

# Why All This Communication? Explaining Strategic Communication in Danish Local Governments from an Institutional Perspective

Jeppe Agger Nielsen and Heidi Houlberg Salomonsen\*

Heidi Houlberg Salomonsen  
Department of Political  
Science, Aalborg University

Jeppe Agger Nielsen  
Department of Political  
Science, Aalborg University

Keywords: Strategic communication, organizational-institutional theory, isomorphic pressures, translation, local government

Nøkkelord: Strategisk kommunikation, institutional teori, isomorfi, translation, kommuner.

Offentlig förvaltning  
Scandinavian Journal of  
Public Administration  
16(1): 69-89

© Heidi Houlberg Salomonsen, Jeppe Agger Nielsen och Förvaltningshögskolan, 2012  
ISSN: 1402-8700  
e-ISSN: 2001-3310

## Abstract

Public organizations are increasingly paying attention to strategic communication. However, the extant literature on public sector communication is predominantly descriptive, exploring how strategic communication is performed in practice, with little emphasis on why strategic communication has become so popular. Drawing on organizational institutional theory together with reports from a case study of strategic communication in Danish local governments, we take a first step towards explaining “all this communication”. Our results reveal how normative and mimetic institutional pressures occur, as key external stakeholders support and legitimize strategic communication while communicating general, yet detailed, instructions for performing strategic communication in a context of radical organizational changes. Moreover, we demonstrate how local governments translate strategic communication somewhat differently than external stakeholders, causing not only isomorphism but also heterogeneity in organizational strategies. Based on the empirical findings, we argue that strategic communication issues might benefit from being interpreted in a broader socio-political context rather than as a simple management tool for professionalizing public sector communication.

## Hvorfor al den kommunikation?

### En institutionel forklaring på strategisk kommunikation i danske kommuner

Offentlige organisationer er i stigende grad optaget af strategiske kommunikation. Den eksisterende litteratur om kommunikation i den offentlige sektor er præget af deskriptive bidrag som i mindre grad undersøger hvorfor strategisk kommunikation er blevet så udbredt. Med afsæt i institutionel teori og et case-studie af strategisk kommunikation i danske kommuner er artiklens ambition at bidrage til at forklare ’hvorfor al den kommunikation’. Den empiriske analyse demonstrerer at normative og mimetiske pres udøvet af centrale eksterne stakeholders bidrager til legitimering og spredning af idéen om strategisk kommunikation i feltet af danske kommuner. Dette pres blev udøvet via kommunikationen af generelle, men samtidig detaljerede opskrifter på hvorledes man udøver strategisk kommunikation. Desuden demonstrerer analysen, at kommunerne fortolker strategisk kommunikation forskelligt således at vi også identificerer heterogenitet i de organisatoriske strategier. Baseret på de empiriske resultater argumenterer artiklen for, at strategisk kommunikation ikke blot skal forklares som implementeringen af et simpelt ledelsesværktøj, men at forklaringer med fordel inddrager betydningen af den bredere socio-politiske kontekst.

\***Heidi Houlberg Salomonsen**, PhD, associate professor, the Department of Political Science, Aalborg University, Denmark. Research interests include civil servants in a comparative perspective, public sector and government communication and public management.

**Jeppe Agger Nielsen**, PhD, assistant professor at the Department of Political Science, Aalborg University, Denmark. His research interests include the modernization of the public sector and new management principles such as New Public Management and E-government. Jeppe Agger Nielsen has co-authored a number of books, including “Hjemmehjælp - mellem myter og virkelighed” [Homecare – Between Myths and Reality] (2006) and “Nye kommuner i støbeskeen (2008) as well as articles in Nordic and international journals, e.g. Local Government Studies.

## Introduction

Private and public organizations alike are increasingly paying attention to strategic communication. Although research addressing public sector communication is limited, there is growing interest in public sector communication, which is also evident in the Scandinavian context. Recent contributions have investigated the reputation management and branding activities carried out by public organizations (Byrkjeflot & Angell, 2007; 2008; Byrkjeflot 2010; Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012; Luoma-aho, 2007; Wæraas, 2008; Wæraas et al., 2011) contributing to identifying the distinct characteristics of public organizations of relevance when importing generic communication strategies and tools. Other studies have identified the strategic communication challenges faced by local governments in general (Frandsen et al., 2005) and their CEOs in particular (Lund & Nyegaard, 2008), the challenges for local government communication with the citizens (Lund & Nyegaard, 2009), the local media (Lund, 2010) as well crisis communication (Frandsen & Johansen, 2004).

Although these studies provide useful insights into strategic communication in public organizations, the existing contributions have primarily been descriptive. This article aims to move beyond description and begin explaining *how and why strategic communication has become institutionalized in local governments*. By addressing this explanatory ambition, the article points out the need for understanding the broader political and inter-organizational context rather than merely viewing strategic communication as a management tool for professionalizing public sector communication.

The research questions are investigated in Danish local governments, as they have increasingly been concerned with their strategic communication. Over the course of a major government reform process (2002-2007), strategic communication was introduced in most local governments (municipalities). In 2002, the Danish Government decided to investigate whether the public sector structure was aligned with the requirements of a modern society. In January 2004, a commission of experts proposed different models for the future public sector (Strukturkommissionen, 2004), and a model was adopted for the formation of larger municipalities. The reform came into force in 2007, involving an amalgamation of most local governments, reducing the number from 271 to 98. The reform also meant that the division of work between local, regional and central government was reconfigured substantially, including an increase in the portfolio of local governments. Prior to the reform, strategic communication was not a central management topic at the local government level (Frandsen et al., 2005). During the reform, however, strategic communication became increasingly perceived as essential to the strategic management of the mergers and was introduced in most local governments. This trend has continued after the reform.

