The Many Faces of Public Affairs:
A Study of Constructs, Conditions and Claims in a Disputed Field of Practice

Elin Helgesson

Main supervisor: Kajsa Falasca
Co-supervisors: Christina Grandien., Alexander Buhmann.

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Faculty of Science, Technology and Media
Mid Sweden University, Holmgatan 10
Phone: +46 (0)10 142 80 00

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Lumos!

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Elin Helgesson
Sundsvall, 29/9 2023

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Abstract

This thesis explores the communicative constructs and practices of public affairs in Sweden. As a mainstream communication function, public affairs is undertaken by a wide range of actors who wish to influence public policy, and the opportunity to do so is a vital part of any democratic system. At the same time, the practice of public affairs is closely associated with secrecy, inequality and accusations of poor ethics, which makes critical voices question whether lobbyists impede democratic processes. To join the conversation on the role of public affairs in society, this thesis approaches public affairs from several perspectives. The main focus is a specific group of public affairs practitioners, namely consultants.

The thesis illustrates how lobbying has been framed and discussed in the media and considers how these discourses relate to the debate on lobbying in general. Further, it describes values, attitudes and conceptualizations amongst public affairs practitioners through the study of role conceptions. The studies in the thesis present new nuances or categories of roles and hence adds to previous research on the modelling of roles. Moreover, the results show that many public affairs consultants are claiming a proactive role where they pursue clients and assignments based on their own independent agendas and on personal ethics, and I discuss whether consultants should act as political agents or impartial advocates in their occupational role. The dissertation further engages with the issue of legitimacy and stigma surrounding public affairs and shows how the tainted image of public affairs serves as a resource and impediment in the construction of an occupational identity. Overall, the contribution of the dissertation is a more nuanced and varied understanding of various constructs of public affairs, conditions for public affairs work, and the consequences the practices have for society and the building of democratic cultures.

Summary in Swedish

Möjligheten att påverka politiska beslut genom lobbying är en viktig del i alla demokratiska system. Samtidigt är public affairs nära förknippat med hemlighetsmakeri och bristande etik, vilket får kritiker att hävda att lobbyister hämmar demokratiska processer och skapar ojämlika förutsättningar att påverka politiken. För att bidra till debatten utforskar denna avhandling hur public affairs kommunikativt konstrueras och hur public affairs praktiseras, ur flera perspektiv. Ett speciellt fokus är en omstridd grupp av public affairs-utövare: public affairs-konsulter.

Avhandlingen illustrerar hur lobbying har diskuterats och framställts i media och överväger hur dessa diskurser förhåller sig till debatten om lobbying i allmänhet. Vidare studeras hur olika professionella public affairs-utövare själva ser på sin yrkesroll och sin funktion genom att undersöka värderingar, attityder och konceptualiseringar inom yrket. Studiernas resultat kompletterar tidigare forskning om yrkesroller genom att presentera nya nyanser och kategorier av roller inom fältet. Resultaten visar även att många public affairs-konsulter antar en proaktiv roll där de tar sig an kunder och uppdrag baserat på sina egna agendor och personliga etik, vilket är ett resultat som knyter an till diskussionen om konsulter ska agera som politiska agenter eller opartiska representanter i sin yrkesroll. Avhandlingen behandlar vidare frågan om legitimitet och stigma i relation till public affairs och undersöker hur den negativa bilden av public affairs fungerar både som resurs och hinder i konstruktionen av en yrkesidentitet. Sammantaget är avhandlingens bidrag en mer nyanserad och varierad bild av olika konstruktioner av public affairs, förutsättningarna för public affairs-arbete och de konsekvenser som public affairs som praktik har för samhället och för utvecklingen av demokratiska kulturer.

List of Articles

Article I

The Construction of an Elusive Concept: Framing the Controversial Role and Practice of Lobbying in Swedish Media.
Public Relations Inquiry, vol. 6: 3, ss. 275-291 (co-authored with Kajsa Falasca) 2017.

Article II

Revolving around Roles: Public Affairs Practitioners as Democratic Enablers or as Hired Guns.
Public Relations Review, vol. 47: 1 (co-authored with Kajsa Falasca). 2021.

Article III

Paid to Lobby but up for Debate: Role Conceptions and Client Selection of Public Affairs Consultants.
Journal of Communication Management, published online ahead-of-print. 2023.

Article IV

Folk Devils and Moral Vigilantes: The Occupational Branding of Public Affairs Consultants and the Management of Stigma
Under review

The Many Faces of Public Affairs: A Study of Constructs, Conditions and Claims in a Disputed Field of Practice

Public affairs is a vibrant and controversial topic. As a mainstream communication function, public affairs is undertaken by a wide range of actors who wish to influence public policy, and the opportunity to do so is a vital part of any democratic system (Ihlen et al., 2022; Koch & Schulz-Knappe, 2021). At the same time, the practice of public affairs is closely associated with secrecy, inequality and accusations of poor ethics, which makes critical voices question whether lobbyists impede democratic processes (Ihlen et al., 2022; Moloney & McGrath, 2020). In a recent political motion, the authors called for the Swedish parliament to urgently review the lobbyists' role in the political system, arguing that "[i]n recent years, several leaks and disclosures in the media have shown that parties and politicians at various levels of society allowed themselves to be influenced by heavy lobbyists and capital interests. This damages trust in democracy and opens the way for whoever has the biggest wallet to buy themselves advantages in society" (Motion 2022/23:1126, author's own translation). This quote captures much of the social concern regarding public affairs in the current debate, and underscores the need for public trust and democratic legitimacy to be rooted in the perception that "the rules of the influence game are fair and open" (Davidson, 2017, p. 1).

