

Nordic Openness in Practice

Loose Coupling of Government Communication and Policy-making in Finland

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Abstract

Due to the tradition of ‘Nordic openness’, and intensified by international trends, the norm of policy-making transparency is strong in Finland. Inspired by organizational institutionalism, the present article studies what this notion of transparency means in practice. A case study of a social security reform committee is presented. The consensus-building practices typical of Finnish corporatist policy-making significantly constrained the transparency of government communication during the lifetime of the committee. The government communicated actively in public to meet the demand for transparency; but in order to secure effective bargaining, the government communicated issues concerning the committee so vaguely that it did not inspire wide public discussion. Public discussion was instead mainly fuelled by leaks. These findings suggest that a strong norm of transparency can lead to ceremonial transparency, where government public communication is loosely coupled with policy-making practices. These ceremonies might strengthen the notion of Nordic openness.

Keywords: Nordic openness, transparency, government communication, policy-making, corporatism, Finland

Introduction

Nordic countries are famous for their tradition of openness. The reputation of “Nordic openness” is based, among other things¹, on the strong emphasis on transparency of government activities in these countries (e.g., see Erkkilä 2012). During recent decades, the norm of transparency has strengthened even further in Nordic countries, reflecting an international trend: Increasingly critical citizens have been making demands for better citizen participation in policy-making (e.g., Dalton et al. 2003: 1-3). Meeting these demands requires proactive and transparent government communication concerning policy intentions and options (cf. Meijer et al. 2012: 14). Moreover, the news media have become more critical of political elites, they too demanding transparency (Esser 2013).

The present article studies what this norm of government transparency means in practice in Finland. The article thus contributes to the literature on government communication, where there is a need to clarify the concrete meaning and significance of “watchwords” like transparency (Sanders 2011: 268). Earlier research suggests that the policy-making institutions and practices of Finnish consensus democracy (see Lijphart 2012) might put a special twist on how the Finnish government meets the demand for

transparency. In Finnish consensus democracy, policy-making often involves bargaining in tight elite networks. Earlier research suggests that bargaining is usually more efficient and effective when the public and the media are excluded from the process (e.g., Reunanen et al. 2010).

Against this background, I look at how government communication in Finland has adapted to the strengthened norm of transparency: Is the content of policy preparation processes actively communicated to the public and how? How do the policy-making institutions typical of Finnish consensus democracy limit the transparency of government communication? How does the government solve the contradiction between the norm of transparency and the “realpolitik” of secrecy? The present article approaches these questions through the lens of organizational institutionalism. This theoretical tradition offers tools for understanding how organizations cope with normative demands coming from their social environment when those demands collide with internal demands for efficiency (Meyer & Rowan 1977).

The analysis is based on a case study of government communication in a corporatist² policy-making process: the *SATA committee* (2007-2009). This committee was assigned by the government of Finland to draft a major reform of the social security system. As a corporatist bargain between the government parties, the trade unions and the employers' federations, it is a prime example of policy-making based on the imperative to build consensus and seek compromises. Moreover, the demand for transparency was particularly strong due to the societal significance of the policy issues and the enormous scope of the committee's task. It is therefore a good case for studying the possible tensions between the norm of transparency and the need for secrecy. The aim of this case study is not to generalize, but to build theory and to understand “deeper causes” (see Flyvbjerg 2006: 229).

