



Not So Logical, After All – Public Managers’ Understandings of Media

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Abstract

In this paper, we investigate how public organizations, through their senior managers, perceive media-related activities and to what extent these perceptions support the existence of a ‘media logic.’ We interviewed 64 managers from 40 Swedish government agencies and compared their perceptions related to media with their perceptions related to the corporate logic, which has become vital in public sector contexts. The findings reveal that media and media-oriented activities are understood as contextual, contingent, and driven by individual events. In contrast to the understandings of management and strategy (i.e. corporate logic), which was much more coherent, universal, and aligned to sectoral conditions. Accordingly, media are generally more open for interpretations, local adaptations, and contextualization, making it difficult to provide clear-cut answers to what media means for public organizations. Our study suggests that public managers understand media in a manner that challenges the media logic rationale. We also challenge an institutional logic argument that institutional structures surrounding public organizations are, in general, to be seen as open for strategic responses. Our results point in another direction. The way managers understand different institutional structures, such as those associated with media, are, to a much greater extent, characterized by uncertainty linked to a lack of necessary knowledge about what constitutes the underlying qualities of the structures at hand; and by ambiguity about what meanings to mobilize and follow when institutional structures are to be introduced into specific organizational contexts.

Practical Relevance

- Media are important for public managers, and media-related issues receive much attention. However, the reasons why the media matter are less evident, and the attention is sometimes misleading. This begs for more reflexivity among managers to avoid misguided priorities.
- Several professional groups question the focus on media, and this creates tensions between these groups and managers. This underscores the need for a reflexive approach to avoid recurring conflicts.
- There is extensive variation between institutional structures in terms of clarity, origin, and coherence. This requires managers to be sensitive to how different structures relate to their organizations’ core assignments and responsibilities when they evaluate and implement responsibilities and routines and distribute resources in response.

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Introduction

For public organizations, media and journalists have become an increasingly prominent and integrated part of their daily activities (Figenschou et al. 2019). To explain the increased attention researchers have pointed to the emergence of media as an autonomous institution with its own principles for how news is selected, processed, framed, and presented. Parallel to this, the idea of media being the most important form of communication has taken root among actors in non-media contexts. In combination, the two processes have led to the adaptation and accommodation of media’s principles among actors outside the media institution (Strömbäck 2008).

To be able to theorize these transformations, scholars have used the concepts *mediatization* and *media logic*. Mediatization refers to the process of media gaining influence over other institutions, such as politics, business, and religion (Hjarvard, 2008; Hepp, Hjarvard & Lundby 2015). Media logic, on the other hand, refers to how media's principles, norms, values, and working routines are manifested in non-media contexts. Accordingly, the media logic is what connects the media institution with other institutions, including the politico-administrative system (Peters 2016).

This line of reasoning equates mediatization with marketization, globalization, and other institutional transformations (Pallas, Jonsson & Strannegård 2014) and the media logic with other institutional logics (Hjarvard 2008). As the extensive literature on institutional logic has shown, public organizations largely shape their identities, structures, objectives, and activities based on institutional conditions (Meyer et al. 2014; Koreh, Mandelkern & Shpaizman 2019), and mediatization is thus assumed to have similar consequences in adjacent literature. Accordingly, the concept of media logic is widely utilized among scholars across disciplines, though not because of extensive empirical support – quite the contrary. Few researchers have tackled the question of how media in their institutional forms are manifested, and the few who have, have arrived at contradictory results.

The tendency to oversee media's qualities is unfortunate. It brings with it the risk of not understanding the role media have in public organizations if media are ascribed characteristics they lack. But also – equally important – critical implications may be missed if characteristics of *actual* importance are overlooked. Scholars of Scandinavian institutionalism has, for instance, shown how public organizations operate under a constant inflow of fragmented ideas and models that are only partly institutionalized (Brunsson 2009). As a result, the complexity that logics are associated with (Kraatz & Block 2017) is replaced by uncertainty and a lack of knowledge, as well as ambiguity in terms of disparate understandings (Cloutier & Langley 2013; Sahlin 2014). This distinction provides the opportunity for qualitatively different discussions about the causes and effects of media in these organizations (Figenschou et al. 2020).

The notion of logics holds unique characteristics compared with other institutional forms such as ideas, frames, orders of worth, or conventions, and they risk losing their power and relevance as an analytical tool if they aren't separated from other phenomena lacking these characteristics (Alvesson, Hallett & Spicer 2019).

In this paper, the qualities of media are at the center and how they are identified, understood, and possibly acted upon in and by public organizations (in our case, government agencies). To be able to provide a detailed analysis, we map the understandings of media, and we compare them with the understandings of the corporate logic (i.e., managerial practices, structures, and values; see Thornton, Ocasio & Lounsbury 2012). That is to say; the corporate logic is used as a point of reference in examining whether the manifestations of media exhibit the characteristics of an institutional logic. The corporate logic has gained significant influence in public organizations, especially in the wake of new public management reforms, and at the same time, it has its origin outside public administration – that is, the corporate logic arguably shares properties with media as it is researched in connection to public organizations. Our comparison rests on three dimensions commonly used to describe distinctive features of an institutional logic – norms, strategy, and attention (Pahnke, Cox & Eisenhardt 2015) – and our empirical material consists of interviews with 64 senior managers representing 40 government agencies in Sweden.