Over the course of a few decades the prerequisites for public affairs work have evolved and public affairs tactics and strategies have become more professionalized and sophisticated (Berg & Bonewits Feldner, 2019). New pressing issues fuel the debate on public affairs and its role in democratic society. One such issue is the growing presence of public affairs consultants in the political landscape (Hoffmann et al., 2011; Lounasmeri, 2018; Steiner & Jarren, 2009). As public affairs consultancy has come to be described as a new communicative elite (Palm & Sandström, 2014) and a successful new market (Tyllström, 2013) that often remains hidden from scrutiny (Ihlen et al., 2021), scholars query whether selling expertise on a contractual basis is reshaping both political participation and policymaking (Steiner & Jarren, 2009; Walker, 2014). The rise of the consultancy market has inspired the development of terms such as a "consultocracy" and a "PR-itisation" of politics (Kantola, 2016; Louw, 2005) and generated a call for further attention to how public affairs consultants potentially foster and obstruct democracy (Steiner & Jarren, 2009).

In a general sense, the debate on public affairs includes two very conflicting pictures. Nothhaft (2017) described it in terms of a lobbyist being wanted and unwanted at the same time, where the contribution of public affairs in the political landscape is necessary but also met with suspicion. This dissertation takes this as its starting point and will revolve around this tension. To join this conversation and capture the unclear and changing contours of public affairs work, the thesis will explore the communicative constructs and practices of public affairs in Sweden. Its main focus is a specific group of public affairs practitioners, namely consultants, whose presence in the political landscape brings many of the concerns regarding public affairs to a head.

Disposition

In this introductory chapter, I present the purpose of the dissertation, followed by an overview of key terms and research in the field of public affairs and lobbying. Next, the theoretical foundations that have guided the research are outlined. After that, the empirical setting and Swedish context, which set important frames for the studies in the dissertation, are described. This is followed by a reflection on the scientific perspective and a description of the methodological approach and the materials. Finally, conclusions are drawn, and the contribution of the studies and suggestions for future research are discussed. At the end of the chapter, the reader can find summaries of the four articles included in the dissertation.

Purpose and Research Questions

The aim of the thesis is to explore the communicative constructs and practices of public affairs in Sweden. This involves analysing perceptions and claims regarding public affairs, the occupational roles of public affairs practitioners and the legitimacy or stigma surrounding the practice. The main focus is a specific group of public affairs practitioners, namely consultants.

This purpose is addressed through the following research questions:

I. How is the concept of public affairs framed and perceived by Swedish media?
II. How are different public affairs roles constructed and perceived by practitioners?
III. How do public affairs consultants manage stigma associated with their professional identity and occupation?

The dissertation as a whole thus seeks to provide, through the four articles that constitute the body of the dissertation, a more nuanced and varied understanding of various constructs of public affairs, conditions for public affairs work, and the consequences the practices have for society and the building of democratic cultures.

Definition of Key Terms

The topic of public affairs and lobbying has been discussed in a variety of scholarly disciplines including political science, legal studies and public relations research (Bunea & Baumgartner, 2014; Davidson, 2015; Naurin, 2001). Public affairs professionals have been studied under the umbrella of *interest group representation* (Kimball et al., 2012; Kollman, 1998), as part of *policy professionals* defined as an elite group of professionals who are employed to influence politics without being elected (Garsten et al., 2015; Svallfors, 2016), as *corporate political activity* (CPA), referring to attempts by corporations to shape political policy (Hillman et al., 2004; Tyllström & Murray, 2021), and as *political public relations*, entailing a research field that aims to fuse public relations with political communication (Strömback & Kiousis, 2020). The centrality of public affairs is also mirrored in the increasing number of communication and public relations scholars who focus on exploring the role, function and practice of public affairs and lobbying (Davidson, 2015, 2022; Ihlen et al., 2022; Ihlen & Raknes, 2020; Moloney & McGrath, 2020; Nothhaft, 2017). However, in spite of the great scholarly interest in public affairs as a topic, there is no single agreed definition of either public affairs or lobbying. In view of this, I will address research and debate on the key concepts of public affairs and lobbying in the next section. Lastly, I present a working definition of public affairs for this dissertation.

Clarifying the Discussion on Public Affairs and Lobbying

Within public relations research, public affairs is often treated as a specialism or a subfield. Yet, the use of the term "public affairs" tends to vary greatly (McGrath et al., 2010) and it remains a practice in search of a clear identity (Harris & Moss, 2001). At times it is used as a synonym of lobbying, and at times it encompasses a "nexus of politics, management and communication whereby an organization seeks to deal with external public policy challenges" (McGrath et al., 2010, p. 336). Somerville (2011) concluded that public affairs cannot be regarded as "simply lobbying", as it involves functions such as monitoring and gathering intelligence and indirect engagement with relevant stakeholders. "Public affairs" has progressively come to be viewed as an overarching term for communication intended to influence policy and in which lobbying is a core function (Davidson, 2022). In the same vein, Davidson presented a broad definition of public affairs as "the management of relationships and the building of discursive communities across a broad range of stakeholder networks in order to create, re-create, or replace shared interpretations of reality on any issue that may have policy implications" (Davidson, 2015, p. 624).

Lobbying is also a debated concept. The study of lobbying has long roots, yet, as stated by Milbrath (1963), "the words 'lobbyist' and 'lobbying' have meanings so varied that use of them almost inevitably leads to misunderstanding" (Milbrath, 1963). In simple terms, lobbying is defined as "an effort designed to affect what the government does" (Nownes, 2006, p. 6). Lobbying is, at its core, a communication process and practice (Nothhaft, 2017). Within public relations studies, definitions tend to place an emphasis on relationship building – for example, Cutlip et al. (2000, p. 19) define lobbying as "the specialist part of public relations that builds and maintains relations with government primarily for the purpose of influencing legislation and regulation". Some scholars have studied lobbying based on the lobbying strategies used by different groups. Differentiating between *inside* and *outside lobbying*, this line of research concludes that "insider groups" favour direct lobbying strategies, such as talking to policymakers, whereas "outsider groups", who lack access to politicians, seek influence through indirect strategies, such as media relations, campaigns and mobilizing citizens (Binderkrantz, 2005; Kollman, 1998; Trapp & Laursen, 2017). Here the notion of direct and indirect lobbying strategies is of importance, as they illustrate two different spans of strategies through which influence can be wielded.