The Norm of Transparency of Policy-making in Finland

The strong norm of transparency in the Nordic countries is reflected in the early enactment of Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation in these countries. Finland enacted its first information access law as early as 1951 (Erkkilä 2012: 5). This act did not, however, put much emphasis on the transparency of policy preparation (Mäenpää 2006: 58-59). Enactment of the new FOI act in 1999 marked a change in this respect (Mäenpää 2006: 64-66). One of the objectives of this act is to promote citizen participation in policy-making (Openness Act 1999: Chapter 1, Section 3; see also Constitution of Finland 1999: Section 14). In contrast to the old act, which prescribed a passive approach to transparency where information was given only when asked for, the new act emphasizes proactive transparency: civil servants have a duty to make available and share information and, thus, to promote citizen participation (see Hynninen 2000: 35-37, 40). Moreover, the Recommendation on Central Government Communication emphasizes the importance of promoting public discussion and citizen participation in policy preparation (Prime Minister's Office 2002: 6). This goal should be achieved, for instance, by briefing the news media about unfinished policy preparation processes (Prime Minister's Office 2002: 15). In sum, the legislation and recommendations reflect a norm of proactive transparency: The government is expected to inform citizens about on-going policy-making processes in order to enable public discussion and citizen participation in policy-making.

Citizens and the media, too, have increasingly demanded transparency. Due to political de-alignment, rising levels of education, the individualization of society and geopolitical changes, from the 1980s onwards the citizens of Finland have increasingly expected transparency and accountability from the political elite. This can be seen, for instance, in the rising number of scandals targeting political elites. (Kantola & Vesa 2013.) At the same time, journalists began to take a more distanced and critical position vis-à-vis the political and financial elites (Aula 1991; Kantola 2013). This development, which is a sign of the general mediatization of politics, has resulted in journalism that more actively demands transparency from political elites (cf. Esser 2013: 156, 170). Public opinion now strongly supports proactive transparency in policy preparation: For instance, 83 per cent of Finns agree that “it should be made easier for people to participate in and discuss important political decisions” (Bengtsson & Christensen 2012: 261, my translation). This attitude is in line with a widespread trend in established democracies: Citizens have become dissatisfied with representative democracy and want to participate more directly in policy-making (e.g., Dalton et al. 2003: 1-3). Members of the Finnish elite also widely share the normative ideal that policy preparation should be transparent and based on broad-based public discussion (Ruostetsaari 2014: 212).

Public Communication and Policy-Making in a Consensus Democracy

However, at the same time the Finnish political system contains elements that do not necessarily favour transparent government communication. Finland is, to a great degree, a *consensus democracy* (Lijphart 2012): Finnish governments are typically surplus multi-party coalitions and the number of effective parties is high. Moreover, while corporatism (see Lijphart 2012: 158-173) has generally declined in Finland, it is still present in some policy sectors (e.g., pension and social security policy), where major interest organizations have a strong and institutionalized position in policy preparation. Due to their emphasis on “inclusiveness, bargaining and compromise”, consensus democracies can also be called “negotiation democracies” (Lijphart 2012: 2). In Finland, policy-making often involves intensive bargaining and negotiations among the coalition parties and between the government parties and major interest organizations.

Earlier research suggests that bargaining is usually more effective when the media and the public can be excluded from the process. This is, first of all, because publicity encourages posturing and thus tends to fix bargaining positions (Kantola 2002: 287; Spörer-Wagner & Marcinkowski 2010: 8-9). Policy-makers therefore often prefer secrecy during the policy preparation stage in order to facilitate compromise and consensus-building (Reunanen et al. 2010: 295; Spörer-Wagner & Marcinkowski 2010: 9). For this reason, policy-makers in consensus democracies do not usually try to gain leverage in the bargaining process by “going public” (cf. Roncarolo 2002: 76; Kriesi 2004: 202-203; see Kernell 1997), that is, by trying to gain public support for their own policy preferences during the course of the bargaining process.

Moreover, the Finnish political elite is small and cohesive, and informal and personal-level contacts among the elite have traditionally played a major role in the building of elite-level consensus (Ruostetsaari 2007; Reunanen et al. 2010). Because these tight elite networks provide an efficient means of communication, the elites often do not need

media publicity to discuss policy issues with each other (Reunanen et al. 2010: 304; Ruostetsaari 2007: 187; see also Koch-Baumgarten & Voltmer 2010: 222). Thus, the news media do not have a similar visible role in governing in Finland like they do in, for instance, the United States, where “face-to-face communication has become more difficult with the growing reach of government, the increasing number of participants and the dispersion and confusion of power and authority” (Cook 1998: 125).