Our study incorporates two streams of research. First, research on media and how we can understand their consequences for public organizations assists in testing the assumption that media's values and practices will be understood – at least conceptually – in a relatively uniform way among the managers we interviewed. Second, our insights offer a nuanced perspective on the peculiarities of public sector governance. To a significant extent, the institutional logics surrounding public organizations are treated as complex and conflicting but still relatively open for strategic responses. Our study points in a direction where such an approach can be questioned, especially when some characteristics of the institutional environment in which the organizations are embedded lack the qualities they have been a priori ascribed.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: In the next section, we give an overview of previous research on mediatization and the media logic in the literature on public organizations,

with particular attention to studies focusing on how public organizations and their members understand and act upon media and media-related issues. This is followed by a discussion of how public administration scholars have approached the institutional logic framework. Next, we present our methodological considerations and the approach we took when analyzing the empirical material. The results section is divided into two parts: 1) how the managers understood media and media-related activities, and 2) how they understood the hierarchies and managerial practices, structures, and values (i.e., qualities connected to the corporate logic). In the discussion section, we use the results to question the validity of the media logic concept. We also discuss the implications of our results for future research on media and public sector governance.

Mediatization and Media Logic

Research on mediatization appears in several disciplines and takes several approaches, but in research on public organizations, the institutional approach is predominant (Fredriksson & Pallas 2020). This means that the media logic has been central when scholars have investigated the roles media play in public organizations (Laursen & Valentini 2015). The concept of 'media logic' was coined by Altheide and Snow (1979) and later integrated into mediatization theory (Mazzoleni & Schulz 1999), as it helped scholars explain what actors refer to when they interact with or relate to media. For instance, actors in the politico-administrative system have an interest in shaping and controlling how they are perceived, and they tend to adjust to the principles imposed by the media logic (Boon et al. 2019; Klijn 2016). It has been suggested that this means the workings of the political-administrative system become challenged and, to an extensive degree, replaced by activities mobilized by the media logic (Esser 2013). Accordingly, mediatization becomes a form of colonialization (Meyer 2002). This also means that actors within this system not only adapt their communication to the workings and formats of the media, but also integrate these principles when they set up routines, distribute responsibilities, and create strategies beyond communication (Schulz 2004).

Theoretically, the argument for such transformation is straightforward and in line with a general theory of institutions and institutional logics (Hjarvard 2008). Empirically, however, scholars have struggled to gain support for the main assumption. For instance, in terms of media content, mediatization theory suggests that media, to an extensive degree, will portray public organizations negatively, focusing on failures, malfunctions, and conflicts – which is expected to generate corresponding adaptation on the part of the organizations (Hinterleitner & Wittwer 2022; Klijn & Korthagen 2017). This is not confirmed, as most studies show that the news coverage is generally "neutral" (Boon, Salomonsen & Verhoest 2019; Schillemans 2012; Deacon & Monk 2000; Liu, Horsley & Yang 2012; Jacobs, et al. 2022; Grzeslo et al. 2019; Korthagen 2015). The results are not in unison, but it seems to be that the everyday coverage is primarily descriptive. In the less common occasions when agencies are negatively framed, it is related to extraordinary events or issues (Peci 2021; van Duijn, Bannink & Nies 2022; Hinterleitner & Wittwer 2022). Research also shows that the amount of media attention varies greatly between public organizations. Most do not get any media attention at all, whereas a few gain extensive attention more or less daily (Fredriksson, Schillemans & Pallas 2015; Salomonsen, Frandsen & Johansen 2016; Bertelli, Sinclair & Lee 2015).

Regarding responses, research shows that these tend to be much more ad-hoc and crafted on daily basis than the theory suggests – that is, there does not seem to exist a uniform, coherent, and consequent way of dealing with media-related issues that could be explained by the existence of factual media exposure (Fredriksson, Schillemans & Pallas 2015; Figenschou et al. 2019; Klijn, et al. 2022; Salomonsen, Frandsen & Johansen 2016; Schillemans 2012). There are several reasons for this, according to earlier work. For instance, the attention media receive seems not to be mobilized by media but by regulations or expectations linked to the organizations' position in the system. In their study of Norwegian ministries, Thorbjørnsrud and colleagues (2014) showed that the routines that were set up to handle media encounters primarily were a response to legal demands instructing agencies to provide fast and reliable service to stakeholders. Similar results were shown in a Mexican study, where different responses to media

were explained by Access to information laws and the general workload (Erlich et al. 2021). A variant on this explanation is that media gains influence because of others who make use of media coverage to advance political aspirations (Hinterleitner & Wittwer 2022; Kunelius & Reunanen 2012; Schillemans, Karlsen & Kolltveit 2019).

A third anomaly in previous research is the difficulties scholars experience in showing a common understanding among actors of what media *are*. Contrary to what the concept of logic suggests, previous research has shown that there are disparate understandings of media's workings and formats, and accordingly, there are also different views on media's importance and how to handle media interactions (Hinterleitner & Wittwer 2022; Fredriksson, Schillemans & Pallas 2015; Schillemans, Karlsen & Kolltveit 2019; Klijn 2016). Among others, this was shown in an ethnographic study of an agency in Sweden (Pallas, Fredriksson & Wedlin 2016), where it became evident that several different takes on media circulated. The study also showed that norms expressed by different professions occupying the agency were very important when actors developed a stance to media.