When explaining why organizations adopt new managerial tools such as strategic communication, a general distinction can be drawn between rational and institutional perspectives (Christensen et al., 2004: 86). The former argue

that organizational structures and activities shift over time in order to pursue better substantive performance. For this to happen, management must develop communication strategies. Conversely, the latter suggest that the objective of adopting new management tools is not only better performance but also to gain legitimacy by conforming to isomorphic pressures from the environments (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Although strategic communication may represent a rational response to some of the challenges facing Danish local government managers in times of radical organizational changes, neither rational decisions within the local governments nor the reform *per se* are the only factors contributing to the explanation of the widespread adoption of strategic communication within Danish local governments. As our empirical analysis demonstrates, key external stakeholders have been very active in inscribing strategic communication on the local government policy agenda during and after the reform. An organizational institutional perspective (Greenwood et al. 2008) therefore informs our study, as this perspective emphasizes how the broader political and inter-organizational context shapes organizations' decisions and behaviour. From an organizational-institutional perspective, it is possible to identify two perspectives on how organizations respond to institutional pressures. Originally, the perspective put forward was that of isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Yet other contributions have introduced a complementary perspective, arguing that local adoptions causing heterogeneity are also possible reactions from individual organizations when responding to environmental institutional pressures (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Czarniawska 2009).

Next, the organizational institutional perspective is outlined, providing the basis for three expectations to the empirical analysis. We then present the research approach followed by the analysis of how and why strategic communication has become institutionalized in Danish local government. In the conclusion, we revisit our expectations and discuss the limitations of our research.

## An Organizational institutional Perspective

The basic assumption in organizational-institutional theory is that organizations adopt their internal characteristics in order to conform to the expectations of the key stakeholders in their environment (Meyer & Rowan 1977). According to this view, the decision to adopt new management tools (e.g. strategic communication) may have more to do with the institutional environment in which an organization is situated than rational intra-organizational criteria. In DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) seminal article, this is conceptualized as three basic, and analytically distinct, types of forces which organizations respond to in order to gain legitimacy in their environment: coercive, normative and mimetic.

Coercive forces are formal or informal pressures exerted on organizations by other organizations upon which they are dependent (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In the context of the public sector, coercive pressures possibly stem from the government, regulatory agencies and professional associations. The coercive

forces are performed through power, inducements (where incentives motivate to change) or authority "...in which coercive power is legitimated by a normative framework that both supports and constrains the exercise of power..." (Scott, 2007: 53).

Normative forces include the influence of interest groups as well as professional communities, and professional norms and standards for organizational structure or activities (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2008a, 2008b). Organizations are expected to conform to standards of professionalism and to adopt the structures and activities considered to be legitimate by the relevant professional groupings. These normative pressures manifest themselves through inter-organizational channels as well as professional and other types of networks and are diffused by key stakeholders who provide forums for information exchange, set standards, provide education and training for professionals, and evaluate practices. Key stakeholders who could influence organizational behaviour with respect to strategic communication adoption include professions and interest groups. The normative forces are performed through appeals to a sense of social obligation to the organization subjected to the institutional pressure. In modern society, "a sense of social obligation" is often an appeal to "a sense of professional obligation", because normative pressures are primarily exerted by professions (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983: 152). As will become evident in the analysis below, however, interest organizations are also capable of appealing to a sense of obligation to engage in activities which are considered modern and necessary for ensuring some measure of local government autonomy from central government regulation.

Mimetic forces are generated when "best practice" organizations, which already have established a legitimate status in the environments, are imitated by other organizations. This mechanism is triggered by uncertain conditions, where organizational actors cannot be sure of outcomes or when goals are ambiguous. Such mimicry may be undertaken without the clear support of performance improvements and is associated with so-called "bandwagoning". Although imitation can result from direct experience or interaction with "best practice" organizations, imitations are often mediated. As Sahlin-Andersen (1996: 78) notes, "What they imitate are rationalizations – stories constructed by actors in the 'exemplary' organization, and their own translation of such stories. What spreads are not experiences or practices per se, but standardized models and presentations of such practices". These models are often disseminated by consultants travelling from organization to organization (Røvik, 1998; Sevón, 1996). The mimetic forces are thus conveyed via culturally accepted ideas about what are considered to be modern and legitimate ways of organizing, managing, communicating and the like.

DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) major proposition is that these three institutional pressures in time generate similarity within an organizational field and become similar over time. "Organizational field" is defined as a set of interdependent populations of organizations participating in the same cultural and social sub-system (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). It is within such structured settings that

institutional pressures have their strongest effects, as the more mature and structured the field (Ashworth et al., 2009: 167), that is, the more the organizations identify themselves with and are engaged in a “common enterprise” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983: 148), the greater the degree of isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983: 156).

However, the emphasis on continuity and stability associated with isomorphism studies has given rise to expanding new institutional horizons. One stream of research has begun to understand the micro-level processes associated with institutional change, such as explaining how and why organizations reformulate institutional forces as being opposed to passive adoption. In this line of thought, the Scandinavian school of organizational institutionalism emphasizes the diffusion of management ideas through a process of translation (e.g. Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Røvik, 1998; 2007; Djelic & Sahlin Anderson, 2006).

The concept of translation involves change (Czarniawska, 2009: 425). Sevón argues: “...an organization picking up an idea, translating it into something that fits its own context, and materializes it into action. The result of this action may or may not be similar to the idea that was originally conceptualized ... whatever is spread is not immutable; it may change in an ongoing process of borrowing ideas or practices in a chain of actors” (1996: 51). Hence, responses to institutional pressures may generate both homogeneity and heterogeneity. As Røvik points out: “Everything is everywhere, but everywhere differently” (1998: 168, our translation).

Changes in the “original” idea occur because organizations, although engaged in an on-going process of borrowing ideas or practices from exemplary organizations, simultaneously seek to distinguish themselves as being unique (Sevón, 1996). Accordingly, ideas change, because they are edited in order to fit existing practices and institutions in the “host” organization (Sahlin-Anderson, 1996) and/or because they are subject to rational decisions within the organization (Christensen et al., 2004: 84). These processes of organizational editing, reflection and calculation in the translation process become especially evident when the idea represents an entirely new management practice or reform.

Taking all of this into account, we suggest that the institutionalization of new management practices (e.g. strategic communication) unfolds at different levels. Accordingly, we draw particular attention to 1) how institutional forces (coercive, normative and mimetic) unfold in an organizational field and 2) the local translations within individual organizations. Our theoretical framework provides the basis for three expectations regarding the empirical analysis.