The paradox, therefore, is that while the Finnish government faces strong normative demands to practice transparent public communication concerning policies in preparation, it has, at the same time, strong incentives to pursue secrecy in order to maintain efficiency in policy-making (see also Spörer & Marcinkowski 2010). I expect that the Finnish government might respond to this paradox by *loosely coupling* (Meyer & Rowan 1977; see also Lowrey & Ezrikova 2010) its public communication with actual policy preparation practices.

The Concept of Loose Coupling

The concept of loose coupling captures one way in which organizations sometimes adapt to normative demands coming from their social environment. Organizations’ social environments include various *institutionalized rules*, which are typifications and expectations concerning how legitimate organizations should behave. These rules are often supported by law or public opinion. Organizations often do not fully adapt to these institutionalized rules, because doing so would in many cases lead to inefficiency. However, organizations need to take these institutionalized rules into account somehow in order to maintain and increase their legitimacy. (Meyer & Rowan 1977: 341, 347.) As argued originally by John Meyer and Brian Rowan (1977), organizations often solve this dilemma through loose coupling, that is, through a “slackening of bonds” within the organization (Lowrey & Erzikova 2010: 278). Loose coupling occurs when organizations adapt to the institutionalized rules only superficially: Organizations meet the normative demands coming from their environment by adopting new practices or renewing their formal structure, but these practices or structures do not have a firm connection to the core practices of the organizations, which remain unchanged (and efficient). Therefore the “adoption of organizational forms and practices can become *ceremonial*, independent of their functionality” (Lowrey & Erzikova 2010: 278, my emphasis).³ This ceremonial activity has merely “ritual significance: it maintains appearances and validates an organization” (Meyer & Rowan 1977: 355).

It seems likely that the Finnish government might solve the dilemma of the simultaneous strong norm of transparency and the need for secrecy through a loose coupling of public communication and policy-making. As shown, the transparency of policy-making is an institutionalized rule that is to an increasing degree supported by law and public opinion. The government most likely wants to adapt to this institutionalized rule of transparency in order to strengthen its legitimacy. As Jenny De Fine Licht et al. (2014: 112) write, public officials share “a widespread perception that openness increases the perceived legitimacy of the decision making.” But because extensive transparency might hamper efficient consensus-building, it is possible that the government’s public communications sometimes adapt to the norm of transparency only ceremonially, that is, by giving only the *appearance* of transparency and, thus, being loosely coupled with actual

policy preparation practices. This loose coupling of public government communication and policy-making thus means that these two activities would, to a certain degree (but not fully), be disconnected from each other. Earlier research on government communication indeed suggests that this is a possible scenario: Government communication activities can become “mere window-dressing exercises to give the appearance of open government communication” (Sanders & Canel 2013: 311).

The Case, Data and Method

The present article examines the transparency of government communication by analysing a case study of a corporatist policy preparation committee. Because the government parties and major interest groups were represented in the committee, it is likely that public communication *between* the major policy-makers did not play an important role in the policy preparation process. However, it is interesting to study whether the government still practiced active public communication in order to meet the demand for transparency. Moreover, it is interesting to explore whether the nature of the reform, as a corporatist bargain, limited the transparency of government communication and whether the government’s public communication was loosely coupled with the bargaining process.

The SATA committee (2007-2009) was assigned by the “Bourgeois government” (2007-2011, including the Centre Party, the National Coalition Party, the Greens of Finland, the Swedish People’s Party) to reform the social security system of Finland. The committee was a corporatist bargain between the government parties, the employers’ organizations and the trade unions (Saari 2009: 245). The committee and its subdivisions had around 60 members, including civil servants, ministers’ political advisers, interest groups (especially labour market organizations) and civic organizations. The SATA committee finally reached consensus on dozens of proposals for changes in social security legislation. Its most expensive proposals included abolishment of employers’ universal social insurance payments⁴, a reduction in municipal taxes and setting a minimum level for pensions.