In sum, existing research gives little support to the notion that media is manifested in public organizations as identifiable, coherent, persistent, and encompassing media logic.

Institutional logics

In research on public organizations, scholars have used institutional logics as an analytical concept to investigate how institutional conditions are manifested in public administration and addressed and related to by actors (Coule & Patmore 2013; Meyer et al. 2014; Saz-Carranza & Longo 2012; Ramsdal & Bjørkquist 2020). The concept has its roots in sociology and organization theory (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton Ocasio & Lounsbury 2012), and it rests on a realist ontology suggesting that “institutional logics are real in the same way bureaucracy is real /.../ [and] exist independently of researchers analyses of them.” (Ocasio, Thornton & Lounsbury 2017, p. 511). As such, logics are clearly distinguishable from each other (Reay & Jones 2016) and vital when deciding “which solutions get considered and which solutions get linked to which problems” (Ngoye, Sierra & Ysa 2019:257).

Research shows that institutional logics gain their influence through the frames they offer, including goals, means, and principles for organizational activities, as well as motives and bases for the legitimacy of these activities. The influence of institutional logics also rests on their durability and their repeated actualization in different contexts (i.e., a logic is hardly sensitive to specific cultural and organizational contexts). In other words, institutional logics are rather persistent over time and space, and to the extent that they change or differ, it is with limited variations and often without radical consequences (Thornton, Ocasio & Lounsbury 2012).

The frames logics offer are inherent in the overarching belief systems of modern societies, which, in most writings, include seven societal institutions: the market, the state, democracy, the corporation, the family, the profession, and religion (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, 2008; Greenwood et al., 2011; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013; Thornton, Ocasio & Lounsbury, 2012). It is notable that media are not mentioned as an institutional logic in this literature.

Among the logics that emerge from the different belief systems, institutional researchers consider the *corporate logic* to be the one with the clearest link to modern organizations. It represents managerial capitalism, but studies on private firms (Pahnke, Cox, & Eisenhardt 2015; Fisher et al. 2017), higher education (Vican, Friedman & Robin 2020; Anderson & Taggart 2016), non-profit and sports organizations (Teixeira, Roglio & Marcon 2017; Nissen & Wagner 2020), as well as public sector organizations (Skelcher & Smith 2015; Berge & Torsteinsen 2022) show its omnipresence. The corporate logic legitimizes authority through bureaucratic and hierarchical structures, and it puts the upper echelons of organizations (e.g., directors and top managers) in a central position. Accordingly, decision-making is centralized, and actors gain attention and status through their position in contexts governed by the corporate logic (Thornton, Ocasio & Lounsbury 2012). In public sector organizations, the corporate logic clearly challenges the native state logic, as the former is strongly linked to transformations of public sectors by

way of the introduction and proliferation of new public management reforms, with their insistent connection to general ideas of managerialism and means–ends rationales (Hood 1991).

There are obvious differences between logics, and they govern actors in different directions. At the same time, all logics share a set of qualities that set them apart from other types of institutional forms such as ideas, conventions, or orders of worth. These shared qualities were well captured by Pahnke and her colleagues (2015) when they showed how a logic can be identified on the basis of three elements: basis of norms (i.e., who qualifies as a member of an organization and on what basis, who provides legitimacy to the organization's activities, and who has the authority to make decisions); basis of strategy (i.e., accounts concerning an organization's identity and specific strengths in relation to the organization's goals, ambitions, preferences, performance, efficiency, and related concepts); and basis of attention (i.e., how success is understood, the focus, how to achieve desirable ends, and how to evaluate an organization's activities).

Thus, when two logics exhibit significant differences in how they guide and shape the behaviors of organizations and individuals within societies, their underlying structures (i.e., basis of norms, basis of strategy, and basis of attention) remain comparable.

Assumptions

To summarize, the literature offers a detailed picture of the interactions between media and public organizations, and it is evident that media interferes with public organizations in multiple ways. These results notwithstanding, finding extensive proof of a media logic is difficult – at least if we take the logic concept seriously. The empirical results provided by previous research confirm that media are important to public organizations and their managers; however, it seems that organizations' responses associated with media exhibit different qualities and follow different paths than those suggested by the concept of media logic.

The assumption guiding this study is that media do not qualify to be defined as a logic. This means that rather than another investigation of how media interferes with public organizations, we will investigate the qualities of media and how public organizations, through their senior managers, perceive them. First, however, we outline the context for our empirical study in the next section.

Research Context, Methods, and Material

Sweden offers a highly relevant context for investigating how media are identified, understood, and possibly acted upon, and to what extent these understandings support the idea of a media logic. Sweden can be defined as a most likely case, since there are several conditions rewarding actors who develop deep understandings of how media work. This is of particular relevance for managers in government agencies.