**Expectation 1:** As institutional forces have their strongest effects within mature and highly structured fields, we expect to find isomorphic forces in the institutionalization of strategic communication in Danish local government, as it constitutes a clearly defined organizational field (see below). As strategic communication is not subject to legislation, we expect to identify normative or mimetic rather than coercive forces (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

**Expectation 2:** We expect the isomorphic forces to generate homogeneity in terms of how strategic communication becomes institutionalized in local governments. Hence, we expect convergence in the institutionalization of strategic communication in local governments (Ashworth et al., 2009: 169).

**Expectation 3:** We also expect each local government not only to conform to the isomorphic forces but also to translate and potentially change overall ideas of strategic communication. While strategic communication is widely diffused, it will not be implemented passively at the local organizational level; rather, we expect some measure of heterogeneity as strategic communication is adapted to specific local conditions (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996).

## Research Setting and Design

Danish local governments are our case setting. The case design represents that which Yin defines as a single, embedded case design including multiple units of analysis (1994: 39), therein the organizational level of analysis (all 98 Danish Local Governments) and broader socio-political environment.

The Danish local government system is the result of a lengthy institutional development dating back to before the first Danish constitution in 1849. Since the first local government reform in 1970, there has been a high degree of mutual awareness about being in “a common enterprise”, which has been strengthened by the formation of a common interest organization the same year: Local Government Denmark (LGDK). Hence, the field of Danish local governments represents a best case for investigating the impact of institutional forces upon individual organizations (Antoft & Salomonsen, 2007).

We analysed strategic communication in the context of radical organizational changes due to the aforementioned reform reducing the number of municipalities. 66 of the 98 new municipalities resulted from mergers, while 32 of the “old” municipalities, all of which had more than 20,000 inhabitants, did not merge with other municipalities. Strategic communication was not a topic in many local governments prior to the reform. During the negotiations concerning the reform, however, strategic communication became widely recognized as a crucial management challenge.

Our study builds on three sets of empirical data and covers different units of analysis as reflected in our case design. Table 1 provides an overview over the data collected with respect to the unit of analysis, purpose, data source and the date the data was collected.

The first data set relates to the identification of institutional pressures relative to strategic communication adoption. Data sources include policy documents, articles, memos and inspiration guides which have been primarily published and/or produced by Local Government Denmark (LGDK) before, during and after the reform. As already mentioned, LGDK is the interest organization of Danish local governments. LGDK membership is voluntary, but all 98 local governments are currently members. LGDK annually negotiates the overall financial frames of the local governments with the Danish Government. Fur-

thermore, LGDK actively “assists” the local governments to accommodate the different types of challenges posed both to the local politicians and the local administration, including the CEO when implementing the policies decided by the national government as well as introducing new management ideas to local governments. As LGDK membership is strictly voluntary for the local governments, LGDK has no formal authority over local governments but can apply normative pressure. Data have primarily been collected via a systematic review of the LGDK journal, “The Danish Local Government Newsmagazine” (Nyhedsmagasinet Danske Kommuner), from 2004-2010 together with frequent and systematic visits to the LGDK website during and after the reform, where memos and inspiration guides regarding strategic communication were published. One of the authors also participated in two conferences arranged by LGDK. Finally, the political agreements concerning the local government reform (Ministry of the Interior and Health, 2004) and the general legislation regulating the implementation of the reform as well as legislation regulating the local governments in general (Den kommunale styrelseslov) have been analysed in order to identify potential coercive pressures for strategic communication.

Table 1: Data Collected

Unit of analysis	Purpose	Data source	Date
Socio-political environment	Identify coercive, normative and mimetic pressures on adopting strategic communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Content analysis of articles published in “The Danish Local Government” newsmagazine and inspiration guides regarding strategic communication from LGDK</li> <li>• Content analysis of policy documents and legislation related to the municipal reform</li> <li>• Participation in conferences and network meetings</li> </ul>	2004-2010
Organizational	Explore how Danish local governments adopted and translated ideas of strategic communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survey to CEOs of the 98 local governments (response rate 55)</li> </ul>	June 2006
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Content analysis of communication strategies during the reform</li> <li>• Content analysis of communication strategies after the reform</li> </ul>	October 2006-May 2008

The second set of data includes a digital survey sent out to the CEOs of the 98 local governments in June 2006. We asked them about their motivation and

purposes for engaging in strategic communication, thereby providing a sense of how they started to translate strategic communication.

The third and final data set includes a content analysis of communication strategies during and after the reform. The communication strategies formulated during the reform were collected in the period from October 2006–May 2007 by searching the local government websites. If the strategies were not available on the websites, contact was made to the officials responsible for communication by telephone. Only the local governments involved in a merger process are included (66 local governments). We were able to get in touch with 59 (89%) of these organizations, 49 (83%) of which had formulated a communication strategy (see Appendix 1). The communication strategies formulated after the reform were collected in April and May 2008, again by searching the local government websites and via contact by either e-mail or telephone. This time, all of the 98 new local governments are included in the data. We were able to get in touch with 86 (88%) of these organizations, 48 (56%) of which have formulated a communication strategy. 47 of these are included in the final sample of strategies, as one was not available for research (see Appendix 2).

The strategy for coding documents was a qualitative content analysis (Bryman, 2004) designed to identify the purposes of strategic communication prescribed in the data collected from the broader socio-political environment (the first set of data) as well as in the local government communication strategies (the third set of data). The purposes (e.g. openness or dialogue) are only coded if they are explicitly mentioned in the data sources. Secondly, the purposes identified in the communication strategies have been quantified in order to identify the degree of diffusion of these purposes. This enables the analysis of whether the purposes for engaging in strategic communication as proposed by key stakeholders in the broader socio-political context have been adopted “as is” or reformulated/rejected by local governments.

