up the organisational black box and investigating reputation and brand management from a primarily organisational point of view. Fur-

thermore, the articles critically assess both the effectiveness and potential democratic and managerial challenges involved in developing, performing and implementing brand and reputation management in public sector organisations.

Note

¹ Financed by the Norwegian Research Council, DEMOSREG. Project “The challenges of building trust- Reputation and brand management in municipalities”.