- In line with other Nordic - but in contrast to many other - countries, the media system in Sweden relies on universally available communication systems, strong public service media, regulative support for extensive access to information, and far-reaching professionalization of journalism. This means that there is strong institutional support for independent media organizations (Syvertsen et al., 2014).
- Swedish agencies possess a high degree of autonomy in relation to their principals, and contrary to their Scandinavian equivalents; for instance, Swedish ministers are prohibited from interfering in the agencies' day-to-day activities or decisions. In addition, the Swedish government makes their decisions collectively, and therefore individual ministers are less prone to take responsibility for mishaps or failures. This means that ministers have a greater possibility to push sensitive issues towards the agencies to avoid scrutiny and critique (Figenschou et al. 2020).
- Swedish agencies are connected to various actors, interests, and settings, as many agencies have sectoral responsibilities. This gives them a central position, and they face high expectations of being responsible for whole policy areas, which most often include conflicting activities and priorities. These factors increase the possibilities for Swedish agencies to gain attention from media and journalists (Jacobsson, Pierre & Sundström 2015).

Collection of data

To gain variety in tasks as well as settings, we included managers from 40 government agencies in our selection, representing nine COFOG-divisions (OECD 2011): General public services, Defence, Public order and safety, Economic affairs, Environmental protection, Health, Recreation, Culture and religion, Education, and Social protection. The only division not included was Housing and community amenities. To ensure the respondents had experiences from media interactions, we selected agencies that occur in media frequently: The amount of media attention differed, but all agencies have had regular encounters with journalists and have been included in articles and news reports on a regular basis.

We included managers from the first and second tier, as this category of managers has a significant influence on defining and formulating how agencies understand themselves, their operations, and preferred means of achieving the multiplicity of their goals and responsibilities. They are also the most likely people to have experiences from media interactions. This gave us an opportunity to ask detailed questions about their understandings of authority, hierarchy, and media (Fredriksson, Schillemans & Pallas 2016; Pallas, Fredriksson & Wedlin 2016).

The use of interviews was motivated by the fact that words and accounts are central to institutions' construction and maintenance. How actors describe and talk about their work, their organizations, and society is a central source for those who want to capture institutional orders (Zilber 2016). The interviews were conducted in 2016–2018 by the authors and were based on a semi-structured design. The overall focus was on how the respondents perceived and understood their agencies' work, activities, structures, and identities in relation to organizational and environmental factors, including media. The first part of the interviews focused on notions of what it means to be an agency in relation to external expectations and constituencies, including questions on how the respondents understand the notion of "government agency" and how this notion applies to the primary purpose(s), strategies, and activities of agencies in general. The second part focused on the extent to which their perceptions of their organizations were related to their notions revealed during the first part of the interviews. The third part included questions about the respondents' views on media's role in relation to the agency they worked for and the politico-administrative system in general. The respondents were also asked about their experiences from media interactions; to what extent and under what circumstances media are brought up in their work; and what the aims and goals are of their agencies' communication and media activities.

Analysis of data

The interviews were transcribed into anonymized accounts. First, we used MaxQda 2018 software to identify two types of accounts: 1) those related to media and the agencies' media-related activities, and 2) those connected to the corporate logic and the agencies' hierarchical and managerial practices, structures, and values.

Initially, we listed all words included in the corpus and selected words associated with the two accounts using previous studies (see Table 1). These accounts were then coded using the following categories:

1. Norms (i.e., who qualifies as a member of the agencies and on what basis; who provides legitimacy to the agencies' activities; and who has the authority to make decisions)
2. Strategy (i.e., accounts concerning the agencies' identity and specific strengths in relation to the agencies' goals, ambitions, preferences, performance, efficiency, and other related concepts)
3. Attention (i.e., how success is understood, what to focus on, how to achieve desirable ends, and how to evaluate the agencies' activities)

Based on the arguments of Pahnke and her colleagues (2015), we consider these categories as representing a minimum of requirements for an institutional structure to be referred to as logic. After this, we compared the accounts within and between the interviews to address whether they adhere to the definition of a logic (Thornton, Ocasio & Lounsbury 2012).

Table 1. Key assumptions and keywords in the literature and the material regarding media and the corporate logic

Accounts	Media	Corporate
Key assumptions	Rests on texts, images, preferences, values, practices, and working routines that help organizations to become a part of news-producing processes. Journalists, PR-consultants, communication practitioners with specialized practical skills are legitimate actors	Rests on hierarchy and bureaucracy where top management sets rules and norms for efficient firm employees to secure status, resource management, and increase size of the organization. Stakeholders and shareholders are legitimate actors
Keywords in the material	Messages, Media, News, Communication, Visibility, Dramaturgy, Timing, Editors, Journalists, Newspapers, Radio, TV, Format, Content, Listeners, Readers, Viewers, Press	Order, money, planning, performance, price, problem, process, production, recruitment, results, resource, routine, count, numbers, strategy, structure, governance, follow-up, development, business plan, tools, well-functioning, annual report

Quotes and examples used in the following section were translated from Swedish to English by one of the authors. The translations are not literal, as we needed to comply with requirements on confidentiality and anonymity.

Findings

Accounts of media and management were well represented in the material, and the two were evident aspects of the respondents' understandings of the agencies, their activities, and decisions, as well as the field.

Media accounts

We begin by describing how our respondents understood media along the three dimensions: norms, strategy, and attention.

Norms: Membership criteria

Our respondents believed that one must have personal experience working with media and communication to become a valuable employee. General competencies were expected, and the required knowledge was developed by practice rather than formal education. It was also commonly pointed out that the necessary skills varied and were perceived as negotiable. Thus, gaining employment did not automatically require previous engagement with matters of relevance for the respective agency.