The strategies for collecting and analysing the data varied. Whereas the documents relative to the broader political context have been collected and analysed according to an explorative strategy (tables 2 and 5), the survey questions (table 4) are more deductive, as they are based on theories on administrative (Graber 1992; 2003; Garnett 1997) and corporate communication (Cornelissen 2004; van Riel & Fombrun 2007) (see Salomonsen 2011 for a more detailed discussion). The documents on the organizational level (the communication strategies – tables 3 and 6), have been analysed according to a combined strategy whereby the deductive element is reflected in the fact that we have identified purposes which are also evident in the broader political environment, and the explorative element is reflected in the fact that other purposes explicitly mentioned in the strategies are also included.



## Analysis

### Analysis of Institutional Pressures during the Reform

The implementation of the major local government reform involved extensive legislation. However, communication was not subject to legislation. According to our data, the only pressure from the national government for engaging in strategic communication was of a normative character and issued by the Minister of the Interior, which stressed the need for both internally and externally open and honest communication, free of party politics (Danish Communication Association, 2004: 3).

In contrast, LGDK was extensively involved in promoting strategic communication. In the early stages of the reform, the LGDK chairman stated that communication is a critical factor if the local governments are to succeed in explaining and legitimizing the reform, both internally to local government employees as well as to the local citizens (Danish Communication Association, 2004). The LGDK was also exceedingly active in terms of producing inspiration catalogues, memos and articles in their journal (“The Danish Local Government Newsmagazine”) containing advice and guidance for the local government communication (Amskov et al., 2004; LGDK, 2004a; 2004b; 2004c; 2005; The Danish Local Government Newsmagazine, 2004; 2005; 2006a; 2006b; 2006c). Furthermore, LGDK arranged several conferences for communication professionals and the top government in local governments. At these conferences, consultants and “best practice” local governments provided advice on strategic communication. Finally, LGDK organized network meetings and seminars for communication professionals. In so doing, LGDK promoted strategic communication as an appropriate response to the challenges facing local governments during the reform. In addition to creating a normative pressure towards an institutionalization of strategic communication, these initiatives also contributed to the creation of a mimetic institutional pressure, as the promotion of strategic communication included a description of the “best practice” local governments. Networks and conferences held by LGDK also ensured that “best practices” were imitated by other local governments.

*Table 2. Purposes of Strategic Communication during the Reform Identified in the Socio-Political Environment*

Purpose of Strategic Communication – identified themes
Providing information on decision-making processes to the local government employees and the welfare institutions for minimizing insecurity during the merger
Providing information on decision-making processes to the citizens for minimizing insecurity during the merger
Dialogue
Openness
Create a sense of identification among the citizens with the new local government
Create an organizational identity for the employees

Hence, in addition to institutionalizing a need for communicating strategically, LGDK-related activities also provided extensive advice and guidance about how to perform this communication. According to LGDK, the formulation of a communication strategy is central. The various LGDK publications provide general advice for producing a strategy, including an explication of the purposes for engaging in strategic communication. These purposes are illustrated in Table 2.

### Communication Strategies during the Reform

Communication strategies were widely adopted during the reform. 49 (83%) of the 66 amalgamated local governments now have a communication strategy. Table 3 illustrates the purposes of strategic communication identified in these strategies and how widespread they are.

*Table 3. Purposes of Strategic Communication during the Reform Identified in Local Governments' Communication Strategies (rank order)*

<b>Purpose of strategic communication</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
Provide information about the merger to employees	49	100
Provide information about the merger to citizens	38	78
Openness	36	74
Dialogue	34	69
Reduce insecurity during the merger	24	49
Create a new organizational identity for the municipal organization and a sense of identification among the employees	13	27
Brand the municipality	11	22
Create a sense of identification among the citizens with the new municipality	8	16

Note: N = 49

*Table 4. CEOs' Priorities Regarding Different Purposes with Strategic Communication in the Immediate Future (rank order)*

<b>Purposes with strategic communication</b>	<b>Very or rather high priority</b>	<b>Very or rather low priority</b>	<b>Undecided</b>
Provide information to the citizens	92% (33)	6% (2)	3% (1)
Brand the municipality	91% (33)	6% (2)	3% (1)
Create a new organizational identity for the municipal organization and sense of identification among the employees	86% (31)	8% (3)	6% (2)
Create a sense of identification with the new municipality among the citizens	86% (31)	11% (4)	3% (1)
Improve political steering	59% (21)	35% (13)	6% (2)
Improve administrative management and steering	59% (21)	35% (13)	6% (2)

Survey to CEO (2009). N = 36, exact numbers in brackets

As Table 3 illustrates, most of the purposes suggested by LGDK are reflected in more than half of the strategies (provide information about the merger to employees and citizens, openness and dialogue). However, purposes related to creating an identity, identification and branding activities are adopted to a lesser degree. These purposes have nevertheless reached the agenda of the CEOs, as they were very high on their priority list for strategic communication activities in the immediate future (Table 4).

### **Institutional Pressures after the Reform**

After the reform, LGDK continued to produce a normative pressure promoting strategic communication in a mix of conferences, articles, public statements, inspiration guides, memos and publication of stories from “best practice” organizations. As reflected in table 5, the purposes defined by LGDK after the reform are now of relevance for all of the local governments (not only the amalgamated municipalities), including branding activities, media management and communication during crisis (The Danish Local Government Newsmagazine, 2007; LGDK, 2006; 2007; 2008; 2009a).

The purpose of engaging in branding and reputation management is emphasized by providing “best practice” examples on the LGDK website ([www.kl.dk](http://www.kl.dk), visited 05 March, 2011) as well as through articles and memos published on the website (LGDK, 2009b). Branding is argued to be necessary for accommodating the challenge of establishing new identities in the new local governments attracting and retaining citizens and employees alike. Moreover, branding is a means to profile local governments and the quality of the welfare services provided at the local level. These branding activities are further argued to strengthen the reputation of the local government and prevent an increase in national government control and regulation (LGDK, 2009b).

