Behind Closed Doors: How Public Affairs Professionals Perceive the Process of Organizational Frame-Building

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Various organizations employ framing in their public affairs strategies to influence public and political issue debates. However, how frames are built by actors before lobbying activities remains a black box. Thus, to outline the origins of strategic frames, we investigate perceptions and understandings of the frame-building process by public affairs (PA) professionals across corporations, public organizations, and interest groups. Besides framing theory and the hierarchical influence model, this study draws on a strategic communication and institutional theory perspective on PA as an organizational practice. By means of qualitative interviews with PA professionals from a diverse set of 24 Dutch organizations, we propose a model of perceived frame-building from issue emergence, the assessment of issue viability, via frame construction and alignment to legitimation. The model reflects aspects of the frame-building process as understood by PA professionals and categorized by the authors into individual, organizational, and routine factors, as well as context and timing. It enriches our understanding of the way PA professionals perceive organizational influence in framing contests and policymaking through their strategic frames.

Keywords: frame-building, public affairs, lobbying, strategic communication, qualitative interviews

Framing theory mainly regards journalists as frame sponsors that significantly direct discussions on public issues (Brüggemann, 2014; Lecheler & De Vreese, 2019; Scheufele, 1999). Yet powerful actors in frame contests are interest groups (Klüver, Mahoney, & Opper, 2015), corporations, and trade unions (Valentini, Ihlen, Somerville, Raknes, & Davidson, 2020) that attempt to influence issue salience in the public domain and in policymaking through their public affairs (PA) strategies.

The deliberate use of strategic frames by PA professionals in all sorts of organizations can be considered as an underlying communicative strategy (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Verčič, &

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Sriramesh, 2007) that supports broader PA strategies (e.g. agenda setting, policy change or maintaining the status quo; Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Leech, & Kimball, 2009) and its tools or techniques, such as lobbying, building relationships with policymakers, or raising public salience (Baumgartner et al., 2009). Because "the quality of their [the organizations'] argument is fundamental" (Thomson & John, 2007, p. 5) for such influence processes, a communication perspective supplements existing institutional and power perspectives on PA (Mahoney, 2007). However, how these frames originate in organizations has largely remained a black box.

PA professionals employ several strategic frames in their attempts to influence public policies (frame-sending), and some frames indeed "travel" to their lobby target (frame-setting; Lock, Stachel, & Seele, 2020) or have a stronger resonance than others in framing contests (Jacobs, Wonneberger, & Hellsten, 2020). Like frame-sending (Brüggemann, 2014) and frame-setting (Lecheler & De Vreese, 2019), frame-building can build on a scholarly tradition that has focused on how frames are constructed between news actors (e.g., politicians or corporations) and journalists (Verhoeven, 2016), rather than how frames are built within organizations before lobbying activities. Thus, organizational frame-building processes are often considered either a given or a black box, in which at most the impact of cues and organizational identities are recognized (Cornelissen, Carroll, & Elving, 2009).

Analyzing PA professionals' perceptions of individual, organizational, and issue-specific factors of frame-building within organizations, while also using an institutional work perspective to further understand these processes, enables us to describe PA professionals' understandings of the frame-building process. This model can serve as input for large-scale empirical studies to assess the generalizability of these findings.

The core act of framing "involves selection and salience" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). In this study, we aim to identify what PA professionals perceive as the factors and institutional logics that affect the selection and salience of specific aspects of an issue. Our focus is on the perceptions of the process through which frames originate in PA: How are PA frames constructed within organizations, according to PA professionals who are involved as key actors in these processes? By means of semistructured, in-depth interviews with PA professionals, we outline the perceived process of organizational frame-building and describe the logics at play in PA practice.

Theoretical Framework

Strategic Frame-Building by Organizations

Organizations use strategic frames to enter societal debates on issues where they meet frames by other actors (Jacobs et al., 2020) and compete in framing contests (Dan, Ihlen, & Raknes, 2020). However, frame-building before this external communication remains a relatively unexplored terrain (Brüggemann, 2014). The works conducted in this field predominantly consider political actors and/or journalists (Lecheler & De Vreese, 2019; Scheufele, 1999; Wichgers, Jacobs, & Van Spanje, 2021). Lecheler and De Vreese (2019) describe the elements of frame-building by journalists as "refer[ring] to the process of competition, selection, and modification of frames from elites or strategic communicators by the media" (p. 12). Although journalists serve as imagined audiences in organizational decision making about strategic communication

and framing (Wichgers et al., 2021), and although the frame-building process between organizations and journalists is said to depend on cues and organizational identities (Cornelissen et al., 2009), the origins of the organizational frame remain unclear. Then, organizations sponsor journalists with their strategic frames (Entman, 1993); the latter turn these inputs, along with other journalistic considerations, into a media frame (Scheufele, 1999). In this dynamic process, frame sponsors and journalists mutually influence one another, whereby frame sponsors that possess authority and have a large stake are particularly powerful (Wichgers et al., 2021).

This literature explicitly states that the origin of frames is important yet understudied (Klüver et al., 2015). In fact, strategic frames by organizations are treated as a given input rather than a communicative outcome (Verhoeven, 2016). Lock, Stachel, and Seele (2020) proposed a model that explains the framing process in PA but regards the construction of frames as a black box. To uncover this blind spot, this study sets out to investigate how PA professionals perceive their strategic frame-building efforts within organizations.

Frame-Building in Public Affairs

Frame-building in organizations occurs in the context of social issues. By integrating Entman's (1993) and Scheufele's (1999) definitions with the issue focus from the social movements literature and applying it to PA, we define frame-building as the explicit or implicit organizational process of selecting aspects of an issue and/or making them more salient.

Acknowledging frame-building as an explicit or implicit process is essential because frames do not come out of the blue. Frames are social and communicative constructions that arise from either the deliberate or unconscious interplay between individual, organizational, routine, and institutional factors (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014) because "the individual is always nested within different contexts" (Brüggemann, 2014, p. 67).