The case was studied by triangulating observations with many types of data: interviews, the government’s public communication material and newspaper articles. In total, 20 interviews with 13 members of the SATA committee and two government communication officers were conducted between November 2011 and January 2013 and in January 2014 (in three waves).⁵ The public communication material includes the government’s press releases and PowerPoint presentations used at the committee’s press briefings. Articles about the committee (including news articles, editorials, commentary, and letters to editor) from July 2007 to December 2009 were collected from the electronic archives of major newspapers: *Aamulehti*⁶, *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Keskisuomalainen*. These papers used to be affiliated with political parties, but nowadays they are considered to be quite neutral in a party-political sense, at least when covering national-level politics. In addition, some observations were made and facts checked on the basis of earlier studies on the SATA committee (Pulkkinen 2011; Saari 2009, 2011).

The data were analysed to find out how actively and in what way the government informed the media and the public about the SATA committee during its work; how and to what extent these government communication activities were visible in the media and to what extent they inspired public discussion; and how the interviewees assessed the significance of public discussion and of the government’s official public communication

activities. The analysis focuses on the period from June 2007 to January 2009. Between these dates, the committee’s politically most significant and most expensive decisions were agreed upon, and the political significance of the committee was reduced to a considerable degree after this period (see Saari 2011: 88).

Findings

Active Government Communication

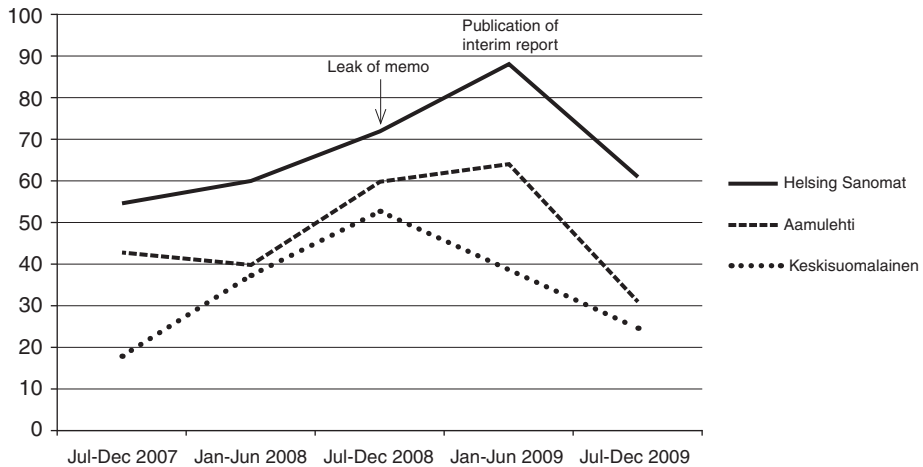
The government’s official public communication of the committee’s work was quite active. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and the Prime Minister’s Office organized many press meetings and press conferences concerning the committee during its work (see Table 1). In these press events, the chairman of the committee (a retired civil servant), the Minister of Social Affairs and Health and occasionally the Prime Minister told journalists about the committee’s work and the issues it was working on. The social security reform was also the topic of some government press releases. Moreover, the ministry published a brochure about the reform committee. There were also dozens of semi-public⁷ seminars and other events where the civil servants on the committee talked about its work to a broad spectrum of stakeholders (e.g., civic organizations and other people who were not committee members).