The more recent focus on media management is caused by the increasing mediatization, which LGDK perceives not only as a challenge to the reputation of the individual local government but also local democracy as such (LGDK, 2008; 2009a), why the institutionalization of a professional, strategic approach to communicating with and in the media when individual local governments are subjected to attention regarding sensational issues is a part of avoiding single issues are turned into general politics by the government. The local governments and LGDK have worked to prevent this dynamic for years. The emphasis on media management is reflected by the publication of an inspiration guide for communicating with the media for both administration (LGDK, 2008) and politicians (LGDK, 2009a). As reflected in the quote below, the introduction to the former argues that the reform caused an increase in the media interest in the production of welfare services by local governments.

An individual case that raises questions regarding the quality of public services makes for a good story in the media. This is why we see numerous examples of how a single story from Municipality X suddenly provides material with which the local, regional and national

media dig deeper in other municipalities. The total municipal service and the municipalities' respective reputations come under fire. And the municipal autonomy is under pressure like never before. The media are responsible for focusing on the municipalities and the problems emerging in the wake of the most comprehensive reform in the history of Denmark. Conversely, it is just as much a municipal responsibility to deal with and solve the critical stories. (LGDK, 2008: 3) (our translation).

As the quote reflects, LGDK emphasizes media management as a means to preventing increased pressure on the reputation of local government and ultimately its autonomy. Moreover, the quote reflects the normative pressure placed on the local governments by emphasizing the importance of media and reputation management. The inspiration guide for the local politicians also emphasizes how a good reputation created by communicating proactively in the media – and especially during crisis – is important for local government and local democracy, as this guide is published as part of a program for the future local democracy (LGDK, 2009a). Apart from the inspiration guides, LGDK also publishes “best practice” examples of local government interaction with the press and crisis communication ([www.kl.dk](http://www.kl.dk), visited 05 March 2011). Crisis communication was also a major topic at a meeting of local politicians and the annual communication conference held by LGDK in 2008. Table 5 illustrates the various purposes for strategic communication suggested by LGDK after the reform.

*Table 5. Purposes of Strategic Communication after the Reform Identified in the Socio-Political Environment*

<b>Purpose of Strategic Communication</b>
Branding
Media management
Prepare for and improve communication during crises

### Communication Strategies after the Reform

The strong focus on strategic communication has continued to mark local government after the reform. In the survey of the municipal CEOs, 80 per cent replied that they either had or were going to employ one or more professional communications officials. Further, 91 per cent of the CEOs expect communication to be a higher priority in the future. Interestingly, strategic communication is perceived as the management function they primarily expect to give greater priority when compared to the management of development, change management and operational management.

48 of the new local governments included in the sample had a strategy in 2008. Another 20 were in the process of developing such a strategy, and 7 planned to do so in the near future (see Appendix 2). Hence, strategic communication has survived the reform. Furthermore, the idea of engaging in strategic

communication has transferred to the entire population of local governments – also beyond the local governments resulting from the mergers. Table 6 illustrates the purposes of strategic communication identified in communication strategies and how widespread they are.

As reflected in Table 6, media management has been extensively recognized in local government communication strategies. 91 per cent explicitly mention this purpose. Furthermore, the CEOs' expectations regarding an increasing focus on the identity of local government were to a larger extent explicitly mentioned as a purpose in the communication strategies after the reform. In contrast, branding and crisis management were not as evident. However, recent analysis carried out by LGDK demonstrates that 62 per cent of the municipalities are working with branding, which indicates that branding activities have become a more important issue (The Danish Local Government Newsmagazine, 2009).

*Table 6. Purposes of Strategic Communication after the Reform Identified in Local Government Communication Strategies (rank order)*

<b>Purpose of Strategic Communication</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
Media management	43	91
Identifying and communicating the organizational identity to external stakeholders	26	55
Identifying and communicating the organizational identity to members of the organization	21	45
Improving the organization's image and engaging in branding	15	32
Crisis management	11	23

Note: N = 47

## Discussion

Our analysis demonstrates how different stakeholders supported and legitimized strategic communication as it was promoted as the appropriate response to managerial challenges in a context of radical organizational changes. The analysis revealed how LGDK has been significantly involved in the promotion of strategic communication, both during and after the reform, creating normative pressure by providing general models for strategic communication as well as emphasizing how strategic communication is critical in terms of ensuring effective and legitimate mergers during the reform and in terms of ensuring local government autonomy after the reform. Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates how, on the one side, LGDK communicated opportunities for imitation “at a distance” by publishing “best practices” regarding communication in their member journal. On the other side, they also created network meetings in which the local governments could share and communicate direct experiences, which might later be imitated. Hence, LGDK provides models for strategic communication as well as mediating the communication of more or less rationalized stories “constructed by actors in the ‘exemplary’ organizations” (Sahlin-Andersen, 1996: 78).

Stakeholders behind the mobilization of strategic communication included not only LGDK but also best practice local governments. By materializing the idea in conference presentations and inspiration catalogues, these stakeholders provide general, but rather detailed, instructions for how to carry out strategic

communication. Furthermore, these materializations enable the transfer of the idea of strategic communication (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996) within the population of local government.

In sum, especially LGDK produced normative pressure which was supplemented by creating opportunities for mimicry. LGDK was also active in defining how the heterogeneous group of local governments could all benefit from adopting strategic communication. Indeed, they conceptualized a number of challenges and purposes for strategic communication, which were relevant for the local governments involved in mergers. After the reform, LGDK redefined these purposes as “generic”. All local governments potentially experience these challenges and problems related to dealing with single issues raised by the media and/or national government, which may lead to an increase in new legislation and agreements limiting the ability of local governments to make local political decisions and priorities. Hence, as argued, strategic communication is seen as a central means for ensuring local autonomy and the formal authority and power to make political priorities and decisions in local governments. However, LGDK further encourages the politicians in the district councils to put party politics aside in order to collaborate with the local administrations for ensuring the reputation of the local governments through strategic communication practices (LGDK, 2009a: 2), which contributes to the depoliticized character of local governments’ communication strategies (Salomonsen, 2011).

Although the local government communication strategies have primarily been analysed to identify the extent to which the purposes prescribed in the broader socio-political context are reflected in the strategies, we identify not only a rather extensive adoption of most of these purposes but also a number of differences. Hence, although our data are limited to identifying local government translation relative to strategic communication, we identified some heterogeneity as we observed differences in the extent to which the local governments have adopted the purposes suggested by key stakeholders in the environment.