Applied to PA, individual factors relate to a PA professional's perceptions of the profession, values and ideologies, experiences, and educational background (Koch & Schulz-Knappe, 2021). PA professionals attach different role perceptions to their job: that of advocates, experts, or mediators (von den Driesch & van der Wurff, 2016). Similarly, a survey among German PA professionals distinguished the professionals in persuaders, advisors, coordinators, or mediators. The type of job, whether consultant or in-house lobbyist in a company or industry association, did not influence these role perceptions, as all valued transparency and ethical conduct highly (Koch & Schulz-Knappe, 2021). On this individual level, cognitive patterns of interpretation are at play (Brüggemann, 2014). Preexisting attitudes and frames of reference on the level of the actor (e.g., journalist, PA professional or organization) affect how issues are interpreted and consequently (re)framed (Brüggemann, 2014). Framing judgments can occur either consciously or unconsciously (Entman, 1993). Brüggemann (2014) distinguishes between these patterns of interpretation and patterns of presentation, or news frames. In PA, the patterns of meaning articulated by PA professionals are strategic frames (Dan et al., 2020).

A second set of factors relates to the organizational structure in which the PA professional is nested. First, the organization type matters—that is, the extent to which the organization has a profit or nonprofit nature (as defined by its ownership, funding, and objectives; Boyne, 2002). The type of organization is strongly related to the impact on its environment (Werder & Holtzhausen, 2011). Furthermore, other environmental factors such as sector, network, and broader public perceptions of the organization (reputation, legitimacy) are mesolevel factors that influence frame-building. Intraorganizational factors such as the organization of the PA department, its budget, and internal politics might influence frame-building as well (Hillman, Keim, & Schuler, 2004; Klüver, 2011). When looking at strategic communication departments, Werder and Holtzhausen (2011) found that communication strategy is an emergent process (see also King, 2010) dependent on the interplay of internal structure, role enactment of the manager (for PA, see individual-level factors as described in Koch & Schulz-Knappe, 2021; von den Driesch & van der Wurff, 2016), decision-making behavior (e.g., top-down or group-based), and leadership style (transactional versus transformational).

Framing and therefore frame-building are heavily context dependent (Matthes, 2012). Next to individual factors and the organizational setting and routines, the political and social system strongly influences frame-building (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). The political opportunity structure; the institutions, political, and media system (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996); and the discursive opportunities (Koopmans, 2004) influence whether and how an issue comes to an organization's attention. In addition, interest group systems and the interconnections between public and private actors are to be considered (Hillman et al., 2004). On a cultural level, societal values and discussion norms influence how issues come on the public and political agenda (Bowen, 2017). An inherent aspect of a framing perspective on PA is therefore the communicative construction of societal issues and their solutions.

Issues in society come and go through several stages, and their salience on the public and media agenda varies (Downs, 1972). Issue salience is a decisive strategic factor in PA and is both a consequence and constraint of lobbying: Organizations attempting to change an issue debate or related policy will likely seek attention, whereas those who want to protect the status quo are more prone to be defensive in their media strategy (Baumgartner et al., 2009). Relatedly, the complexity of an issue—such as the number of actors, competing issues, and levels of government—links to public salience (Mahoney, 2007).

Another related and critical factor in PA success is timing, thus tailoring the strategy to political and policy logics, cycles, and processes, for example, to couple the streams of problems, policy, politics, and consequently the opening of policy windows (Kingdon, 1984). Issue framing can contribute to these processes, especially if focusing events have occurred (Rawat & Morris, 2016).

Frame-Building as Institutional Work

To further understand frame-building within organizations, we also include social factors by interpreting frame-building through the lens of institutional work, as previously has been done with other communication disciplines such as public relations and strategic communication (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2014; Fredriksson, Pallas, & Wehmeier, 2013). PA research is rooted in either a political science (e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2009; Klüver et al., 2015) or management studies tradition (e.g., Hillman et al., 2004), and only

recently have communication scholars contributed to understanding this practice field from a strategic communication perspective (e.g., Valentini et al., 2020). This explains why most PA research in the management tradition is based on instrumental perspectives (Barron & Skountridaki, 2022) that are rooted in the resource-based view on the firm and a rational choice approach (Hillman et al., 2004). With their focus on interest groups' strategies' influence and success (Dür, Bernhagen, & Marshall, 2015; Mahoney, 2007), the political science literature on PA is predominantly driven by such a perspective. An institutional lens that focuses on the agency of professionals within the institutional setting of policymaking as studied here is only starting to being developed (Barron & Skountridaki, 2022), but to date, none has married that with a strategic communication view, as we strive to do in this article.

PA professionals can be seen as cognitive and normative institutional agents who actively create institutions (Barron & Skountridaki, 2022). They operate within the institutional framework and engage in institutional work, and thus in the creation, maintenance, or change of institutions (Sandhu, 2009). One such form of institutional work best applicable to frame-building is maintenance, which refers to self-reproducing mechanisms within institutions because of practices that embed, routinize, and facilitate norms and rules within those institutions (Fredriksson et al., 2013). In frame-building, actors repeatedly produce routinized responses to a task across different issues but within the same institutional setting. This is accompanied by the communication function of providing that stresses either rule-following behavior by organizations or adjustment to institutional norms. Thus, the perspective of institutional work allows us to interpret frame-building, like strategic communication, "both as bounded by and constitutive of institutional structures" (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2014, p. 144).

The maintenance processes of PA frame-building can be regarded as one of two logics. Two logics (of consequentiality and appropriateness), initially focusing on behavior within the context of governmental organizations, capture two modes of human action in decision making. These logics describe interpretations of the organization and its context, how success is defined, and which behavior is considered "appropriate" (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, as cited in Fredriksson et al., 2013, p. 188). Although actors can shift between logics, a key difference between these logics lies in the degree to which information processing is routinized. First, a logic of consequences describes an actor's actions as "driven by subjective assessments of outcomes of alternative courses of action," thus, as deliberate action (Schulz, 2016, p. 1). A logic of appropriateness describes an approach characterized by following rules, which are "relatively fixed responses to defined situations," such as routines, experience, intuition, policies, and bureaucratic rules (Schulz, 2016, p. 2). This perspective of two logics helps us to further grasp the dynamics of frame-building by drawing attention to how PA professionals process or make sense of information, in addition to how their actions create, maintain, or disrupt institutions (the institutional work perspective).