Table 1. *Major Public Communication Events Related to the SATA Committee*

Month	Events
11/2007	Press meeting
5/2008	Press conference
8/2009	Press meeting
11/2008	Leak of memo; Press meeting
1/2009	Leak of draft interim report; Press conference (interim report)
4/2009	Press meeting
10/2009	Press meeting
12/2009	Press conference (final report)

Loose Coupling of Public Communication and Policy-making

Although official government communication was active, its impact on public discussion was limited. In spite of the communication activities, there was not much public discussion about the committee in the media during the first year of the committee (Figure 1; Pulkkinen 2011: 37).⁸ For instance, the committee and the government arranged press briefings in November 2007, May 2008, and August 2008 (Table 1), but the amount of news coverage remained at a low level during these months (Pulkkinen 2011: 37). The newspapers wrote a few news articles on the basis of some of the government’s communication activities, but these articles did not often lead to many follow-up stories or commentaries. As one interviewed committee member said, “it was visible nowhere” that the press briefings were held. The lack of public discussion was even brought up in newspaper editorials, which stated for instance: “Does the SATA committee not want discussion?” (*Savon Sanomat* 27th July 2008) and “There should be public discussion about the social security reform” (*Helsingin Sanomat* 19th July 2008).

Figure 1. Number of Articles Mentioning the Social Security Reform in Three Newspapers

Note: The articles include news articles, editorials, commentary, and letters to editor.

However, lively public discussion emerged in the media in November 2008 (Pulkkinen 2011: 37⁹; Figure 1). But this public discussion was not caused by the government's above-mentioned official communication activities. Instead, the increase in the number of newspaper articles was caused by leaks (see Table 1). A draft memo, prepared by the chairman of the committee to facilitate internal discussion in the committee about its proposals, was leaked to the news media. Newspapers wrote big headlines on the basis of the memo, and this led to a public discussion that lasted for days. One of the most heated issues was related to earnings-based social security benefits. Trade unions held the view that a policy option mentioned in the leaked memo would weaken these benefits. Interviews show that there were severe conflicts inside the committee at the time of the leak. The leak can be seen as a consequence of these conflicts. According to interviewees, in corporatist bargaining it is very common that heated issues are leaked to the press. The leak also affected the official government communication – the committee arranged a press meeting in November 2008 as a response to the public discussion following the above-mentioned leak.

Vivid public discussion also emerged from January 2009 (Pulkkinen 2011: 37; Figure 1). This public discussion was caused by employers' and employees' representatives' agreement on social policy, and the subsequent publication of the SATA committee's interim report. This public discussion was mostly about decisions that had already been agreed upon and not so much about issues that were still under negotiation in the committee. Publication of the interim report was also preceded by leaks (Table 1), which led to many news articles.

Why then did the government's official public communication activities not inspire vivid public discussion in the media? Answering this question requires taking a closer look at the content of the government's public communication.

It seems, first of all, that the government presented the goals of the committee quite vaguely and in an abstract way in its public communication. For instance, to facilitate public communication, the committee simplified its goals into nine "core messages"

agreed upon by the committee members and listed in the committee's communication plan. These core messages included, for example, the goals of "reducing poverty" and creating "a supportive and fair social security for everyone." Thus, the core messages were formulated so vaguely and at such a high level of abstraction that almost everyone, including all the committee members representing conflicting interests, could agree upon them. The formulation of the core messages thus downplayed the controversies inherent in the committee's assignment. For instance, almost no one will argue against the core message that poverty should be reduced, but the controversy begins with discussions of which part of the population (e.g., the unemployed or elderly people) should be relieved from poverty and how. The core messages were used in press releases, ministers' public speeches and the brochure about the reform, for instance in the following manner: "The aim of the government's social security reform is to secure for everyone an extensive and reasonable social security, which offers the people better possibilities to control life and changes" (Prime Minister's Office, press release, 7th May 2008).