Relatedly, the value of media and communication competencies of the people working at the agencies was unclear, even though the agencies commonly expected such competencies, by those involved with communication as well as other members. Media-related competencies, our respondents argued, were difficult to specify, and it was therefore difficult to know whether expected outcomes were met. So, rather than showing results, the attention given to media seemed to be a preference, or as a general director said:

It is part of the mission to have a media role if you are the head of such a large agency ... so you have to do it. Then, of course, some people are passionate about it and prioritize it, others see it as a, well, necessary evil in the worst case. Or at least something that one should devote oneself to. But of course, it's only wrong if you prioritize it so much that other aspects [of being a agency] fall by the wayside. (#52)

Norms: Legitimacy

People who had media activities as their main responsibility had little internal legitimacy, as others tended to consider them as detached from the agency's core. Instead, this group searched for legitimacy in other places, for instance, in relation to members with similar responsibilities in other agencies. The acceptance or recognition of media activities was fluid and often based on the expectations of different external audiences.

In general, our respondents expressed uncertainty about how to evaluate media activities. They were perceived as providing a support function not strongly connected to the main responsibility of the agencies. As such, they were difficult to consider legitimate:

We measure PR value ... we have news coverage every day of what's being written about us ... to keep us up to date. We have developed support and help for the business [agency's core personnel] when meeting the media ... We are very aware of that [the media]. Then it's difficult to answer how other people in our organization see it. (#30)

Similar reflections were made when our respondents discussed relations to principals and stakeholders, pointing out that agencies were expected to represent issues for which their principals were responsible and also take part in other agencies' media activities relatively often. These activities were frequently infused with issue-specific values not necessarily reflecting the responsibilities of all involved. Thus, recognizing the agencies' core activities as legitimate stood, at times, on relatively fictitious and diffuse grounds – especially when the legitimacy was connected to the agencies' orientation on media matters.

Internally, the value of media orientation was perceived as subjective and connected to unpredictable assessments. It was an area shrouded in a certain degree of mystification. When our respondents described how they dealt with media-related activities and responsibilities, they described a decentralized, unclear, and diverse set of activities. It was evident that the interviewees' perception of their agencies' media work was difficult to grasp:

I find it a bit difficult to evaluate the role played by the media. But you can say in general that in this brand building that the agency is engaged in, the media are perceived as something very important. You [the agency] work more and more with information and communication strategies and visibility in different ways ... Then I find it a bit difficult to evaluate, in step two, how it affects my everyday life. Does it make my work more difficult or easier? (#14)

Norms: Authority structures

When our respondents discussed who had the right to make decisions regarding media, it was evident that they could be made by various actors within and from outside the agencies, making it difficult for members to clearly see where authority was located and how it was articulated. Those who were assigned to make decisions on media-related issues appeared to be distributed across different departments, units, and functions, resulting in ambiguous authority structures. Such distributed decision-making makes the foundation for authority unstable and even arbitrary. So, even if authority structures were based on explicit expectations, responding to 'authority' seemed to be voluntary. The authority structures were distributed and were 'everywhere and always' – meaning that media aspects were seen as omnipresent and open for many interpretations.

A central aspect of this omnipresence was that the authority structures seemed ambiguous and infused with what was perceived as journalistic values, while at the same time, they followed shifting public preferences concerning what was acceptable. Deciding what these external authority structures were or what or whom they represented seemed difficult, as these structures appeared both as recurring (circular) and with a certain persistence, as well as event-driven, subjective, and time-limited. The latter characteristics were partly dependent on having different audiences and value systems involved in influencing central decisions and decision-making processes:

The behavior [of the agency] is very much driven by communication outside the agency's activities ... And it's becoming more and more evident. It's also a very strong force for forming opinions or views. The media sets the agenda very much for what issues become a part of typical political reforms and, thereby, media issues become the agency's issues. (#64)

Strategy: Identity

The sense of identity at the agencies mainly connects to external nongovernment actors (mainly media) through such notions as visibility, reach, impact, and agenda-setting. Strategizing identity was based on showing that agencies did the right things by following shifts in public and media reasoning about the agencies' activities. A director-general commented:

Organizations that work through the media and advocacy become 'stronger' [more oriented towards adaption of their identities to various external impulses] in some way in this. I think I have several examples. The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency is one such organization that I think has become much worse. I think it's being worse, it's very subjective. I think many authorities are actually becoming less clear and more compliant in the wrong way in this media world. (#62)

Considerable resources were mobilized in media-related identity work; but it was a work that was difficult to connect to any clear, specified outcome. Within the media accounts, the agencies focused on an identity that represented an abstract category containing different things at different times: an identity that represented a variety of goals, such as securing public access to information, secrecy, attention, scrutiny, and status.