Methods

We used a qualitative design with in-depth, semistructured interviews to answer the research question. This approach allows us to explore in-depth accounts of frame-building by the interviewees, and it invites us to reflect on the choices that were made and how these came about. Previously, we described frame-building as a social and communicative construction in which individuals interact with their environment (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). In-depth interviewing also allows us to explicitly and

implicitly address the role of these environmental factors. Thus, compared to, for instance, participant observations, this method will likely yield more insights on the perceived drivers and provided rationales behind frame-building processes. On the one hand, we acknowledge that interviewing as a method is not unproblematic, in the sense that interviewees have to solve many problems during the interview, like the nonroutine interview setting and the need to make sense of the questions of the interviewer (Alvesson, 2003). On the other hand, within our design, we consider interviewees as "knowledgeable agents" who "know what they are trying to do and can explain their thoughts, intentions, and actions" (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013, p. 17) and thus construct their organizational realities. We do note that interviewees implicitly might have other goals (e.g., their willingness to sound rational, or to position themselves as competent professionals), which might inform and resonate in their answers (Alvesson, 2003). As interviewers, the researchers were in the position of the "glorified reporters" responsible for adequately giving account of the interviewees' shared interpretations, experiences, and realities (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 17), while acknowledging that this information is also a result of the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. The interviews, analysis, and findings thus reflect the information and understandings following from the interaction process between interviewer and interviewee. Still, we believe that given these circumstances, we can look for patterns and variations in the accounts interviewees give of frame-building processes.

Sample

We applied a two-step purposeful sampling strategy. We strove for maximum variation sampling on the type of organization "to get variation on dimensions of interest" and to enable us to "identify important common patterns that cut across variations" (Patton, 2002, p. 243). The types of organizations differ—among other factors—in their sources of control (e.g., being subordinated to a political body or being controlled by market forces), funding (e.g., taxes or customers/clients/members), size (in terms of FTE), goals (e.g., collective vs. private), and field/sector (Boyne, 2002). Interviewees were sampled from the Netherlands to keep the sociopolitical environment stable. It should be noted that these differences between types of organizations are not absolute and that the within-group variation is large. After selecting the organizations, we applied criterion sampling to select the interviewees (Patton, 2002). Because we were interested in frame-building by PA professionals, the self-description of their professional function should refer to PA. The interviewees were also informed that they were selected based on their self-description as a PA professional (or similar type of affiliation). One of the implications could be that the interviewees used the interview situation to "express, elaborate, strengthen, defend, and/or repair a favored self-identity" (Alvesson, 2003, p. 20). This required awareness during the interview and analysis. Moreover, we also included individual factors to explicitly pay attention to these matters.

We invited 41 PA professionals across all five types of organizations via e-mail for an interview, resulting in 25 interviewees from 24 organizations (Table 1). Five (large) businesses were included because business actors are among the most active in lobbying (Dür et al., 2015). Public affairs professionals working for six PA consultancies were interviewed, acting on behalf of client organizations. In addition, we included seven interest groups, four local or regional governments (who direct their lobby toward the central government level), and PA professionals working for two public sector organizations. The interviews were

held by the two authors between January and April 2020, mostly on the premises of the organization, but after March 15, all interviews took place online given the COVID-19 lockdown in the Netherlands. The interviewees were informed about the purpose of our study, the interview procedure, and data processing and storage via a research-specific information sheet. After that, they signed an informed consent. All interviews were recorded and varied between 38 and 91 minutes. The interviews were held in Dutch and transcribed by native-speaking student assistants.

Table 1. Sample.

Number	Organization type	Gender
1	Interest group	Female (F)
2	Consultancy	Male (M)
3	Business	M
4	Interest group	M
5	Business	M
6	Regional government	M
7	Business	M
8	Business	F
9	Consultancy	F
10	Consultancy	F
11	Consultancy	F
12	Regional government	M
13	Interest group	M
14	Interest group	F; F
15	Public sector	F
16	Regional government	M
17	Interest group	M
18	Consultancy	M
19	Consultancy	M
20	Local government	M
21	Interest group	M
22	Interest group	M
23	Public sector	M
24	Business	M

Topic List and Interview Procedure

Our topic list reflected the main frame-building factors identified in our theoretical framework: individual, organizational, and routine frame-building factors. Because these factors are rather abstract and difficult to assess in a direct manner, we used reconstructions of either successful or unsuccessful cases the PA professionals had self-chosen to discuss each topic (Boesman, d'Haenens, & Van Gorp, 2016). In preparation for each interview, we asked our interviewees to think of one of their PA cases

that they considered successful (no matter what the reason) and of one unsuccessful case. To familiarize ourselves with the interviewee and create an open atmosphere, each interview started with the invitation to the interviewee to tell about their daily work. After that, we shifted the topic of the interview toward one of the main topics from the list. The order of the topics differed per interview because we tried to logically connect the topics to the ongoing conversation. Our topics were (1) explanation of the cases chosen by the interviewees (issue-specific factors and social system), (2) professional identity (background, motives, and personal values), (3) organizational factors (factors such as the positioning of PA within the organization and CEO support), and (4) communication routines (frame choice and internal legitimation). During the interviews, we were aware of possible differences in the interpretation of concepts like framing. We therefore asked the interviewees for detailed explanations to make sure we had a similar understanding of the topic at hand. A topic that emerged during the interviews was timing in PA. The study was approved by the ethical review board (2019-CC-11590).

Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed in ATLAS.ti 8 using the Gioia method to ensure rigor. First, we engaged in open or initial coding, using informant-centric codes and staying as close as possible to the expressions used by the interviewees (Gioia et al., 2013). This resulted in 2,637 unique codes. After that, we applied focused or second-order coding to identify patterns, dimensions, themes, and processes, informed by our theoretical exploration of frame-building (Gioia et al., 2013). Consequently, the codes were grouped into 27 code groups. Not all codes from the initial coding process ended up in a code group because, in this stage, 101 codes were considered irrelevant for this study. Some first-order concepts reflecting multiple dimensions were attributed to multiple code groups. Lastly, we analyzed and discussed the second-order themes (organized in code groups) to make room for the emergence of a data structure, with the goal to arrive at multiple aggregate dimensions. Occasionally, third-order dimensions were included to reflect various (sub)dimensions of the aggregate dimensions (see Figure 1). Several aggregate dimensions and their ordering were compared with the first-order concepts, second-order themes, and (if applicable) third-order dimensions that had emerged, to make sure that the aggregate dimensions and the way they were modeled reflected the data structure in the best way (Gioia et al., 2013). Figure 1 provides an example of the interrelations between first-order concepts, second-order themes, and an aggregate dimension for the dimension "frame construction and alignment." The manuscript was sent to the interviewees for member checks.
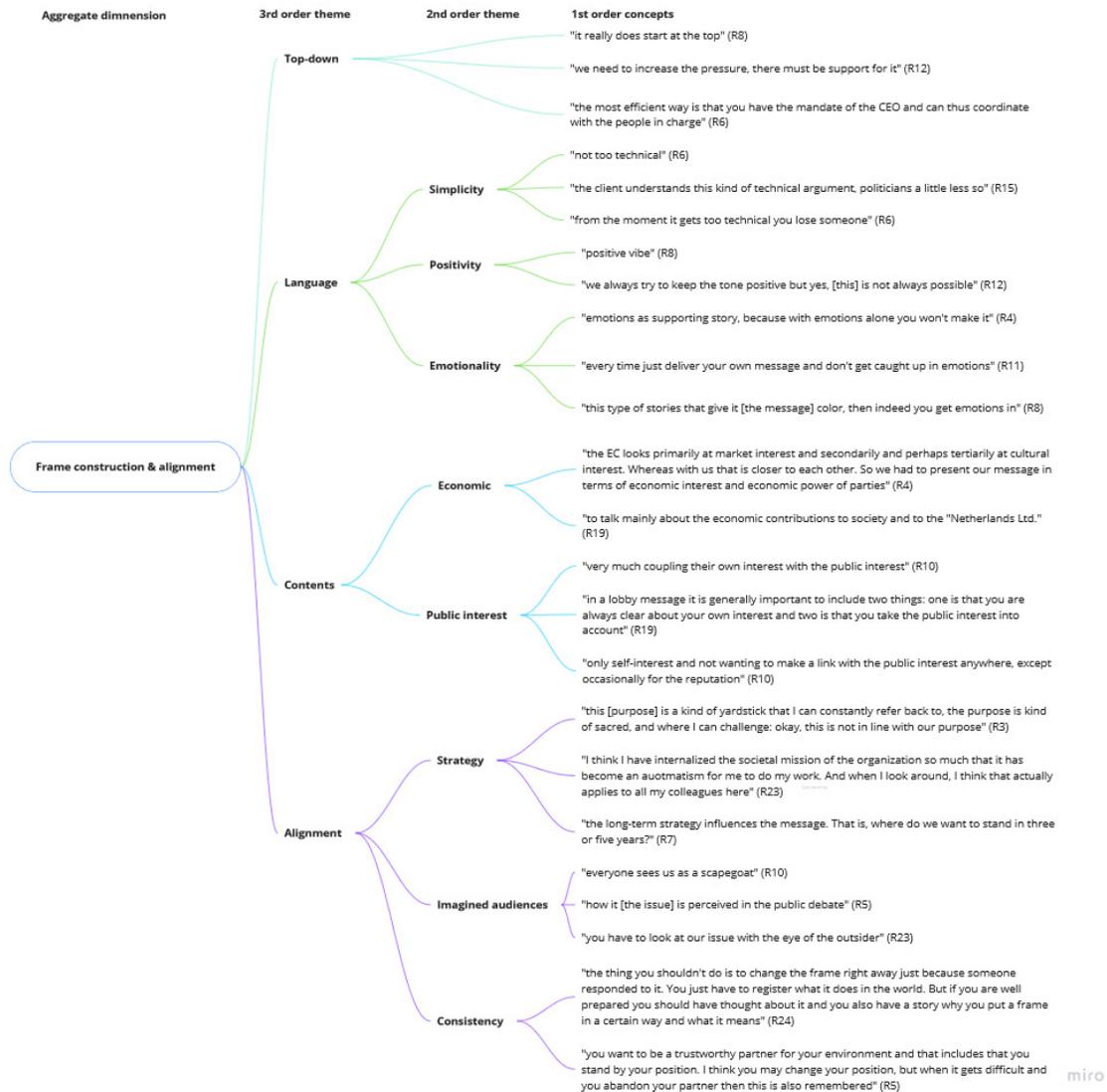
Aggregate dimnension   **3rd order theme**   **2nd order theme**   **1st order concepts**

Top-down
- "it really does start at the top" (R8)
- "we need to increase the pressure, there must be support for it" (R12)
- "the most efficient way is that you have the mandate of the CEO and can thus coordinate with the people in charge" (R6)

Language
- Simplicity
  - "not too technical" (R6)
  - "the client understands this kind of technical argument, politicians a little less so" (R15)
  - "from the moment it gets too technical you lose someone" (R6)
- Positivity
  - "positive vibe" (R8)
  - "we always try to keep the tone positive but yes, [this] is not always possible" (R12)
- Emotionality
  - "emotions as supporting story, because with emotions alone you won't make it" (R4)
  - "every time just deliver your own message and don't get caught up in emotions" (R11)
  - "this type of stories that give it [the message] color, then indeed you get emotions in" (R8)

Frame construction & alignment

Contents
- Economic
  - "the EC looks primarily at market interest and secondarily and perhaps tertiarily at cultural interest. Whereas with us that is closer to each other. So we had to present our message in terms of economic interest and economic power of parties" (R4)
  - "to talk mainly about the economic contributions to society and to the "Netherlands Ltd." (R19)
- Public interest
  - "very much coupling their own interest with the public interest" (R10)
  - "in a lobby message it is generally important to include two things: one is that you are always clear about your own interest and two is that you take the public interest into account" (R19)
  - "only self-interest and not wanting to make a link with the public interest anywhere, except occasionally for the reputation" (R10)

Alignment
- Strategy
  - "this [purpose] is a kind of yardstick that I can constantly refer back to, the purpose is kind of sacred, and where I can challenge: okay, this is not in line with our purpose" (R3)
  - "I think I have internalized the societal mission of the organization so much that it has become an auotmatism for me to do my work. And when I look around, I think that actually applies to all my colleagues here" (R23)
  - "the long-term strategy influences the message. That is, where do we want to stand in three or five years?" (R7)
- Imagined audiences
  - "everyone sees us as a scapegoat" (R10)
  - "how it [the issue] is perceived in the public debate" (R5)
  - "you have to look at our issue with the eye of the outsider" (R23)
- Consistency
  - "the thing you shouldn't do is to change the frame right away just because someone responded to it. You just have to register what it does in the world. But if you are well prepared you should have thought about it and you also have a story why you put a frame in a certain way and what it means" (R24)
  - "you want to be a trustworthy partner for your environment and that includes that you stand by your position. I think you may change your position, but when it gets difficult and you abandon your partner then this is also remembered" (R5)

Figure 1. Example of the relations between lower-order concepts and an aggregate dimension.