## Conclusion

As expected, we observed how institutional pressures emerged in a broader political and inter-organizational context, enabling the diffusion of strategic communication across Danish local governments. Hence, an organizational institutional perspective can contribute to answering the question: Why all this communication? While we did not identify any significant coercive forces, we did identify both normative and mimetic forces. Although performed differently, they mainly originate from the same actor: LGDK. The analysis also demonstrates how LGDK maintained institutional pressure for local governments towards institutionalized strategic communication, although for different reasons: Firstly, to accommodate challenges during the reform, that is, challenges related to merger processes; and secondly, to accommodate challenges for preserving the reputation and autonomy of the Danish local self-government regime.

The diffusion may also be characterized as rather extensive given the relatively short timeframe of the analysis. This may be a consequence of the degree of maturity and structuration of the field of Danish local governments. It may also be a consequence of how more than two-thirds of the local governments have undergone mergers. Hence, they represent “new” organizations and lack a common set of institutionalized ideas about how to perform strategic communication. Such organizations may be more receptive to institutional forces representing general ideas from their environment (Salomonsen, 2008: 180).

Turning to the question of how strategic communication has become institutionalized within the field of Danish local governments, our analysis demonstrates both homogeneity and heterogeneity. We identified some homogeneity, as expected, as the purposes identified in the communication strategies within local governments largely reflected the recommendation promoted by the stakeholders in the environment. This may be explained by the fact that although the local governments represent a somewhat heterogeneous group in terms of characteristics such as size, party-political leadership and economy, they are facing a number of the same challenges in addition to their common interests, including challenges related to handling crisis communication, as all local governments may potentially end up in a crisis.

Finally, and as expected, the analysis also revealed how local governments translated and interpreted strategic communication somewhat differently compared to key stakeholders in the environment, causing heterogeneity in terms of the extent to which all of the purposes prescribed for engaging in strategic communication have been adopted and implemented in the individual local government communication strategies. Although our data had some limitations involving the identification of heterogeneity (see the discussion on limitations below), the “first” editing (Sahlin-Anderson, 1996) of the general models for strategic communication was reflected in the formal communication strategies. However, data on how the communication strategies are translated into practice would expectedly reveal even more heterogeneity, as existing institutional practices and ideas in the individual organization would lead to expectations of local translation processes producing differences in the respective local governments. Heterogeneity may also be expected in practice, as strategic communication represents a rather new managerial practice in the local governments. And a final reason for possibly expecting heterogeneity relates to Sevón’s (1996: 56) argument that although organizations imitate and adapt to institutional isomorphic pressures and although they consider themselves part of a field, they also identify themselves with elements they find distinctive for their specific organization.

In terms of the theoretical implications for the empirical findings, the ambition has primarily been to contribute to the incipient literature on strategic communication in the public sector. Here, the analysis has provided explanation concerning the question “Why all this communication?”, by emphasizing the institutional mechanisms, generating the diffusion as well as convergence of local governments engagement in strategic communication. Moreover, by apply-

ing an organizational institutional perspective, we have demonstrated how strategic communication issues might benefit from being interpreted in a broader institutionalized political and inter-organizational context rather than as a simple management tool for professionalizing public sector communication. Although the analysis does not identify substantial coercive forces as typical for fields of public sector organizations (Ashworth et al. 2009: 167), it has identified how normative and mimetic forces are also generated by LGDK for political reasons, namely to prevent the national government to interfere with and reduce the local governments' autonomy. In addition, the institutional perspective has enabled the analysis to demonstrate how strategic communication, becomes "rationalized models", which are presented as the solution to a number of different types of problems.

In terms of the empirical implications of the analysis, keeping the broader institutionalized and political context in mind a number of potential challenges facing local governments can be pointed out. First, it is worth noting that all types of strategic communication include an element of asymmetry, which stands in contrast to the ideal of democratic dialogue being by definition symmetrical (Salomonsen 2011: 212). Hence, local governments may import strategic communication tools from the private sector, but in a democratic perspective this may reduce the democratic potential involved in the local government's communications with its residents. Second, still bearing in mind the democratic element of local governments, excessively strategic communications may over time reduce the high degree of trust enjoyed by local governments among their citizens. If local governments increasingly use strategic communications to tackle the media during a crisis or more mundane single issues raised by the media, such strategic actions might adversely affect the value of being open and ensuring transparency.

Turning to the limitations of the research, however, the results of our analysis can also be seen in relation to the chosen at the organizational level: the communication strategies. Firstly, representing formal documents, the strategies may not necessarily reveal all of the differences in the local translations of the institutional forces. Although the strategies represent systematic and robust data, they also have limitations when analysing translation. Hence, when responding to institutional pressures, organizations may revise and edit the general models prescribed in national inspiration guides as well as in the local strategies when turning formal strategies into communication practices. However, answering such questions in greater detail requires a more process-oriented research approach, including data sources other than formal documents.

Secondly, the strategies may be "merely" formal symbols subject to decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Brunsson, 2003) with limited or no relation to communication practices. As Scott (2007: 173) notes, however, "...to an institutionalist, the adjective merely does not fit comfortably with the noun symbolic". The formal changes not only signal to the environment about what is valued or of importance for which purposes – they also signal to members of the organization about how and why the local government should communicate more strate-



gically. This potentially leads to the aforementioned editing and adjusting process regarding the general model of strategic communication and branding.

The third limitation concerns generalizability. Although strategic communication in Danish local government represents a best case and therefore an attractive subject for the analysis of institutional forces because it represents a highly structured setting and hasty diffusion of strategic communication, it is still merely one example of institutionalization. An extension of our study would be to determine whether strategic communication demonstrates similar patterns in other settings. It might well do so in some cases, while other cases will present different stories when it comes to the strength of institutional forces and local translation activities.