Not only goals but also the content of the committee's work was presented at quite a general level. The analysis of the interviews and the public communication material shows that, in the press briefings, the committee's chairman did not reveal in detail individual committee members' positions on different issues. The information given to journalists was therefore relatively vague. A telling example is the issue of work incentives, which was a controversial issue within the committee. The committee was assigned to strengthen work incentives, that is, incentives for unemployed people to seek for paid work. This issue was hotly debated in the committee; for instance, trade unions fiercely opposed some policy options aimed at reforming earnings-related social security in order to strengthen work incentives. However, at the press meetings, the chairman of the committee did not reveal the opinions of individual committee members on this issue (interviews). Instead, his PowerPoint presentations (5th February 2008; 19th August 2008) described at a high level of abstraction that the committee was, for instance, conducting research on "how the principle of earned income should be included in the criteria for paying earnings-related social security benefits" and conducting "an international comparison of tax reductions that increase work incentives." Thus, this controversial issue was presented to journalists in an abstract way, not revealing in detail the concrete controversies on the committee's table.

Evidently, and as already indicated by the low amount of media coverage related to the government's official communication activities, journalists did not consider much of the information presented to them as very newsworthy. Given the enormous scope and importance of the reform, journalists were interested in it and attended the press meetings. However, much of the information presented to journalists in the government's public communication did not seem to have a great deal of news value (Galtung & Ruge 1965), nor did it fit into the media logic (see Strömbäck & Esser 2009: 212-213): As mentioned above, *conflicts* within the committee were not revealed to journalists in detail and they were not *personalized*. An interviewed committee member understood very well that the information given to journalists did not fit into the media logic, as individual committee members' policy positions were not revealed in detail: "[Journalists], of course, would rather want to have a juicy fight than this kind of statement that 'we have been developing and calculating and there are different points of views'" (committee member). Another interviewed committee member told an anecdote about

a journalist who had said to her/him after a press briefing, “next time, if you don’t have anything new to say, it’s not worth inviting me”. Some interviewees also suggested that journalists mostly wanted to know what the committee would eventually decide, but it was not possible to give this kind of information when negotiations were still underway.

However, and as mentioned above, not all of the information provided by official government communication activities was totally ignored by journalists. Some news articles were written on the basis of these communication activities, but these news articles were not usually followed by lively public discussion in the media. For instance, one press release informed about the tightening of the schedule of the social security reform, and *Helsingin Sanomat* published a news article on the basis of this press release. Not surprisingly, this news about the schedule did not inspire much public discussion. In addition, the news articles based on government communication often mentioned the committee’s goals (e.g., *Aamulehti* 8th May 2008; *Helsingin Sanomat* 8th May 2008), echoing the “core messages”. Because the core messages presented the committee’s goals at a very general level, thus downplaying their inherently conflictual nature, they did not inspire much public discussion either. However, the analysis of news articles shows that some concrete policy options were also presented to journalists during the press meetings. Concrete policy options (such as a small bonus for unemployed people who manage to find a job) were mentioned in some news articles that were based on the press meetings. But this did not lead to follow-ups or commentaries in the studied newspapers. These policy options were not particularly controversial in comparison to some other issues on the committee’s agenda.

In sum, the information published through official government communication was often at quite a general level. Issues the committee was negotiating were often presented in ways that did not go into detail concerning the concrete controversies at stake. This seems to explain why the official government communication did not result in much media coverage and public discussion about the issues under negotiation; the most visible news articles and vivid public discussions were usually based on leaks or on issues already agreed upon by the committee.

Thus we can conclude that a loose coupling of the government’s public communication and policy-making occurred. The information published through the official government communication activities was to a considerable degree disconnected from what was going on in the committee. In other words, links between the government’s public communication and private communication among the committee members were quite loose: Government communication activities did not enable broad-based public discussion about many of the politically sensitive issues that were the subject of the most heated discussions within the committee.