While working on this dissertation, I have encountered, among both scholars and practitioners, an ongoing and sometimes frustrated debate regarding the conceptualization of key terms. The definition of, and distinction between, "public affairs" and "lobbying" has been a conundrum, as there is an apparent gap in the use of these concepts among scholars, research tradition, journals and practitioners. One illustrative point of this gap is that the term "public affairs" does not currently exist in the Swedish language. It does not exist in the dictionary, in the national encyclopedia or on the government's website, which uses lobbying as a concept in commissions and referrals. In contrast, "public affairs" is used in Swedish society, and the notion of public affairs as an industry is well established. Amongst others, courses on public affairs are found at Swedish universities, and the term is used by, for example, the Swedish association for public relation companies (PRECIS) as well as the Swedish Communication Association (Sveriges kommunikatörer). When setting out to perform the studies in this dissertation it became evident that the use of the terms differed greatly – for example, the media prefer the term "lobbying", whereas it was close to impossible to find a lobbyist to interview as the industry almost exclusively uses the term "public affairs". Consequently, performing research in this field has required attention to the nuances and language of each separate context in terms of which word is most suitable to use. As a result, in order to authentically capture each setting, the terminology differs among the articles.

A Working Definition of Public Affairs

As the title "The Many Faces of Public Affairs" illustrates, I have settled on using the term "public affairs". In this dissertation I use a broad definition of public affairs. As such, public affairs is viewed as a practice that has lobbying and advocacy at its heart but acknowledges that public affairs is a speciality that covers a range of accompanying activities, such as management of relationships, the creation of discourses and the gathering of intelligence. It hence covers both "inside" and "outside" lobbying strategies (Binderkrantz, 2005). The reason for this broader definition is to encompass a wide variety of practices and perspectives on public affairs. I argue that this is necessary to capture the rich texture of public affairs work in the Swedish context. The choice is also anchored in the group of professionals that, for the most part, I have studied – namely consultants – who have claimed public affairs as their field of practice rather than lobbying. This working definition is therefore a reflection of the public affairs business evolving in the Swedish context. The use of the terms varies among the articles in the following way. The first article explores how lobbying is discussed and framed in Swedish media. Here the term "lobbying" is used, as Swedish media almost exclusively use "lobbying" instead of "public affairs" as a term. In articles two, three and four I have engaged with public affairs consultants. Here, both the terms "public affairs" and "lobbying" are utilized in order to join the conversation and larger debate on the topic.

The Communicative Construction of the “Meaning of Work”

Research on public affairs emphasizes that public affairs as a practice is of importance, but that the role and function of public affairs are unclear (Nothhaft, 2017; Tyllström, 2013). Yet clarity of “the meaning of work”, entailing shared understandings of an occupation's essence or fundamental character, provides important frames for how work is organized and streamlines expectations and interactions with its practitioners (Ashcraft, 2007, 2013). In view of this, continual exploration of how the meaning of public affairs work is constructed can shed light onto what is taking place and changing in public affairs, but it can also provide important insights into the debate on the role and function of public affairs in the building of democratic cultures. The focus of the studies in this dissertation has therefore been on the construction of the meaning of work and how occupational roles, claims and perceptions can be discussed in relation to the occupational group, practice and society at large.

I draw on the perspective that occupations are formed through discursive struggles (Ashcraft, 2007, 2013; Ashcraft et al., 2012; McDonald & Kuhn, 2016; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). Challenging assumptions that the construction of occupational roles occurs *at work*, this perspective holds that occupational phenomena are a collective work that exceeds the boundaries of the workplace (Ashcraft, 2013). This distinction signifies that the nature of work is continually negotiated and that this negotiation occurs at a multitude of sites, such as at workplaces and labour organizations, in families and educational institutions, and in popular culture (Ashcraft, 2007).

A further cornerstone of the analysis is the observation that this negotiation is conducted through communication, and that public affairs roles can in turn be viewed as communicative constructs. Thus, public affairs is regarded as a communicative construct in the sense that “it comes into being through acts of communication that allow for the idea to circulate, to be used, to be argued and challenged, and incorporated into laws, regulation, policies and practices" (Johnston & Pieczka, 2018, p. 23). Communicative constructs are closely connected to the topic of discourses, where discourses defined as systems of representations constitute a context for language use (Ashcraft, 2007). These discourses are a "(loosely) affiliated set of metaphors, images, stories, statements, meanings, and so forth that generate a particular and socially recognizable version of people, things, events" (Ashcraft, 2007, p. 11). In constructing the meaning of work, practitioners tweak and negotiate available discourses as they navigate contemporary changes and lived frictions (Ashcraft, 2007).

Occupational Roles and Identity

The concepts of *occupational roles* and *occupational identity* have been important theoretical lenses in my research and serve the purpose of shedding light on the different ways practitioners understand and interpret their roles and how the meaning of work is constructed. Either or both terms occur in all the texts in this dissertation in one way or another, and while the terms overlap there are subtle differences between them.

Occupational roles is an area that has a long tradition of research within public relations theory (Dozier & Broom, 2006). Roles have been explored as concrete activities or tasks – in other words, as descriptions of what practitioners are doing (Cutlip et al., 2000), conceptualized as an expected attitude and behaviour, norms and ideals of individuals in a certain position (Mellado, 2021) and as constructs developed during the work life of practitioners through socialization and their understanding of others' expectation of the role at hand (Biddle, 1986; Koch & Schulz-Knappe, 2021). Occupational identity refers to the "shifting, material, and discursive framing of image and practices associated with a particular type of work" (Meisenbach, 2008). Occupational identity is a depiction of work shaped through ongoing negotiation aimed at creating a representation of an occupation and its practitioners in a way that creates value, worth and legitimacy (Meisenbach, 2008). While showing strong similarities, scholars often concur that roles and identities differ slightly, where role research often accentuates external input, whereas identity draws on inner dynamics, internalized meanings and internal expectations of the practitioners (Wolf et al., 2020). Occupational roles and identities hence evolve in tandem, which explains why the concepts are often used interchangeably in research, which I also do. For example, Wolf et al. summarized the interconnection as follows: "Identity includes how the role occupant interprets and makes sense of a role. The external description of a role is likely to affect the way people think about the role, whereas a person's identity influences the way one enacts this role" (Wolf et al., 2020).