Strategy: Strength

Reflecting on what allows the agencies to perform well and with what means, the respondents frequently referred to sensitivity and the ability to adapt. Such sensitivity allowed, for instance, a more flexible connection between media and communication departments and the agencies' core activities; the ability to be selective about the context in which to be visible and which discussions to be a part of; and the possibility to prioritize different expectations. The agencies considered the outcome of their own operations as something that must be perceived as distinctly different from other agencies or actors occupying the same policy area. Such a strategy was described as having a continuous and flexible connection with different audiences and contexts:

You could say ... that we are open to the media, and open in general. And that we have been invited to come to different places ... so we spend quite a lot of time and resources on communication and an active communication department and active press service ... It's grateful to be a big agency that is well known. We never have a problem reaching out in different venues if we want to. (#24)

Thus, in the realm of the media accounts, the agencies' strengths were expressed in terms of responsiveness to issues, questions, or expectations expressed by and through different types of media and other nongovernment actors such as opinion-makers, experts, and industry partners.

Attention: Success and focus

Success was described as avoiding failures rather than achieving specific (media-communication) goals. Yet, others considered their agencies' success in terms of becoming and staying invisible. Especially in a context of external accountability for one's own actions and decisions, success was equal to sidestepping media scrutiny. However, the approach was contested – both within and between agencies. The contestation was expressed partly by referring to different regulatory frameworks and partly by pointing to the difficulty of navigating the many different media orientations permeating the agencies. Having a clear idea about media success was complicated – both in the contexts in which the goals were originally formulated, as well as among communication professionals and managers:

So in terms of time, this year I have spent a lot of time on internal work. Far too little on external contacts and the media, I would say ... And especially if I compare my time at [name of agency] where the media was a very large part. I hope to be able to turn that around, because I would like to spend more time, perhaps not on media, but on communication. And that is my message to the Head of Communications, so that he knows that I want to do that. So, we're trying to think much more strategically about how to get out there [to the media]. (#54)

Consequently, the agencies saw the nature of success as continuously redefined. This was also evident not least from the agencies' limited interest in documenting and formally evaluating their media activities. The interviews often revealed that as the values and priorities of the media were both hard to predict and subjective, it was difficult to find common ground for deciding whether the activities could be considered successful.

Corporate accounts

In the same manner as with the media accounts, we looked for accounts connected to the corporate logic as our respondents understood it.

Norms: Membership criteria

The corporate accounts contained specific skills and competence that employees working within areas as management, accounting, and law should possess, and competence connected to specific tasks and practical experiences based on formal and documented training was central. Professionals whose expertise allowed mutual coordination with other professions within the agencies were prioritized. Furthermore, presumptive members were expected to have acquired verifiable skills that were relevant to predefined requirements. A second-tier manager described the profile of the people that work in her department:

[We are] ... business developers, analysts, and then I have a bunch of controllers, who are either business controllers or financial controllers. Then I have [people in] the quality area as well. These are also a form of controllers. And then there are some little bit loose ones – i.e., those [who work with] processing cases and disclosing information. Those have legal expertise and are linked to the regional manager. (#54)

In addition, it was also required from members that they understood how government agencies worked as an organization in terms of delivering on their goals and expected results. This required high levels of formal education, but new organizational members were also expected to learn on-site, which required extensive socialization.

Norms: Legitimacy

The agencies were considered to receive recognition and legitimacy through formalized and standardized professional performance evaluations, and cooperation with stakeholders was understood as creating complexity and thereby downplaying the need for uniqueness. Responsibility and autonomy were connected to formal structures and goals and within the resources and framework that the government set. What was defined as important and relevant was based in formal structures and policies. Thus, perceiving different parts of the agencies and their activities as legitimate included compliance with predefined performance standards, norms, and measurements that other parts and professions recognize. The typical description of this includes dictating clear, explicit, and hierarchical priorities and ‘autonomy under responsibility’.

Our interviewees stressed clarity in identifying the appropriate course of action, which other actors to consider, and to whom to relate. Even if internal legitimacy was recognized as the most important, other actors were mentioned, including the government and instances for control and evaluation, as well as professional associations, research institutes, and consultants.

Norms: Authority structures

Who decides on different matters (and on what basis) was considered relatively easy to predict, and it provided stability. The respondents argued that the authority structures were recognized throughout the agencies, especially in relation to economic and technical issues, such as financial flows and the production of services.

Another salient feature of the authority structures was their strong connection to what was understood as tangible and real. Even when the accounts referred to somewhat abstract ideals, they seemed to be recognizable within and across the agencies. Personified by senior representatives, the authority structures represented specific norms, policies, and laws that were easily identifiable, accessible, and interpretable in relation to the agencies’ internal goals and priorities. As such, they could be delegated and validated in different parts of the agencies and at a more aggregated level.

Strategy: Identity

In terms of identity, the respondents pointed out that their own agencies primarily align with other agencies, describing features such as functionality, cost-effectiveness, and performance. Characteristics distinguishing agencies from each other were not necessary nor explicitly

expected. Identity was rather based on widely accepted properties and qualities that were resilient over time. A director-general commented on his agency's autonomy to shape the nature of its responsibilities:

The more structured, and the larger these structures become and the more intertwined they are with other activities, the less leeway and space there is to let personal experiences and views shape the work [and identity of the agency]. (#63)

The agencies were recognized as embedded in larger governing structures that emphasized efficiency. Even if the agencies were individually evaluated in relation to what they were set to perform, the identity issues were described as taking place within a broader governing regime.

Accordingly, the agencies' identities within the corporate accounts were described as rational and linked to the identities of other agencies. They were also non-negotiable and relatively stable over time. There was relatively little space for a re-evaluation and re-definition of an agency's purpose, internal organization, procedures, and practices.