The final limitation concerns the choice of only one theoretical approach. Hence, although the analysis demonstrates the importance and relevance of organizational institutional explanations when addressing the question “Why all this communication?”, our analysis does not enable the identification of more rational explanations. We therefore recommend that future research include different theoretical perspectives looking for more rational explanations of how and why strategic communication has become a popular management concept, including perspectives on, for example, reputation management and corporate communication management (e.g. van Riel & Fombrun, 2007).

## References

- Amskov, J. B., Iversen, F. & Fabricius, A. (2004) *Når vi flytter sammen – Ledelse af Kommunale fusioner*, KL and KTO, Kommuneinformation, Denmark.
- Antoft, R., & Salomonsen, H. H. (2007) ‘Det kvalitative casestudium: Introduktion til en forskningsstrategi’ in R. Antoft, M. H. Jacobsen, A. Jørgensen & S. Kristiansen (eds), *Håndværk og horisonter: Tradition og nytænkning i kvalitativ metode*, University Press of Southern Denmark, Odense.
- Ashworth, R., Boyne, G. & Delbridge, R. (2009) ‘Escape from the Iron Cage? Organizational Change and Isomorphic Pressures in the Public Sector’, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 19: 165-187.
- Brunsson, N. (2003) *The Organization of Hypocrisy: Talk, Decisions and Actions in Organizations* (2nd edn, 2nd print), John Wiley and Sons, Chichester.
- Bryman, A. (2004) *Social Research Methods*, 2nd edn, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York.
- Byrkjeflot, H. (2010) ‘Omdømmehåndtering – drivkrefter, kritikk og paradokser’, *Scandinavian Journal of Public Administration*, 14(1-2): 3-24.
- Byrkjeflot, H. & Angell, S. I. (2007) ‘Dressing up Hospitals as Enterprises? The Expansion and Managerialization of Communication in Norwegian Hospitals’, in P. Kjær & T. Slaatta (eds), *Mediating Business, The Expansion of Business Journalism*, Copenhagen Business School Press, Copenhagen.
- Byrkjeflot, H. & Angell, S. I. (2008) ‘Forvaltning i foretakslær. Omdømmehåndtering i norske sykehus etter sykehusreformen’, *Nordiske Organisasjonsstudier*, (3): 71-92.

- Christensen, T., Læg Reid, P., Roness, P. G. & Røvik, K. A. (2004) *Organisasjonsteori for offentlig sektor*, Universitetsforlaget, Oslo.
- Cornelissen, J. (2004) *Corporate Communications: Theory and Practice*, Sage, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi.
- Czarniawska, B. (2009) 'Emerging Institutions: Pyramids or Anthills?' *Organization Studies*, 30(4): 423-441.
- Czarniawska, B. & Joerges, B. (1996) 'Travels of ideas', in B. Czarniawska & G. Sevón (eds.), *Translating Organizational Change*, Walter De Gruyter, New York and Berlin.
- Danish Communication Association [Dansk kommunikationsforening] (2004) 'Strukturreform og kommunikation af Lars Løkke Rasmussen', appendix to article in *kommunikatøren*, August 2004.
- DiMaggio, P. J. & Powell, W. W. (1983) 'The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields', *American Sociological Review*, 48(2): 147-160.
- Djelic, M.-L. & Sahlin-Anderson, K. (2006) *Transnational Governance*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Frandsen, F. & Johansen, W. (2004) 'Hvor godt forberedte er de? En undersøgelse af danske virksomheders og myndigheders kriseberedskab anno 2003', *Rapport fra Center for virksomhedskommunikation*, Aarhus School of Business, Aarhus University.
- Frandsen, F., Olsen, L. B., Amstrup, J. O. & Sørensen, C. (2005) *Den kommunikerende kommune - Danske kommuner under forandring*, L&R Business (formerly Børsens Forlag A/S), Copenhagen K.
- Garnett, J. L. (1997) 'Administrative Communication: Domain, Threats, and Legitimacy', in J. L. Garnett & A. Kouzmin (eds), *Handbook of Administrative Communication*, Public Administration and Public Policy/63, Marcel Dekker, New York.
- Graber, D. (1992) *Public Sector Communication: How Organizations Manage Information*, C.Q. Press, Washington DC.
- Graber, D. (2003) *The Power of Communication: Managing Information in Public Organizations*, C.Q. Press, Washington DC.
- Greenwood, R., Oliver, C., Sahlin, K. & Suddaby, R. (eds). (2008) *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism*, SAGE. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore.
- Hansen, K., Bjørnholt, B., Jespersen, P. K., Nielsen, J. A. & Salomonsen, H. H. (eds) (2008) *De nye kommuner i støbeskeen*, DJØF Publishing, Copenhagen.
- LGDK (2004a) *Fusion med begejstring* (1) by Hans Mogensen, Director of Communications in Silkeborg Municipality.
- LGDK (2004b) *Fusion med begejstring* (2) by Hans Mogensen, Director of Communications in Silkeborg Municipality.
- LGDK (2004c) *Temaguide: Den politiske og administrative topledelse – De strategiske valg*, LGDK Version November 2004.
- LGDK (2005) *Gode råd om Kommunikation*, LGDK memo, 11 October 2005.