The Complex Case of Public Affairs Roles

There are circumstances that add complexity to the negotiation and construction of roles. For public affairs I wish to highlight two such issues that I have found especially relevant and that in themselves are interconnected: first, the elusive boundaries of public affairs work, and second, the legitimacy challenge of public affairs.

The Elusive Boundaries of Public Affairs Work

Public affairs is elusive in the sense that it is found at the intersection between the political sphere, the public sphere, the media and clients (Létang, 2007; Lounasmeri, 2018; Palm & Sandström, 2014). This means that practitioners of public affairs manoeuvre within numerous and sometimes contradictory contexts and in relation to a variety of stakeholders. The multitude of contexts and stakeholders can be a breeding ground for tensions, where competing demands, contradictory logics or paradoxes cause practitioners to define themselves and the meaning of work in different ways (Fiol et al., 2009; Ghadiri et al., 2015). The core functions and fundamental values of public affairs, as well as how practitioners incorporate, renounce and accommodate advocacy and persuasion in their occupational role, are brought into question by the frequently contradictory demands. For example, the idea of professionalism requires professionals to serve both the public interest and the client's interest at the same time; however, individual public affairs professionals are expected to assess and handle the tension between these dual pressures (Barron & Skountridaki, 2020). The situation invites discussions on the perception of roles, the functions and values of public affairs (see, for example, Fitzpatrick & Bronstein, 2006), issues of power and societal legitimacy (see, for example, Ihlen et al., 2018) and discussions on what constitutes "good" democracy (see, for example, von den Driesch & van der Wurff, 2016).

Public affairs is, however, not only elusive due to its multi-contextual nature, but it is also a loosely defined occupational group and hence mirrors the shifting boundaries many contemporary occupations are experiencing (Slay & Smith, 2011). While established professions come with much prepackaged occupational identity content, such as occupational values, legitimating ideologies, clear goals, tasks and/or routines, new or emerging occupational groups are faced with less input and are put in a situation where practitioners must create identity content themselves (Murphy & Kreiner, 2020). Knowledge-based occupations, lacking official credentials and professional status in the "traditional sense" (Muzio et al., 2011; Noordegraaf, 2015), are, as such, characterized by instability where the occupation is in a constant state of becoming (Kantola, 2016). This instability is further of relevance when focusing on the specific subgroup of public affairs consultants. Continual negotiation of the meaning of work is a characteristic of consultancy work in general, as the composition of consultancy skills and services is continually defined and redefined (Fincham & Clark, 2002). Thus, the flexible nature of consultancy work creates the opportunity for consultants to negotiate, select and construct an occupational role for themselves.

The Legitimacy Challenge of Public Affairs

Legitimacy is a multifaced issue in public affairs. Not only is legitimacy embedded in the practice of public affairs, as creating and preserving legitimacy is a core object of the vocation (Berg & Bonewits Feldner, 2019), but legitimacy is also of importance for practitioners' ability to receive societal acceptance and hence what can be likened to a licence to operate, as well as for obtaining clients and marketability (Merkelsen, 2011). Yet legitimacy, or rather the lack of it, constitutes a challenge for public affairs practitioners.

While it is tempting to regard legitimacy as a "you are legitimate" or "you are not legitimate" notion, legitimacy is not a "binary variable". Instead, legitimacy varies in both degree and certainty – sometimes at the same time (Reinecke et al., 2015). Drawing on Suchman's definition that "legitimacy is a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574), it is clear that legitimacy is driven by perception and therefore rooted in social evaluation by different audiences (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014; Helms et al., 2019). As such, legitimacy is not something that can be *managed* and instead much study has been devoted to understanding legitimacy as a concept, how it is negotiated and its role in society (Ihlen et al., 2018).

Building on the insight that public affairs spans a variety of contexts that at times create tensions, legitimacy is a key concept that embodies the core of several of those tensions and ambivalences. As an explanatory model, this tension can be described using Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) "orders of worth". In short, the authors concluded that society consists of different "worlds" that are guided by their own "order of worth", i.e. they are guided by separate ideas of what constitutes value, and what is deemed legitimate and just (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). For example, in what is labelled the *civic world*, legitimacy is found in the collective as a principle, emphasizing equality and the common good. In contrast, the *market world* is guided by competition as a principle, where market worth, monetary achievements and wealth are the focus. Without going too deeply into Boltanski and Thévenot's theory, their framework illustrates that what qualifies as legitimate differs among contexts, and that tensions between contexts can result in legitimacy challenges and the need for negotiation and justification. This is especially visible when an actor must draw on values from two or more "orders of worth" where multiple legitimacy claims coexist and compete. In the case of public affairs, the most obvious challenge where legitimacy principles clash is that between society and business, and the different legitimacy claims that are guiding in the political versus the market logic (Helgesson & Grandien, 2015). In turn, the continuous back and forth between clash and coexistence of these logics may have a range of consequences. For example, the perception that public affairs consultants prioritize profit-making over contributing to the policy debate at the same time as being portrayed as key actors in the political landscape has created a legitimacy challenge that reaches beyond the occupational group itself. The OECD (2012, p. 26) stressed that public affairs as a profession has reached a point where it is at a "crossroads when it comes to supporting or undermining political legitimacy". The report concludes that since public affairs has become closely associated with the notion of the special interests of the rich and with deceitful practices, the public's trust in not only public affairs, but also in government, has fallen dangerously low.