Findings

The interviewees described frame-building as a process following four steps that can be differentiated in an issue viability assessment, frame construction and alignment, and frame legitimation. Yet the trigger of the frame-building process, according to the PA professionals, appears to be the emergence of the issue in the organization's environment.

Issue Emergence

First, we invited the interviewees to reflect on the origins of the issue itself, because the interviewees' awareness of issue emergence precedes their interpretation. The responses by the PA professionals allowed us to cluster issue emergence around three different sources:

- *Organizational*: An issue came up internally because it was deemed relevant by the constituency such as higher compensations (R7), or it was a strategic decision from management, such as improving the organization's reputation (R10). In the case of umbrella (interest) organizations, issues were also put forward by the represented organizations (R1, R7).
- *Policy*: An issue was or would soon be on the political agenda, such as a new law (R2, R11, R21), revision of regulation or subsidies (R3, R11), or budget allocations (R15, R20).
- *Public*: Public salience of an issue increased, and thus citizens, not necessarily constituents of the organization, put the issue to the attention of the organization (R13).

According to several PA professionals, policy-related issues were clearly triggered by a real or "focusing" event such as the formation of a new governmental commission (R3), whereas issues that emerged within the organizations or in the public domain could also be communicatively constructed by the media or other actors (R10, R13). Specifically related to the timing of our interviews, many interviewees pointed at their preparations for the input for the party manifestos that were being written at that time (for the parliamentary elections coming up in March 2021). The interviewees indicated that they continuously scan the organizational environment—or more specifically, the three-issue sources—for relevant topics, and simultaneously, topics are brought to their attention by other internal or external actors: "It is our core business to monitor [the organization's topic] in the Netherlands, and our members inform us about this topic. You could also see a lot of newspaper articles about this topic" (R13). No matter the issue's source, all PA professionals thoroughly screened the issues for viability.

Issue Viability

Once an issue emerged, the interviewed PA professionals indicated that they relied on both their routines and explicit strategic considerations to assess the issue's viability. This quote illustrates experiences voiced by several PA professionals, who do not consider this an easy task: "Sometimes, it's just really difficult to decide if we are going to do something with this or not" (R17). A crucial point in the frame-building process is the assessment of an issue's viability. "What do we consider as 'viable?'" (R1) is a key consideration in making the go/no go decision to either pursue the issue or not. This is best captured by the Dutch expression, paraphrased here as "Are we going to run for this issue?" (R17; R20). A reflection on the considerations of issue viability from a macro level allowed us to categorize them into social system–, organization-, and issue-specific factors, which we will further explore.

Issue-Specific Factors

Several PA professionals referred to the complexity of an issue as a decisive factor for their rationale of issue viability: They assess an issue in terms of their ability to explain and translate it both internally and externally (R1; R22).

The salience of an issue was mentioned as a factor that can either be an argument for or against pursuing an issue. High public salience can speak in favor of acting on an issue, for instance when citizens demand stricter regulation on public transport routes (R20); in contrast, heightened attention can also be a factor to not advocate for an issue, for instance, if a company does not want to be associated with a case such as corporate tax evasion (R5). Low issue salience can likewise be used as an argument for or against taking on a lobby, for instance when a constituency wants to raise awareness for an issue (R22). An issue that is under the radar of news media because it touches only a small part of the population or its news value is low, such as the compensation of a small group of public service officials, can be more difficult to lobby for because attention of policymakers is harder to reach, and thus more media work needs to be done (R10). For morally sensitive or emotional issues, such as large excavation works in a community, media attention was said to be desired to change the frame of public debate and eventually policymakers' attitude: "So we gave residents a voice and suddenly it was on the title pages of all newspapers. Well, and then the coalition partner didn't want it any longer" (R9). Although high as well as low salience can be considered favorable for an issue, the fit of an issue with the goals of the organization always needs to be given: "the purpose is kind of sacred" (R3).

Organizational Factors

In evaluating the viability of an issue, the internal structure of the organization was often identified as decisive. One of the interviewees explained this as follows: PA professionals in holistic organizations that have clear top-down hierarchies and decision-making mechanisms (e.g., "the corporate Christmas tree"; R3) have to put less effort in coordinating and generating support for an issue, whereas sector associations or partnership-based organizations are more dependent on broad support for an issue, "because so many people need to think something about it [the issue]" (R3). Thus, issues are sometimes not taken on because the process of generating support internally is perceived as too cumbersome: "But [generating support] internally is actually trickier than externally" (R15).

Besides the internal network of constituents, the dependencies of the organization on its external network were identified to play a vital role in issue viability considerations: the degree of an organization's autonomy in its sector (resources, decision making), the construed external image of the organization as a leader, and its interconnectedness with imagined audiences.

All interviewees turned out to be implicitly or explicitly aware of the type of organization they work for, the consequences that their organization type has for both their position and possibilities, and the process of frame-building related to specific issues. An interviewee working for a public organization said, "We cannot just suggest a plan without involving the municipality or our client" (R15), whereas for corporations, the construed external image is of higher importance because an industry leader is perceived

as having a stronger voice (R5; R24). Such organizational network dependencies are also decisive in later stages of the frame-building process when strategic decisions on coalition-building are taken: "It would have been way less complex if we would not have been connected to the other 'clubs'" (R1).

Social System Factors

The macro setting of the issue in terms of societal developments and the political constellation impacts an issue's viability assessment. The impact of social systemic factors differs depending on the type of organization. The interviewed PA professionals considered the issue in terms of broader trends such as demographic change (R2, R19), crises like the worldwide financial crisis (R19), or other (macro) economic factors (R11) such as public financing and budget (R20, R21) or the employment structure of a region (R12, R24). In terms of politics, mostly the current parliamentary majorities, chairmen (of parties or commissions), leadership in ministries, party programs, and upcoming elections were considered.

Timing

Timing is a factor that was emphasized as decisive for the assessment of an issue's viability. It was said to interfere with all levels: "Timing is key" (R11). At the issue-specific level, timing determines the life cycle stage of an issue. Public issues had already reached a certain level of public salience, even though not necessarily at the top of the public agenda. In most cases, consultancies were brought in when the issue peaked, which was unanimously judged by the interviewees as far too late. Some PA professionals said that they actively scanned the environment to determine issues at the latent stage when public salience was low or inexistent. This was mostly the case for organizational issues that were either strategically set, such as the construction of a reputation for sustainability, or that were brought in from its constituents.