Reasons for Loose Coupling

The interviews suggest that the vagueness of the government’s public communication was related to the need to preserve the efficiency of the bargaining process. Many interviewees held the view that extensive public discussion during bargaining should be avoided because public discussion tends to fix bargaining positions and thus makes compromise-building more difficult (see also Pulkkinen 2011: 80-82). One interviewee, for instance, said that “it never helps to achieve the goal of a working group or the like

if things go public too early.” On the whole, the civil servants interviewed regarded public discussion as more harmful than did the interviewees representing other roles. Moreover, the committee members had agreed that the committee’s meetings and draft documents were confidential. Confidentiality was justified as a way to preserve the “working peace”, and it was seen as a typical feature of corporatist committees (see also Vesa & Kananen 2014).

In order to ensure that public debate would not hamper the consensus-building process, politicization of issues was avoided in the official government communication, as the analyses of the public communication material already suggest. The press was not informed about what the committee members “are fighting about” (interviewed civil servant). This means that committee members’ opinions on different issues were not revealed in detail, as mentioned above. An interviewed civil servant also noted that it was important that the government’s press briefings would not be used to promote or oppose any particular policy option. Thus, it is understandable that an interviewed civil servant considered it somewhat inevitable that the committee’s work was presented at a fairly general level. According to her/him, it was difficult to inform the media in any other way than telling “at a slightly more general level” what kind of decision the committee is looking for.

Bargaining-style policy-making thus limited public discussion on the committee’s work. Many interviewees felt that extensive public discussion was dangerous and should therefore be avoided. Why did the government, then, arrange the public communication activities in the first place?

Many observations suggest that the aim of meeting the demand for transparency was one of the most important reasons for arranging the official public communication activities. For instance, one interviewed representative of an interest group stated that the press briefings were held to “remove suspicions and secretiveness.” An interviewed communication officer said that the briefings were a concrete expression of openness. More concretely, one press meeting was a direct response to some journalists’ public demands that the committee’s work should be discussed more openly in public (interview). Soon after these demands, the Minister of Social Affairs and Health invited journalists to an “evening party”. The (draft) invitation letter promised the “possibility of talking about the progress of the social security reform and its financing over good food and a sauna.”

The pressure to arrange the public communication activities was most likely even further strengthened by the practice of quantitatively monitoring these activities (cf. Erkkilä 2012: 204-207). The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health reports the yearly figures on its press meetings and press releases to the Ministry of Finance, which has considerable power over the former’s financial resources (cf. Erkkilä 2012).

However, some of the same interviewees who saw the public communication activities as a means of meeting the public demand for transparency said at the same time that it is important to conduct public communication in such a way that the committee’s “working peace” is secured. For instance, while the aforementioned representative of an interest group saw the media briefings as a means to increase transparency, she/he neglected the possibility of a broad-based and inclusive public debate and participation: “I have held the view, that when laws are being made, every citizen cannot participate in preparing them.” Another interviewee said that she/he prefers to “have genuine discussion in a small group of people” and does not “love big stages” (i.e., public or

semi-public events). However, she/he added that it would often be wise to use “big stages” for various reasons, one being to create “*an image* that this is somehow very democratic and open”.

Thus, there was an apparent paradox in the perceptions of these interviewees: On the one hand, the government’s public communication activities were seen as being aimed at transparency, while on the other hand, keeping the work of the committee out of the public view was considered important to ensuring effective bargaining.¹⁰ The vague presentation of the committee’s negotiations and goals in public communication was apparently a workable solution to this paradox. By referring to vague policy goals and talking about the negotiations only at a fairly general level, the government could meet the demand for transparency without hampering the bargaining process (cf. Spörer-Wagner & Marcinkowski 2010: 10).

Thus, we can conclude that the simultaneous need for secrecy and for meeting transparency demands seems to be one important reason why public communication was loosely coupled with policy-making. It seems that the official government communication to a certain degree served a ceremonial purpose: It gave an appearance of transparency to strengthen legitimacy. Therefore we can speak of *ceremonial transparency*.