The lack of legitimacy becomes an inevitable parameter in the construction of occupational roles and in practitioners' ability to present their occupation as meaningful to a wider audience. In view of this, a stream of research aims to explore how occupations that face issues with their image and reputation negotiate identity and manage tensions in their work (Meisenbach, 2008). The perceived image of an occupation and its practitioners can be compromised or shattered when practitioners are faced with tasks that clash with their asserted occupational identity (Morales & Lambert, 2013). Tensions or moments of stigma can hence constitute a threat or a challenge to practitioners' occupational legitimacy and prompt the need to engage with different stakeholders and justify the practice.

The Empirical Setting

Public affairs, as with any other social practice, is anchored and coloured by the context in which it takes place. While Sweden is similar to other democracies in western Europe, and especially to other small welfare states, (Bengtson et al., 2014), there are certain features that are influential in the way public affairs is practised and has developed in the Swedish context.

Therefore, the following section provides a review of historical developments in politics and the public affairs industry, as well as describing characteristics that influence the Swedish public affairs scene.

From Corporatism to Something Else

Modern-day Sweden has a heritage of a corporatist policymaking style. In the 1930s, the so-called "Swedish model" took shape. The Swedish model was characterized by a high degree of formal influence. The state invited selected stakeholders, such as labour market organizations and trade unions, to participate in decision-making in order to level out power imbalances and encourage "special interest" to take social responsibility. This gave these stakeholders a unique position of political influence in an institutionalized form (Lundberg, 2014). Parallel to this, selected stakeholders were encouraged to participate in commissions of inquiries and referrals before political decisions were made (Petersson, 2015).

The corporatist tradition was unchallenged for several decades. However, in the late 1980s, a change in the discourse about corporatism took root and the support for the corporatist system weakened. Öberg (2015) described the change as sudden and dramatic. Scholars have presented no singular or uniform explanation as to why the debate started when it did (Naurin, 2001), but the changes represented the starting point for a rapid decline of the corporatist model of interest group involvement. In the 80s and 90s, the previously privileged organization withdrew from the institutionalized participation, allowing a wider variety of stakeholders to participate and hence paving the way for a more market-oriented and pluralistic system (Hall, 2016). Naurin (2001) noted that the development of the relations between interest groups and the state did not follow an intentional strategy, it rather just "happened". Parallel with the breakdown of corporatism, the formal influence through referrals and commissions, which had long been a cornerstone of policymaking, also saw changes. While it is still customary that important issues are processed in a commission of inquiry in the preparatory stages of a decision, it is clear that fewer inquiries are conducted, and those appointed have been instructed to finish their assignments in less time and deliver shorter reports (Öberg, 2015).

The Development of a PR Industry with Public Affairs Expertise

The Swedish public relations (PR) industry developed during the 1940s. The formation of the Swedish model entailed PR functions being established in the governmental sector in large state-owned corporations such as Swedish Rail and the National Board of Health. The PR professionals of the time were assigned to manage media contacts and to provide and send information and propaganda to the public (Larsson, 2006). As such, the Swedish PR industry grew within the governmental sector rather than in private and commercial settings.

When the corporatist system eroded, the public relations industry experienced a boom. Public affairs, which was previously perceived as a minor channel of influence, became more common as organized interests had to find new ways to influence policymaking (Petersson, 2015; Öberg, 2015). The opportunity to exert political pressure in a more informal manner became a breeding ground for a new political job market offering PR and public affairs services. Organizations and companies quickly introduced departments that specialized in public affairs and lobbying. The 1999 Commission of Democracy, a governmental inquiry, concluded that 90% of all companies that had specialized departments for public affairs at the time had established them during the late 1980s–1990s as the corporatist tradition eroded (SOU, 1999:121). The change also constituted a point of departure for public relations consultancies. Only a few agencies were established in the corporatist Sweden in the 1970s (Larsson, 2006), whereas several hundred could be found at the beginning of the millennium (Tyllström, 2013). As the political landscape changed, many former politicians decided to start up PR bureaus, resulting in the fact that political knowledge and public affairs became available – and are still often found – in PR agencies (Larsson, 2006; Tyllström, 2013). Close connections still exist between the political sphere and the PR industry in Sweden, and issues of role confusion and conflict of interest have received great attention due to the high volume of personnel passing through the so-called "revolving door", i.e. when individuals move from a position in the political sector to the private sector, or vice versa (Lindström & Bruun, 2012). To give some examples, there have been several major "waves" of transfers from the government to the public affairs industry. One such exchange occurred after the change of government in 1994, when 36% of former politicians or political advisors went to work in the public affairs field. The same trend could be seen in 2006 when 56% of politicians, advisors and other political personnel packed their desks and went to work within public affairs, and in 2014 when the change of government resulted in 64% of the same groups transferring to the advocacy industry (Bergling & Sundling, 2022). Many previous public affairs practitioners also moved to work within the government. In 2022, a third of all secretaries of state had a background as a lobbyist (Sadikovic, 2022).

Central Characteristics Influencing Swedish Public Affairs

To set the scene for investigating public affairs in Sweden, it is important to bear in mind certain additional characteristics that influence how the public affairs field of practice has developed. Firstly, it has long been clear that large and small nations have very different public affairs cultures (Ihlen et al., 2021). In view of this, the first characteristic is the relatively small size of Sweden. A country of around 10 million citizens has a comparatively small political sphere. As such, networks and connections have long been an important route to influence (Öberg, 2015). This naturally means that those who have positions and mingle in the same circles as policymakers (Ihlen et al., 2021; Öberg, 2015), or have the resources to hire representation by experts (Lundberg, 2014) who have access to these networks, have an advantage. However, the limited opportunity of certain actors to have direct contacts has promoted the use of indirect strategies of influence. As such, opinion formation and media contacts are the most used channels of influence in Sweden, and the competition for the public's attention is high (Berg & Bonewits Feldner, 2019; Lundberg, 2014; Öberg, 2015).