Goal-Setting

The rationalization—as provided during the interviews—regarding the issue, organizational, and social system levels is intricately linked to the goals PA professionals set when evaluating the issue, as visualized by the two-headed arrow in Figure 2.

No matter the issue, the mentioned goals are manifold, and PA professionals indicated that they never strive for a policy-related goal such as maintaining or changing the status quo of regulations or permits alone. They also indicated that neither do they only attempt to create salience for an issue, for instance the well-being of a specific societal group. According to the interviewees, these substantial-level goals are always combined with image-related or relationship-level goals.

At the image level, organizations strive for improving their reputation or to position the firm in their network (i.e., industry) or within the social and political system: "Sometimes we can also speak of lobby success even if the final goal is not achieved, but . . . the organization has been able to build up a good reputation" (R11). One interviewee said he experienced ambiguity while trying to reframe the image of his

organization in the public debate. His organization was being framed as a "Calimero,"[1] "but then the same people tell you not to frame yourself as a Calimero" (R16). Internally, an issue can also be used to maintain the legitimacy of the PA function with the constituent base: "The more often you show how something has worked, the more seriously you will be taken in the whole process" (R16).

PA management has relationship-building at its core. PA professionals vastly used the "opening door" metaphor when referring to this tactic. On the other side, existing relationships need to be nurtured and kept alive, including with one's own constituency, said an interviewee (R17). According to another interviewee, relationship- and image-level goals were usually pursued as an addendum to substantial-level objectives, and sometimes they emerged only in the rationalization process surrounding an issue's viability (R19). The advantage of multiple objectives is that if the substantial goal is not achieved, the issue can still be declared a partial success, which aids in the process of internal legitimation of PA or the consultancy.

Frame Construction and Alignment

Once the decision to run for an issue is taken, frame construction starts (Figure 2). Surprisingly, the interviewed PA professionals did not indicate to follow a strategic plan when constructing the message; instead, often the frame is regarded as a given: "In part, those kinds of stories are already there" (R12). "Maybe it is already in there, that frame" (R1). "Partly, we already have had these messages for a long time and update them over and over again" (R13). At the same time, the interviewees indicate that the frames are not static: "Frames are always subject to change . . . it changes from the moment that you communicate it externally" (R24). This explains the role of consultancies that aid in developing the frame in a more strategic manner. PA professionals described their frame construction as a top-down process where they drafted the frame (with or without a consultant) and double-checked it with the leadership: "First, we discussed it with a small group: with the CEO, the head of accountancy, and some others" (R3). Only afterward was the message forwarded to the constituency (see also the "Frame Legitimation" section).

When reconstructing framing processes during the interviews, we observed that PA professionals rationalized the language, message contents, and strategical alignment. Interviewees emphasized that a frame's language needs to be simple and self-evident; technical language and jargon are to be avoided: "If I get it, a member of Parliament gets it, too" (R21). They were very much aware of the formative aspects of language: "It is very strong to give a name, to connect your issue to a magic word" (R18). Furthermore, positive framing was often preferred to negative messaging, no matter whether the issue supports or challenges the status quo. Yet it was also a discussion topic: "We had to decide whether it should be a positive or a negative frame, what would work best, and that took us two sessions" (R21). Interviewees working for organizations in the public sector seemed to be less reluctant to use negative frames after having tried the positive ones that did not yield the desired effect. The interviewed PA professionals were

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[1] This refers to an animated movie with a small chicken as the main character. The chicken's motto is: "They are big and I am small, and that is unfair!" The "Calimero complex" is frequently used in discourse about organizations that feel or are seen as inferior because of their size.

aware of the risks associated with emotional framing—"emotions can become cheesy" (R4)—but nevertheless agreed that using rational arguments alone was not effective.

It was indicated that the contents of a frame needed to be factually correct and logically consistent. To do so, PA professionals indicated that they often commissioned research, whether externally or within the organization. The frame was also constructed in a way that the organization's interest was coupled with the public interest, as a consultant states: "Their interest has been connected to the public interest" (R10) because a self-interest frame was expected not to resonate well with external audiences, even though it would likely resonate more with internal constituents. PA professionals and consultants dealing with corporate interests maintained that a frame needed to have an economic component to be effective in the Netherlands. However, they also emphasized that a purely economic frame would likely not be as effective (R8, R10, R19). Organizations in the public sector or with collective/societal goals tended to connect their frame to societal problems, or issues that touch citizens' everyday life, as one interviewee indicated: "We don't come to represent an institutional interest, but we do this for citizens" (R21).

Strategic considerations in frame construction can best be circumscribed with internal and external alignment of the message, as well as consistency over the life cycle. Internally, PA professionals indicated that they strove to align the frame with the goals and mission of the organization and, most important, with the interests of internal constituents and/or its close network:

> We chose this frame for two reasons. The first one is: we think that this one would be the most effective one towards the government. Second, this one is most closely related to the reality of our members . . . And then you experience that a lot of people at the board level say, "This is a good story, we can do something with this." (R21)

At the same time, PA professionals indicated that they tried to anticipate how the frame would resonate outside. When strategically considering frame-setting effects, they had a clear picture of who their audiences would be and tried to imagine their reactions to the frame (R20). Generally, being consistent in the framing of the issue was said to be preferred over adapting the frame to external messages.