Conclusion

The present article has analysed how the government of Finland copes with the strong norm of transparency in policy-making. A case study revealed that the government struggles to meet transparency demands, but the practices and institutions of consensual policy-making can put limits on the transparency of the government communication. As a consequence, the demand for transparency is sometimes met only superficially. Because policy-makers think that detailed information about policy negotiations cannot be published without hampering the bargaining process, government communication activities can include ceremonial elements: Such activities may seek to maintain the appearance of transparency without publishing information that would enable broad-based public discussion and effective citizen participation. In these cases, a loose coupling of government communication and policy-making occurs, which means that the government’s public communication is to a certain extent disconnected from the ongoing policy-making process. This loose coupling is not a sign of a grand conspiracy, but a consequence of the practical considerations of government officials who are “muddling through”.

These findings suggest that Nordic openness might be – at least in Finland – partly a myth maintained by rituals of government communication. As David Heald (2006: 34) writes: “Even when transparency appears to be increasing, as measured by some index, the reality may be quite different.” However, whether this ceremonial transparency actually succeeds in enhancing a government’s legitimacy is not certain. If citizens become aware of the ceremonial nature of government communication, their trust in the government might, on the contrary, decline (cf. Sanders & Canel 2013: 311).

Although the present findings were not intended to be generalized, some remarks about generalizability are in order. Due to its nature as a corporatist bargain, the committee under study can be seen as a most likely case of the loose coupling of policy-making with government public communication. Because not all policy-making processes in

Finland involve such intensive corporatist bargaining, the findings cannot be generalized to all kinds of policy processes.

The SATA committee can also be seen as an “extreme case” (see Flyvbjerg 2006: 231), which demonstrates what can happen when a strong norm of transparency meets a strong need for secrecy. I believe that this scenario is not only possible in Finnish corporatist committees, but also in many other countries and contexts (e.g., see Spörer-Wagner & Marcinkowski 2010). I hope that the findings presented here can be used as a “yardstick” when analysing practices of government openness in future studies in similar or different contexts.

Notes

1. Besides transparency, Nordic openness also refers to the broad participation of civil society actors in policy-making (see Rainio-Niemi 2014). However, in the present article, I focus on openness understood primarily as transparency of government communication. While focusing on transparency instead of participation, I understand that these aspects of openness have a “*synergistic relationship*”, as transparency is an important prerequisite for participation (Meijer et al. 2012: 14, emphasis in original).
2. In the article, the term “corporatism” refers to democratic corporatism or neo-corporatism, which is different from authoritarian corporatism (cf. Lijphart 2012: 158).
3. The original argument of Meyer and Rowan (1977) is only concerned with loose coupling of (symbolic) structures and practices. However, I do not see any reason why the argument could not be extended to loose coupling of different practices, as Lowrey and Erzikova (2010) seem to do.
4. This was not officially the committee’s proposal, but this decision was connected to the work of the committee due to an agreement by trade unions and the Confederation of Finnish Industries.
5. Nine interviews were conducted by Johannes Kananen and 11 by Juho Vesa. The first nine interviews were about the negotiation process, policy ideas and public communication. The last 11 interviews focused primarily on public communication. Five committee members were interviewed twice. Some interviewees gave later further information by e-mail or telephone.
6. I collected the articles of *Aamulehti* from *Suomen Media-arkisto*, which I want to thank for co-operation.
7. By “semi-public” I mean that participation to these seminars was based on invitation, and the information given concerning the SATA committee was not confidential.
8. This is true with regard to all studied newspapers, although there are differences in the total number of the articles between these papers. As the papers are politically independent, I believe that these differences are caused by differences in editorial resources.
9. Titta Pulkkinen (2011) counted the monthly numbers of articles about the reform in *Aamulehti* (AL) and *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS). In November 2008, 23 articles were published in HS, and 15 in AL. In earlier months, the number of articles varied between 0 to 8 in HS, and 0 to 7 in AL.
10. Esa Reunanen et al. (2010: 303) found a somewhat similar contradiction in the perceptions of members of the Finnish power elite.

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