Another characteristic in Sweden that influences the debate on public affairs is that there are no regulations or legislation for public affairs and lobbying activities. Over the years, there have been several propositions, debates and inquiries on the topic, but to date no regulations have been put in place. For example, the 2000 Commission on Democracy reviewed the question of whether a lobby register was necessary in the increasingly pluralistic landscape emerging in Sweden, but it found that a register would increase political inequality and advised against it (SOU, 2000:1). In a similar fashion, the idea of a register was considered and dismissed in the remit of the 2014 Commission on Democracy (SOU, 2016:5). The motivation for the dismissal was that a register was not appropriate from a democratic point of view or realistic from a legal point of view, and that while the number of contacts between lobbyists and politicians had increased, it was not a problem or a challenge at the time. This situation has generated criticism and a call for action from, for instance, the Council of Europe and Transparency International (Lindström & Bruun, 2012), especially as the risk of role confusion and conflict of interest has been deemed critical due to the common transfers of personnel through the "revolving door" (Lindström & Bruun, 2012).

Sweden has, however, seen some changes in other regulations that may influence lobbying practice. A first regulation of the "revolving door" was introduced in 2017 through a special act enabling the government to suggest that personnel take a one-year quarantine break before transferring to a position that could present a conflict of interest (SOU, 2017:3). However, the governmental investigation leading up to the special act does not address the question of lobbying in particular, and lobbying is hence only mentioned under the section of "delimitations" presenting the assignment of the investigation, and under the review of other nations' regulations. Moreover, the special act is regarded as toothless as there are no sanctions if it is not adhered to. Furthermore, the regulation concerning access to parliament has changed in several steps over the latest years. For a long time, previous members of parliament were granted an access card with unlimited validity to parliament. This so called "veteran" access card gave the cardholders privileged access and enabled them to enter government facilities without having to register their visit or purpose. In 2020 around 800 of these veteran access cards were active (Betänkandet 2020/21:URF3), many belonging to previous members of parliament currently working as lobbyists (Jakobson & Lindholm, 2018). Since 2019 new amendments to the regulation on safety and protective security states that access cards are to have limited validity, and that all issued access cards are to be listed in a register (RFS 2019:1; RFS 2022:2). The continuation of the veteran cards is still under debate.

The era of no regulations on lobbying might however be coming to an end. In response to several recent pressures to address the questions on lobbying again, the Department of Justice announced the decision to launch a new political commission on June 15, 2023. The aim of the inquiry is to review and consider the need for regulation, and perhaps a register, to increase transparency surrounding contacts between political decision-makers and lobbyists (Dir. 2023:88). The inquiry is due to be finished in February 2025.

Scientific Perspective, Method and Material

As this dissertation deals with different constructs of public affairs, a constructivist approach permeates the research. One philosophical assumption for this work is that there is an interplay between social structures and human agency (Danermark, 2003; Layder, 1993). These social structures comprise frames that facilitate and constrain human agency. At the same time, human agency produces and reproduces social structures. Thus, the reality is socially constructed and continually created through the interaction between agents and structures (Danermark, 2003). The studies in this dissertation use qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods of inquiry, which are described below. While a constructivist approach is associated with qualitative methods, it is my belief that quantitative methods can yield insights that can contribute to discussions on meaning and constructs. A concrete example is the way in which statistical data can be collected and analysed to illustrate patterns and structures, which in turn provides the ground for a larger debate on public affairs and lobbying in society.

The first article presents a quantitative content analysis of Swedish news and trade media to explore how lobbying and lobbyists are defined, described and framed in Swedish media over a period of ten years (2006–2016). The unit of analysis was n=400 full news stories and op-eds in the form of debate articles and columns, found in five strategically chosen media outlets. The material was analysed using a code sheet developed for the study. While a content analysis of this sort cannot measure intent, and can only provide a snapshot of the framing of lobbying in the selected outlets, the method was deemed suitable due to the exploratory nature of the study and the aim of giving a first insight into how lobbying was discussed in Swedish media.

The second article is a qualitative interview study exploring how public affairs practitioners perceive their often-debated role in the political landscape by examining the specific group of public affairs practitioners called "revolvers". The study draws on 11 in-dept interviews, ten of which were conducted with public affairs consultants while one was with a local government commissioner coming from a long career as a public affairs consultant. The interviews followed a semi-structured template with a set of questions that enabled the respondents to elaborate on their answers and for the interviewer to pose follow-up questions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in full. Interviews are conducive to gaining an understanding of people's experiences, knowledge and world views, and respondents can use their own words in explanations and accounts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). However, an interesting point to discuss from a methodological perspective is the interviewing of individuals who are themselves "professional storytellers" (Terry, 2001). The creating of discourses of reality and legitimacy has been described as a core function of public affairs professionals (Berg & Bonewits Feldner, 2019; Davidson, 2022), and as such, the respondents can be assumed to be highly skilled at "talking". Raknes (2023) described lobbyists as a "political elite", defined as a group with close links to power and policymaking (Lilleker, 2003). In his study, Raknes (2023, p. 104) concluded that one challenge in interviewing elites is that "elites can be highly self-aware and trained in pushing their own agendas". A lasting impression from several interviews is that the practitioners are indeed experts at storytelling, which in turn lays the ground for questions regarding how this might influence the answers they have provided. While this could be considered a methodological limitation, I do not believe that this makes interviews a poor method through which to study public affairs. However, I do believe that awareness of this trait is necessary when analysing material.