Frame Legitimation

Based on the information provided by the interviewees, we can conclude that the last step of the perceived frame-building process revolves around the legitimation of the PA frame with internal and external stakeholders. Internal legitimacy of the message was considered crucial for members to identify with the organization's position (R5; R8; R13). PA professionals also indicated that they expect that such internal support would increase external legitimacy of the frame because the media was expected to be more positive if the issue and the frame were shared by internal members.
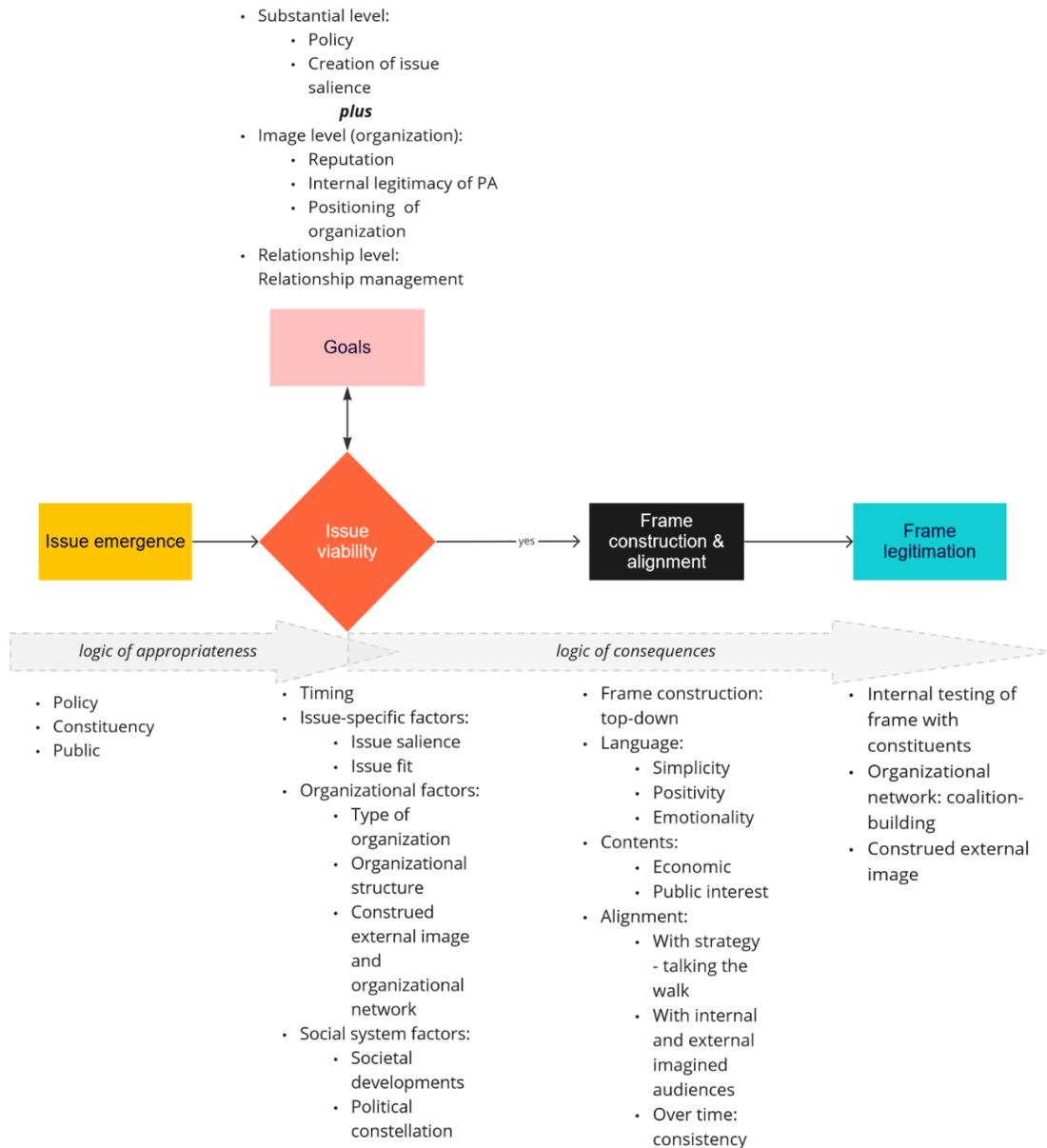
They said the frame was also coordinated with potential coalition partners such as companies from the same industry or affiliated organizations (R20; R22). However, in most cases the frame was not changed

due to a possible coalition partner's preference; rather, interviewees said that coalitions were built when the frame matched, but when it did not, organizations moved on with their own agendas.

Beyond the organization's network and potential coalition partners, external testing of the frame barely took place: Only in one case did the PA professional (R8) mention at times releasing "test balloons" to see how external audiences would react to a message. This professional was the only one in the sample who united a corporate communication and PA role. Mostly, PA professionals said that they hypothesized the reactions of the frame's imagined audiences and therefore tried to deduce whether the frame would be effective: "I think all of our communication advisors have an antenna to sense how this will be received by our constituency" (R14b). They also reasoned how the frame would affect the construed external image of their organization and its positioning in their sector. But these thought processes were not translated into actual testing for reasons of time, and "we mainly did this internally, we once had a masterclass taught by a framing expert" (R21).

The Perceived Process of Organizational Frame-Building

Our findings allow us to propose a model (Figure 2) that summarizes how PA professionals perceive frame-building. Across PA cases, issues, and organization types, PA professionals perceived frame-building as a process of four consecutive steps, triggered by an issue that emerges in public policy, from constituency, or in the public. In the issue viability assessment, PA professionals indicated that they considered timing, issue-, organizational, and social system factors to assess whether to engage in the framing of the issue. This assessment goes hand in hand with the formulation of the framing goals, taking into account substantial, image, and relationship considerations. If the decision is taken to run for the issue, PA professionals reported to construct the frame from the top, reflecting on language, contents, and strategic alignments. The last step marks the predominantly internal testing of the frame's legitimacy, as understood by the interviewees, before it is used in the organization's PA tactics.

- Substantial level:
    - Policy
    - Creation of issue
      salience
      plus
- Image level (organization):
    - Reputation
    - Internal legitimacy of PA
    - Positioning of
      organization
- Relationship level:
  Relationship management

Goals

Issue emergence → **Issue viability** — yes → **Frame construction & alignment** → **Frame legitimation**

logic of appropriateness   *logic of consequences*

- Policy
- Constituency
- Public

- Timing
- Issue-specific factors:
    - Issue salience
    - Issue fit
- Organizational factors:
    - Type of
      organization
    - Organizational
      structure
    - Construed
      external image
      and
      organizational
      network
- Social system factors:
    - Societal
      developments
    - Political
      constellation

- Frame construction:
  top-down
- Language:
    - Simplicity
    - Positivity
    - Emotionality
- Contents:
    - Economic
    - Public interest
- Alignment:
    - With strategy
      - talking the
      walk
    - With internal
      and external
      imagined
      audiences
    - Over time:
      consistency

- Internal testing of
  frame with
  constituents
- Organizational
  network: coalition-
  building
- Construed external
  image

Figure 2. The perceived process of organizational frame-building.

Discussion and Contribution

This study explored how PA professionals perceive processes of frame-building within organizations other than the media (Brüggemann, 2014). It thereby contributes to political communication, journalism

research, and strategic communication research as it unravels how PA professionals understand frame-building within organizations before influencing journalists (Wichgers et al., 2021).