Strategy: Strength

Defining core qualities and competencies was related to planning and execution. The agencies were described as being confined by the generally accepted operational framework:

We set up a whole new division of operations and financial management. And then we've invested a lot in the HR side, so we've also now actually developed our own performance management system ... It's a bit different from how many government agencies work. But I think it's definitely within the framework of how a government agency [as an effective organization] should work. (#55)

Another aspect of the corporate accounts related to breaking down and specifying (in detail) goals and tasks. This, in turn, presupposed that the goals were widely accepted and agreed upon. However, strength also related to an agency's connection to other agencies' efforts and work. To be capable of delivering on one's own goals, the agencies' must be involved in collective and collaborative relationships and structures.

Attention: Success and focus

The respondents were in agreement on the importance of smooth, predictable, and efficient execution of the agencies' internal goals to reach success – mostly within a context of being a part of the public sector and its governing structures. To succeed was to achieve goals that reflected what an agency's constituencies considered an expected outcome, which limited the agencies' room to avoid or redefine what to do and how. Even if individual departments of an agency had their own goals and were internally evaluated in relation to these goals, success rested on structured and formal assessment, where standardized processes and routines were expected to reflect the agency's aggregated responsibilities. The quantitative focus of the evaluation and evading subjective parameters, such as feelings, estimations, and hunches, also strengthen the clarity of assessment. What the agencies' personnel consider to be the core of their attention was thereby closely connected to tangible goals, professional norms, standardized administrative procedures, and other measurables.

Discussion

Media were important when managers described, explained, and reflected on their agencies and operations, and media-related issues received much attention. Dealing with media was regarded as a natural phenomenon, with the active incorporation of media into decision-making and planning was deemed inevitable. More specifically, the media accounts included general preferences and values, and were related to common practices. Managers understood media as linked to a particular set of norms, values, and preconceived assumptions that went beyond the discretion of the individual manager and agency. These norms, values, and assumptions specified the forms, activities, and procedures an agency should adopt in order to appear as a member-in-good-standing of its class (cf. Barley & Tolbert 1997; Meyer & Rowan 1977). Thereby the media accounts met the prerequisites for being understood as a shared institution –

a finding confirmed in several studies within mediatization research on public organizations (Figenschou et al., 2019; Schillemans, 2012, 2019).

However, specific aspects of the media accounts need to be addressed before we can assess the institutional status of these accounts. First, our material was filled with remarks on the agencies' media activities as a clearly inescapable yet contested practice – a practice that had low internal legitimacy and that received relatively weak support from several professions occupying the agencies (Pallas, Fredriksson & Wedlin 2016). Commonly, the managers struggled to provide a conceptual understanding or a clear definition of what media are, how they work, what values they offer their organizations, how to evaluate the effects of the agencies' media activities, and how to justify the prominence media were given compared to other types of activities. The media accounts resemble a set of various ideas and activities that, on the one hand, appear highly technical and precise and, on the other, lead to considerable confusion when put into different contexts or when mobilized in relation to specific issues (Fredriksson & Pallas 2016).

More generally, the managers' understandings of media appeared fragmented and vague, because the managers had difficulties addressing media within a coherent referential framework – not least in terms of how agencies should use, evaluate, legitimize, staff, and relate their media activities and practices vis-à-vis the rest of their operations. For example, the managers in our study demonstrated difficulties in explaining how and why values connected to journalistic preferences (Klijn 2016), news content (Peters 2016), and communication principles (Pallas, Fredriksson & Wedlin 2016) were important for their agencies. In our reading, the accounts described media as an institution with a fragmented infrastructure (cf. Faulconbridge & Muzio 2021) with a limited number of activities, relationships, and coalitions stabilizing the relationships between the agencies and media (cf. Fligstein 2013).

The non-logical properties of media accounts

The unclear and ambiguous institutional underpinning of the media accounts becomes even more apparent when we systematically compare these accounts with the managers' understandings of their agencies' hierarchical and managerial practices, structures, and values. Even though both types of accounts bear witness to institutionalized characteristics, they differ significantly regarding integration, internal coherence, and persistency (Nielsen, Wæraas & Dahl 2020; Blomgren & Waks 2017; Figenschou et al 2019; Fredriksson, Schillemans & Pallas 2015). That is, they clearly exhibit different characteristics in relation to institutional logics (Ocasio, Thornton & Lounsbury 2017; Reay & Jones, 2016) (see Table 2).