- LGDK (2006) *Temaguide: Kommunikationspolitik*, LGDK memo, 6 November 2006.
- LGDK (2007) *Kodeks for god offentlig topledelse*. Survey blandt kommunaldirektørerne, LGDK January 2007.
- LGDK (2008) *Temaguide: Presse- og krisehåndtering*, LGDK, September 2008.
- LGDK (2009a) *Kommunalbestyrelsen og medierne – Sådan bliver vi bedre til at sætte dagsorden i medierne!*, Inspirationskatalog, Fremtidens kommunale demokrati, kommunernes demokrati program 2008-2009, June 2009.
- LGDK (2009b) *Kommunebranding – relevans og aktualitet*, [www.kl.dk/kommunikation/artikler](http://www.kl.dk/kommunikation/artikler) (accessed 05.03.11).
- Lund, A. B. (2010) *De lokale nyhedsmedier og kommunikationsstrategien*, LGDK, Copenhagen.
- Lund, A. B., & Nyegaard, M. (2008) *Kommunaldirektøren og kommunikationsstrategien*, KL, Copenhagen.
- Lund, A. B., & Nyegaard, M. (2009) *Borgerne, brugerne og kommunikationsstrategien*, LGDK, Copenhagen.
- Luoma-aho, V. (2007) 'Neutral Reputation and Public Sector Organizations', *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10(2): 124-143.
- Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1977) 'Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony', *American Journal of Sociology*, 83(2): 340-363.
- Ministry of the Interior and Health (2004) *Aftale om strukturreformen*, Indenrigs- og Sundhedsministeriet, June 2004.
- Røvik, K. A. (1998) *Moderne organisasjoner. Trender i organisasjonstenknin-gen ved tusenårsskiftet*, Fakkbokforlaget, Bergen-Sandviken.
- Røvik, K. A. (2007) *Trender og translasjoner. Ideer som former det 21. Århundrets organisasjon*, Universitetsforlaget, Oslo.
- Sahlin-Andersson, K. (1996) 'Imitating by Editing Success: The Construction of Organizational Fields', in B. Czarniawska & G. Sevón (eds), *Translating Organizational Change*, Walther de Gruyter, Berlin, New York.
- Salomonsen, H. H. (2008) 'Kommunernes kommunikation i et politisk og administrativt perspektiv', in K. Hansen, B. Bjørnholt, P. K. Jespersen, J. A. Nielsen, & H. H. Salomonsen (eds), *De nye kommuner i støbeskeen*, DJØF Publishing, Copenhagen.
- Salomonsen, H. H. (2011) 'Strategisk kommunikasjon og organisasjonsidentiteter i kommunene', in A. Wæraas, H. Byrkjeflot, & S. I. Angell (eds), *Substans og fremtreden. Omdømmehåndtering i offentlig sektor*, Universitetsforlaget, Oslo.
- Scott, R. W. (2007) *Institutions and Organizations*, 3rd edn, Sage, Thousand Oaks, London New Delhi.
- Scott, R. W. (2008a). 'Lords of the Dance: Professionals as Institutional Agents', *Organization Studies*, 29(2): 219-238.
- Scott, R. W. (2008b). 'Approaching Adulthood: The Maturing of Institutional Theory', *Theory and Society*, 37(5): 427-442.

- Sevón, G. (1996) 'Organizational Imitation in Identity Transformations', in B. Czarniawska & G. Sevón (eds) *Translating Organizational Change*, Walther de Gryther, Berlin, New York.
- Strukturkommissionen (2004) *Hovedbetænkningen*, bind 1, Betænkning nr. 1434, Indenrigs og Sundhedsministeriet, Copenhagen, Januar 2004.
- The Danish Local Government Newsmagazine (2004) 'Borgerinddragelse og sammenlægning' af Kommunikationschef H. Mogensen, Silkeborg Municipality, partner J. Gyldenkærne, Aion ApS & Consultant F. Ø. Hansen, KL, *Nyhedsmagasinet Danske Kommuner*, no.36.
- The Danish Local Government Newsmagazine (2005) 'Den store kommunikation', af J. Gaardbo, Gaardbo Comm, *Nyhedsmagasinet Danske Kommuner*, no.25.
- The Danish Local Government Newsmagazine (2006a) 'Kommunernes samspil med lokale medier, af Communications Consultant L. Birk, Municipality of Aalborg and Consultant Flemming Østergaard Hansen, KL, *Nyhedsmagasinet Danske Kommuner*, no.1.
- The Danish Local Government Newsmagazine (2006b) 'Forandrings kommunikation – hold gryden i kog', af Communications Project Manager M. K. Jacobsen, Brønderslev-Dronninglund Municipality and Project Coordinator A.-M. Scheibel, KL struktursekretariat, *Nyhedsmagasinet Danske kommuner*, no.21:14-15.
- The Danish Local Government Newsmagazine (2006c) 'Stil skarpt på kommunikationspolitikken', Communications Director S. D. Pedersen, LGDK, *Nyhedsmagasinet Danske Kommuner*, no.31: 15-15.
- The Danish Local Government Newsmagazine (2007) 'Den store udfordring: Styring og samarbejde i den offentlige sektor', CEO P. G. Hansen LGDK, *Nyhedsmagasinet Danske Kommuner*, no.2: 23-33.
- The Danish Local Government Newsmagazine (2009) 'Kommunale chefer har brug for medietræning', G. Johansen, 2009.
- Van Riel, C. B. M. & Fombrun, C. J. (2007) *Essentials of Corporate Communication: Implementing Practices for Effective Reputation Management*, Routhledge, Oxon, New York.
- Wæraas, A. (2008) 'Can Public Sector Organizations Be Coherent Corporate Brands?', *Marketing Theory*, 8(2): 205-221.
- Wæraas, A., Byrkjeflot, H. & Angell, S. I. (eds) (2011) *Substans og fremtreden. Omdømmehåndtering i offentlig sektor*, Universitetsforlaget, Oslo.
- Wæraas, A. & Byrkjeflot, H. (2012) 'Public Sector Organizations and Reputation Management', *International Public Management Journal*, 15(2): 186-206.
- Yin, R. K. (1994) *Case Study Research. Design and Methods*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi.

### Appendix 1: Adoption of Strategic Communication Strategies within Danish Local Governments during the Reform (2006)

Does the local government have a strategy for communication?		
	Number	%
Yes	49	74
No	10	15
Unable to make contact	7	11
All	66	100

Note: N = 66 (merged local governments)

### Appendix 2: Adoption of Strategic Communication Strategies within Danish Local Governments after the Reform (2008)

Does the local government have a strategy for communication?		
	Number	Percentage (%)
Yes	47	48
Yes, but it is not available for either the public or scientific research	1	1
No, but it is in the process of making one	20	20
No, but it is planning to developing one	7	7
No, and there are no plans for developing one	7	7
Yes, but it is the one used in the merger, and hence not included in the coding and analysis	4	4
Unable to make contact	12	12
All	98	99*

Notes: N = 98, \*The numbers have been round off, for which reason they do not add up to 100%.