The perspective on institutional work and logics reveals how decision making in communication and framing follows routines, habits, and conventions and which factors are deliberately considered in this process. That way, the study contributes to existing instrumental frame-building perspectives which focus on intentional actions between actors (e.g., Cornelissen et al., 2009). This perspective also provides a new angle to PA scholarship that has so far relied on instrumental rational choice perspectives from management studies (e.g., Hillman et al., 2004) or interest group research (Klüver et al., 2015). Similarly, these insights can provide a mirror to reflect on the blind spots of PA practice, for example when professionals construct social issues and (alternative) frames.

The expressed understandings of public affairs frame-building by PA professionals describe it as a process of shifting logics, where the initial stage is marked by a logic of appropriateness quickly followed by a shift to a logic of consequences when the viability of the issues is assessed. This logic seems to dominate the remaining process. At the first stage of issue emergence, PA professionals' reflections indicate that the logic of appropriateness seems to affect the frame-building process when they rely on their routines, skills, understandings, and organizational conventions to notice/become aware of an issue (Schulz, 2016).

The trigger of the frame-building process, the issue, is seen as a given, as an objective reality that needs to be dealt with. It is understood as emerging from a focusing event in public policy, the social system, or from the constituent's base (Rawat & Morris, 2016). The social construction of the issue is not being questioned (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). That an organization can (re)construct the issue by influencing public discourse through an array of strategic communication means is, at the outset, not considered even though the entire process of frame-building is one of influencing the issue's meaning. Thus, issue emergence and issue viability, the first two stages of the process, are not strategic from a communication point of view (Hallahan et al., 2007). Instead, following the interviewees' accounts of frame-building, PA professionals juxtapose organizational goals with timing, issue-specific, organizational, social, and political system factors to decide on whether to run for an issue.

This second step of issue viability assessment marks a shift in logics: From that moment on, PA professionals' accounts of the frame-building process reflect that decision making is more strongly rationalized and characterized by the assessment of outcomes by the PA professional and the management, thus seeming to follow a logic of consequences (Schulz, 2016). Surprisingly, as noted earlier, not all aspects of the decision-making process regarding frame-building are equally "rationally" assessed: According to the interviewed PA professionals' reflections, alternative communicative courses of action or message-level components receive less explicit attention than substantive ones. The frame-building process is very much perceived as inward facing and characterized by internal considerations of consequences that are matched with imagined external circumstances. PA professionals indicate that once PA frames are constructed in a top-down process, they are predominantly tested with internal constituents. They also perceive that external legitimation is barely done explicitly; rather, the interviewed PA professionals explained that they tend to consult imagined audiences and assess expected frame-setting effects (Wichgers et al., 2021) that they judge by experience. Taking an organization-centric perspective, PA professionals state to keep frames

deliberately static during an issue's life cycle. This is because PA professionals attach importance to a frame's consistency, particularly when external pressure arises through changing public salience or different frames by other organizations. Timing is considered crucial regarding the life cycle stage of the issue (Downs, 1972) and the time available until the frame needs to be ready for use.

This frame-building process as perceived by PA professionals shows a paradox in their understanding of framing in strategic communication: While the outcome of frame-building is seen as a communication artifact, the decision to pursue an issue is said not to be dependent on potentially successful framing. Frame-building considerations only start when putting hands on frame construction and alignment. Based on the interviewees' reflections, we can conclude that the decision to initiate a strategic communication process with the PA frame as a product is more dependent on an organization's overall mission and raison d'être and political and discursive opportunity structures (Koopmans, 2004; Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996) than on strategic communication factors. This is in line with a communication-as-process view of communication strategy, where strategy emerges from dynamical interactions between the organization and its environment (King, 2010). Yet despite recognizing that the frame is strongly influenced by contextual factors, the communication strategy is functional to reach organizational goals and not explicitly considered in the interplay with the environment. This has to do with the predominantly internal perspective in frame construction and legitimation.

These findings prompt important insights for strategic communication scholars and practitioners. First, the social construction of issues and frames (Entman, 1993; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014) is not strategically reflected in practice. Second, while acknowledging the context-dependency of the profession and to a certain extent the contingency of issues (Bowen, 2017; Downs, 1972; Matthes, 2012), the PA frame is managed statically rather than emergent (King, 2010). Third, the frame-building process appears to be rather nonstrategic when it comes to the use of communicative means at the message-level (i.e., pictures, stories), at the tactics level regarding (new) channels, or in terms of a communication plan at the strategic level. This may be explained by the predominantly noncommunication backgrounds of the interviewed professionals (and the practice field; Koch & Schulz-Knappe, 2021; von den Driesch & van der Wurff, 2016) where scientific knowledge about the effects of communication modes or framing is lacking. It can also be explained from institutional theory, where the strengths of institutional frameworks, routines, and processes largely impact strategy making (Sandhu, 2009).

The perceived frame-building process depicted here held across different types of organizations and their structures, from the "corporate Christmas tree" to more dispersed partnership organizations and regional governments. Therefore, it contributes a perspective on the inner workings of (corporate) organizations to the literature on corporate political activity (Hillman et al., 2004) as well as interest group research (Klüver et al., 2015).

Limitations and Future Research

The study is subject to limitations. For one, although we applied maximum variation sampling to the type of organizations in the sample, we did not do so explicitly for organizational structure. The data analysis and interpretation of findings in terms of institutional theory revealed that structure might play a

more pronounced role in the process of frame-building than expected at the outset. It is therefore advised to include organizational structure as a sampling criterion in future studies on frame-building or other managerial communication processes.

The study's findings build from interviews conducted with PA professionals in the Netherlands. We made the point that context matters for the conduct of PA generally, and the findings confirm this for frame-building as well. However, our interest was not in generalizability of the findings (which qualitative studies generally cannot perform) but in uncovering an intraorganizational process—the mesolevel. Social and political systems and cultural values certainly influence these inner workings, but we expect that the mesolevel process described here is similar across Western countries. Future studies should depart from this road and compare the frame-building (and framing) process in organizations situated in non-Western cultures and systems.

The internal perspective that was found regarding frame construction and legitimation is also due to the study design that relies on perceptions of the frame-building process of organizational members. Observation studies would provide more and comparative insights on the socio-interactional aspects of the frame-building process, for instance how PA professionals discuss and negotiate potential frames within their organizations.

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