Table 2. A comparison of the qualities of media and corporate accounts

Dimension	Attributes	Media accounts	Corporate accounts
Basis of norms	Membership criteria	Less clear qualification and criteria for evaluation. Semi-profession.	Clear qualification and criteria for evaluation. Specific skills. Formal profession.
	Legitimacy	Variation in who legitimized and on what basis. Subjective and event-driven. Low degree of standardization. Variation between contexts.	Predictable who legitimized and on what basis. Objective and continuous. Standardized. Comparable between contexts.
	Authority structure	Based in fantasy and loose structures (cognition). Difficult to recognizable and access. Can't be delegated. Informal and vertical.	Based in reality. Based in fixed structures (law, strong norms). Accessible. Recognizable. Can be delegated. Formal and hierarchical. Easily identifiable.
Basis of strategy	Identity	Distinct and discrete. Unique. Floating and disconnected from others. Departing from informal requirements. Negotiable.	Not distinctive. Comparable. Embedded and inter-connected. Based in formal requirements/assignments. Not negotiable.
	Strengths	Avoiding comparison and evaluation over time. Flexible connection to core activities. Selective and adjustable.	Performing individually as a part of a collective in relation to ideal type. Substantial performance. Accountable.
Basis of attention	Success	Less focus on standardized, shared practices, structures and values according to predefined standards/criteria. External validation by multiplicity of constituencies. Unclear what success is.	Following standardized, shared practices, structures and values according to predefined standards/criteria. Skills constantly mobilized and structured to be measured and evaluated both by central internal and external constituencies.
	Prioritized assets	On subjective, temporal objectives. Success is dependent flexibility and shaping external perceptions. Opportunities. Here and now.	On formal objectives. Success is dependent on following instructions not to modify them. Long-term. Essence over own organization.

Using the basis of norms, strategy, and attention to assess the characteristics of the two types of accounts left us with an understanding of the media accounts as rather fuzzy and ambiguous, not only within individual agencies but also at an aggregate level. Instead of a coherent referential framework, our respondents connected media and the agencies' media activities to different institutional contexts where they were given different meanings. For instance, by connecting the media accounts to the political sphere, the managers emphasized media in terms

of news, news production, and public debate; elsewhere shifted their focus to branding and positioning; and by referring to agencies' embeddedness in bureaucratic structures, stressed the importance of media in the context of public information and openness. Thereby, media accounts were linked to a vast range of concepts, aims, forms, contents, and patterns of communication (Craig 2019; van Grinsven, Sturdy & Heusinkveld 2020; Fredriksson & Edwards 2019).

In contrast, accounts capturing the managers' ideas about management, hierarchy, and authority resonated well with the corporate logic – characteristics broadly accepted and described both in general writings on logics (Thornton & Ocasio 1999) as well as in studies on public organizations (Meyer et al. 2014; Berg & Pinheiro 2016). The confidence with which the managers connected their agencies with their understandings of the corporate accounts was evident and stood witness to a coherent and stable referential framework. The managers described and conceptualized these aspects distinctly and could relatively quickly refer to widely accepted views on managerialism, rationality, and strategic planning. There was also a coherence in how they connected their agencies' goals, priorities, and identities associated with these views. The managers showed high levels of awareness of the managerial practices, structures, and values and where they were formulated, by whom, and what outcome they were expected to have, contributing to internal as well as external support and legitimacy.

Conclusion

Our study provides empirical support for refuting the omnipotent existence of a clear and consistent media logic. More specifically, our findings reveal that public managers understand and rationalize media in a manner that makes it challenging to provide clear-cut answers to what media means for their organizations. The qualities associated with media are evidently different from the ones that are commonly taken for granted among scholars, and accordingly, we need another understanding of media, both of their specific and institutional form and of how they are manifested in public organizations. Compared with the coherent referential system that seems to encompass the corporate logic – also with its roots in another context – the understandings of media and media-oriented activities appear as far more contextual, contingent, and driven by individual events. Therefore, media are generally more open for interpretation, local adaptations, and contextualization than would be suggested by the media logic rationale (Pallas, Fredriksson & Wedlin 2016). In tandem with recent developments of the (digital) media landscape, we are therefore in a better position if we approach media in their institutional form as weakly integrated, inconsistent, and ambiguous (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Pallas 2022). Such understandings of media relate to what the mediatization literature sometimes label as a 'weak form of mediatization'. In practice, it is a de-centralization of "the media or, indeed, any uniform 'media logic'", as it sees mediatization as connected to other major social and cultural processes (Ampuja, Koivisto & Väliverronen 2014, p. 116–117). This provides a better understanding of media and their effects, not only in public sector contexts but potentially across also in other environments.

In a broader sense, our study contributes to a further understanding of what it means for public organizations to handle increased uncertainty. The institutional structures surrounding public organizations are primarily treated as complex and conflicting but still relatively open for strategic responses. Our study points in another direction. The way managers understand and respond to institutional pressures, such as those associated with media, are, to a much greater extent, characterized not only by uncertainty linked to a lack of necessary knowledge about what constitutes the underlying qualities of the institutional structures at hand; but also by ambiguity about what meanings to mobilize and follow when these structures are to be introduced into and acted upon in specific organizational contexts (cf. Meyer & Höllerer 2016; Sahlin 2014). By revealing how managers understand media, our study contributes to the development of a non-logical approach for research on institutional structures and a critical view of how the concept of logic is applied. Logics constitute an essential part of an organization's institutional environment, and they travel across organizational and sectoral borders without losing (much) significance. This is confirmed in our study, but our findings also provide empirical evidence

that not all institutionally derived governance and organizational rationales have the necessary characteristics to be considered logical. By showing this and questioning the notion of a coherent and distinct media logic, this study can be used as a springboard to challenge the validity and the usefulness of the different concepts we use in understanding the institutional embeddedness of organizations. Our study illustrates the need for greater caution in ascribing meanings and domains of application to central theoretical concepts – an illustration that is valid both within and outside institutional theorizing.

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Conflict of Interest

No conflicts of interest.

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