The third article is a quantitative study of roles using a principal component analysis to test and further explore self-perceptions of public affairs consultants. The article builds on data from a national survey with public affairs consultants. While the modelling of roles based on quantitative methods has received criticism for being a shallow way to explore rich concepts such as roles, it is my belief that role models of this kind have a relevant nomothetic purpose and can be useful for scholars, teachers and practitioners alike as they provide the means to study conceptions on a larger scale. The survey consisted of Likert scale questions, free-text answers and questions on demographics. While there are drawbacks to the use of anonymous, web-based surveys, such as low response rates, participants skipping unwanted questions and the inability to ask follow-up questions, one benefit is that the anonymity provided can enhance the disclosure of sensitive or stigmatized beliefs, behaviours and subjects. Moreover, the method was deemed suitable as the free-text questions allowed survey participants the chance to provide responses in their own words, thereby enabling them to convey what they considered significant, along with their unique language and terminology (Braun et al., 2021). After reviewing 105 consultancies for respondents, participation was solicited from 208 public affairs consultants of whom 97 individuals answered the survey, yielding a response rate of 46.63%. In the current study, only the quantitative data, the Likert scale data and demographic data were used for analysis. As six respondents had missing data, they were excluded from further analysis, generating a value of n=91. The majority of the respondents were male

(71%). Respondents almost exclusively worked for private-sector clients (90%).

The fourth article is a combination of interview material and survey data collected in articles two and three. The interview material consisted of the ten interviews previously conducted with public affairs consultants (the interview with the local government commissioner was excluded, as it did not fit the sample criteria of the current study). In addition, the free-text answers from the survey were used in the analysis. Of the 208 respondents who were asked to participate in the survey, n=77 left free-text answers yielding a response rate of 37%. The gathered material amounted to a total of 24 single-spaced pages of free-text answers, and a total of 102 single-spaced pages of transcribed interviews. The material was analysed using a thematic approach to identify themes and patterns.

Lastly, I wish to make an additional note on the sample used in the articles. As public affairs practitioners are an elusive occupational group and there is uncertainty about the volume and distinctiveness of these practitioners, strategic sampling methods have been used in all studies. Strategic sampling impedes the generalizability of results but can still provide valuable insight if the sampling is purposeful (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). For the content analysis, the journals were chosen to represent a variety of news media and trade media. For the interviews, the respondents have been deemed appropriate based on various criteria that differ between the texts. A common line is that they are chosen for being active practitioners and prominent in the field of public affairs. For the survey, the respondents were located through several steps to locate relevant professionals and cover a large proportion of relevant actors. This included reviewing different trade organizations' member lists and an Internet search using keywords relating to public affairs.

Formalities

All four articles, including the fourth article that is under review, have been included in this dissertation with permission from the publishers. Two of the four articles are co-written. The first article is co-authored, and I acted as first author and collected the material and led the analysis, with great support from my supervisor and co-author Kajsa Falasca. The second article is co-authored, and Kajsa Falasca and I are equal authors and contributed to the gathering of material, analysis and writing of the article. The third and fourth articles are single authored by me.

Conclusion, Contribution and Future Research

Public affairs and lobbying have been approached by different disciplines and fields with varying perspectives on what public affairs – or lobbying – is and what it should be (Davidson, 2015; Naurin, 2001; Strömback & Kiousis, 2020). This dissertation feeds into this debate by providing knowledge about how public affairs is constructed and by exploring conditions for public affairs work. More specifically, the results of the dissertation contribute to research in several ways. Firstly, the dissertation contributes by showing how lobbying has been framed and discussed in the media and considers how these discourses relate to the debate on lobbying in general.

Secondly, by continuing the study of role conception (Koch & Schulz-Knappe, 2021; von den Driesch & van der Wurff, 2016) and the modelling of roles among public affairs practitioners, this dissertation contributes with an overview of the various values, attitudes and conceptualizations in the practice. The studies present new nuances or categories of roles and hence add to previous research on role conceptions in the field. Moreover, by focusing on two specific groups of public affairs practitioners, namely revolving-door personnel and consultants, the results of the dissertation provide insight into how these controversial, yet relevant groups of practitioners make sense of their work and discuss the consequences those practices have for society. Moreover, the results show that many public affairs consultants are claiming a proactive role where they pursue clients and assignments based on their own independent agendas. This resonates with recent calls to explore consultants as more than mere passive intermediaries (Barron & Skountridaki, 2020; Tyllström & Murray, 2021) and illustrates that public affairs consultants are reconfiguring their occupational roles in ways other than previously discussed. This informs the debate on how public affairs consulting as an emerging field of practice should be viewed in a democratic society (Steiner & Jarren, 2009) and how expressions such as a "consultocracy" (Kantola, 2016) should be evaluated. Beyond exhibiting diverse role conceptions amongst practitioners, the study joins the complex conversation on public affairs ethics (Bowen, 2008; Edgett, 2002) by illustrating that personal ethics play a role in practitioners' choice of clients and assignments, but that this entails very different views of what constitutes ethical practice and whether consultants should act as "political agents" or "impartial advocates" in their role (van Es, 2002).

Thirdly, the articles further reveal how public affairs practitioners continually negotiate their occupational role, and as such contribute with insight into how practitioners in reputationally challenged occupations make sense of their work (Meisenbach, 2008). By illustrating how practitioners shift between arguments and bounce between descriptive and normative assertions as they build legitimacy for their work in various contexts, the articles act as a window into how practitioners balance contradictions in their work. Moreover, the dissertation provides knowledge on how public affairs consultants manage stigma communicatively (Meisenbach, 2010), illustrating that while the bad image of the occupation can be inconvenient at times it does not constitute a major problem. Practitioners are in no rush to reconfigure their image; instead they have found productive ways to live with the stigma and tension and incorporate them into their work. This is a stance that calls for a nuanced exploration of how keeping the "status quo" could influence the legitimacy of public affairs practitioners as a group in the political landscape, as well as what this would entail from the professionalization perspective.

One final reflection on the contribution is that all the research is conducted in Sweden, and as such the articles contribute to the knowledge of public affairs in the Swedish political landscape. As public affairs is a practice in constant flux, the empirical data give insight into the specificities of Swedish public affairs at this time in history.

In sum, the articles provide different pieces to the puzzle on how public affairs is communicatively constructed, and they are tied together by capturing constructs, conditions and claims that colour this development. On an abstract level, the articles exhibit diverse constructions – or faces – of public affairs. Yet, the many faces of public affairs are not always explicit due to the multifaceted nature of public affairs work. Like the dual faces of the Roman god Janus, watching two ways simultaneously, practitioners of public affairs switch between roles as they navigate and make sense of their work in various contexts, and balance contradictory demands and tensions.

Limitations and Future Research

As an important and ever-changing practice, the continual exploration of public affairs is essential. The articles in this dissertation point to several interesting avenues for future research.

One avenue is to include and compare the results of the current studies with other national contexts and structures that are different from the Swedish setting. In relation to the role research conducted in this dissertation, one limitation is that it draws mainly on self-perceptions and self-descriptions. While this has provided unique insight into how practitioners construct their work, an interesting way forward would be to study public affairs practitioners' actual work through observation studies. This approach could shed light on whether the role conceptions do in fact translate into role enactment. One element missing in this dissertation is the perception of politicians. The perception of politicians and how this compares to practitioners' view of public affairs practice is an interesting avenue for future studies, which can add yet more pieces to the puzzle on how public affairs is constructed. Moreover, as public affairs has been approached by a variety of fields, the research and models on role conceptions found here could be fused with studies of other groupings such as "policy professionals"(Garsten et al., 2015; Svallfors, 2016) or political public relations practitioners (Strömback & Kiousis, 2020). This could provide grounds for further analysis and a comparison of how other adjacent groups perceive their role and practice, which can expand the knowledge of practitioners working with public affairs.

Finally, I hope that the text in this dissertation can inform both theory and practice and be useful for practitioners in understanding and reflecting on their own role and practice, and for scholars who set out to further the study of public affairs.

Article summaries

Article I: The Construction of an Elusive Concept: Framing the Controversial Role and Practice of Lobbying in Swedish Media

This study seeks to explore the relation between the elusive scholarly concept and the media framing of the role and practice of lobbying. The longitudinal study analyses a period of ten years in Sweden when lobbying has taken on an increasingly influential role in the political system. The results, based on a content analysis of news articles and opinion editorials in five national newspapers and trade media, illustrate that the perception of lobbying is without nuance and a common negative frame is present and continues to be reproduced. Furthermore, a clear contradiction is evident in the relation between the scholarly debate and the mediated debate of the practice. The article discusses what this setting and inconsistency imply for the current society and democracy, and the citizen trust in political representatives and institutions.

The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published in 2017 and is available in: *Public Relations Inquiry*, *6*(3), 275–291.

Article II: Revolving around Roles: Public Affairs Practitioners as Democratic Enablers or as Hired Guns

This paper offers insights into how public affairs practitioners perceive their often-debated role in the political process. By examining the specific group of public affairs practitioners called "revolvers", i.e. individuals who move from a position in the political sphere to a position as a public affairs consultant or vice versa, we engage in the ongoing discussion concerning the legitimacy of public affairs in modern democracies. The empirical material consists of interviews with revolvers who as public affairs practitioners have experience of working in the Swedish political sphere, as well as the commercially driven public affairs industry. Consequently, the article contributes to our understanding of lobbying in the political process from the perspective of the controversial revolvers and gives us an important insight into how revolvers in Sweden argue and act in their efforts to create legitimacy for their role by attempting to fuse corporate and public interests. The perception that is predominant in this study suggests that the revolvers regard themselves as a kind of corporatist influence in a democratic society rather than a special interest influencer. The revolvers appear to find common ground when defining the purpose and contribution of their occupation as advocates, but that different lines of arguments arise when practitioners displace and differentiate themselves from the tainted work connected to lobbying and advocacy tasks. Hence it is clear that there is tension between the professional role conception and role performance.

The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published in 2021 and is available in: *Public Relations Review*, *47*, 1.

Article III: Paid to Lobby but up for Debate: Role Conceptions and Client Selection of Public Affairs Consultants

This article addresses recent calls in the literature for advancing our understanding of public affairs consultants and their role conceptions. By testing and further exploring self-perceptions of public affairs consultants, the study aims to offer new insight into how consultants define and view their occupational role. The study draws on a nationwide survey with public affairs consultants in Sweden. Four main role conceptions were identified (advocate, do-gooder, expert and intermediary). Further, the study tests how personal and professional characteristics correlate with different role conceptions by viewing professional experience and consultants' selection of clients. Data also suggest that consultants' background in politics does not promote any specific role perception. Finally, the findings also show that how consultants choose clients is a divider in the industry, with some acting as passive intermediaries and others taking a more active role in their choice of clients. The findings enhance our understanding of public affairs as a field, and specifically about the modelling of professional roles amongst consultants. The empirical results in this study show how contemporary role typologies need to be extended to better capture the specificities of consultants' roles in public affairs. By addressing the issue of how consultants choose clients, the study engages with the complex debate of whether consultants ought to act as objective or subjective agents and hence join the conversation on ethics in public affairs.

The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published in 2023 and is available in: *Journal of Communication Management*, published online ahead-of-print. https://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-12-2022-0147.

Article IV: Folk Devils and Moral Vigilantes: The Occupational Branding of Public Affairs Consultants and the Management of Stigma

Public affairs is an emerging field of practice; at the same time, it is reputationally complicated. In view of the widespread concern about the impact of its practice on democracy, this study explores how practitioners construct an occupational identity and present their occupation as meaningful to a wider audience. Using the concepts of occupational branding and stigma management communication, the study unpacks how practitioners manage and understand the stigma associated with their occupation and how the meaning of public affairs work is negotiated, described and framed. Drawing on interviews and free-text answers from a nationwide survey of public affairs consultants, the study illuminates how practitioners utilize a variety of strategies while engaging with and navigating the stigma, as well as the societal and historical discourses associated with their profession. Further, the findings show that practitioners are in no rush to reconfigure their image and instead have found productive ways to live with taint and tensions. These results open for debate not only the professionalization project of public affairs but also the implications that keeping the status quo has for the development of democratic society.

The research manuscript is under review

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