

DOSSIER  
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ETHICAL ISSUES IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION PRESS  
RELEASES: THE WHO HEALTHY CITIES PROGRAMME

*1. Communication and Public Administration: an Overview*

The internal and external communication challenges that public managers are constantly confronted with have been variously referred to as “communication in public administration” (Hightsaw and Bowen: 1965), “public agency communication” (Shachter: 1983), and “administrative communication” (Garnett and Kouzmin: 1997). In its commonly acknowledged meaning, the communicational activity carried out by Public Administration qualifies both as *institutional* and *informative* as well as *relational* and *promotional*. Accordingly, as a part of the public sector, government agencies not only have a general obligation to issue official documents such as bills, forms and questionnaires, but also to report to the public on their activities. In this latter case, they can choose from different forms of direct communication to report to their citizenry: issuing agency annual reports, implementing and updating websites with information about the activities of the agency or sending informational material to the citizens according to their individual interests. Alternatively, they can use a more direct way to communicate with external audiences, i.e. through press releases.

The obligation to cooperate with the press has been defined as a combination of the publicness of public administration (Moe and Gilmour: 1995) and the constitutional expectation that the media would serve “as an instrument of democracy” (Patterson: 1998).

Rubin argues that press releases are the bottom line in the field of public relations and “public organizations spend a vast amount of money every year on public relations because it helps them to get the media to portray their views to the public” (1987: 42). Thus, a skilful and effective use of press releases is essential to a successful administration as an agency can accomplish its mission more easily if they encourage behaviours that have broad social approval and reflect widely held values (Weiss and Tschihart:

1994), and foster the support of the public.

Increasing awareness of the public services available helps maximize their usage and achieve their public purpose since, like all other producers of goods and services, government agencies need to market their programmes and initiatives.

Public administrators try to reach different segments of the general public through a mediated form of communication (Scollon: 1998). “Our social world is (...) a discursive social world” (Scollon: 2001, 11), therefore I would argue that we can look at linguistic texts as mediators in the process of self-portrayal performed by PA writers of press releases. In other words, Public Administration communicative activity tends to prefigure an undefined addressee with whom it communicates by means of an undifferentiated ‘public discourse’. If, in Bakhtin’s words “[e]ach speech genre in each area of speech communication has its own typical conception of addressees and this defines it as a genre” (1986: 96), thus the genre of press releases is indirectly targeted, i.e. with journalists being the mediators and the journalists’ own audiences the absent ultimate destinations. The uniqueness of press releases lies in the fact that they are meant to be ‘continued’ in news reporting, and therefore they are “told to be retold” (Jacobs: 1999, 1) as in their content the language of news reporting is anticipated, ‘preformulated’ as Jacobs claims (1999): information is laid out so that the linguistic material can be directly recycled, incorporated into the newspaper article as it is, without any need to be changed. ‘Preformulation’ refers to the specific features that make press releases look like news reports. Thus, press release writers not only provide the journalists with the information to be retold but, at the same time, communicate indirectly with the journalists’ own audience. In order to get media coverage, government agencies act as a sort of news outlet and take on a pro-active role, taking the initiative rather than leaving journalists with the advantage of probing with inquiries and interviews. As a result, journalists are somehow induced to stick almost literally to the classification that others have imposed on events. What the public reads in newspapers or watches on TV is a product of intertextual dynamics as it consists of a chain of textualizations, from ‘news management’, over ‘newsmaking’ to ‘news consumption’.

Therefore, the genre of press releases can be situated on the borderline between interpersonal communication – as press releases are sent to a restricted audience of professional news media - and mass communication – as they are meant to be reported by journalists.

## *2. The WHO Healthy Cities Project: use of press releases*

This study is intended to delineate the specific characteristics of a genre based on a survey – although inevitably incomplete – carried out on PA’s press releases. In particular, I will illustrate how their language is tailored for the media and to what extent the informative, factual and neutral character of specialised discourse matches the features of this mediated genre and, more interestingly, to what extent a conception of the public as customers may influence and filter through the document analysed. The object of study is a small corpus of press releases issued by three British municipalities – Belfast, Stoke-on-Trent and Sheffield - to inform the public about their participation and initiatives in a project promoted by the WHO, called ‘Healthy Cities’<sup>1</sup>.

The WHO Healthy Cities Programme started in Europe in 1986. It has now become world-wide with projects in every continent involving about 1,300 cities and towns in over 30 countries. The purpose is to engage local governments in health development bringing about a partnership between public and private sectors, NGOs and the community.

If ethics deeply concerns Public Administration, health stands as one of the core issues. Local governments may count on the unique position they hold to promote health and sustainable development as they have direct responsibility for key issues that have a major impact on the health of their citizens (such as the environment, housing or social services and public health) and/or because they represent the natural convenors of locally based agencies and citizens’ groups and community organizations. As will be shown, political commitment and active involvement of citizens in planning and taking actions are key concepts in the representation of facts and values that Public Administration provides.

As there is always a close link between the type of specialised text and its structure and the related linguistic features that characterize the text itself (Gotti: 2003), it is essential to situate my analysis within the boundaries of the institutional discourse domain. Press releases are undoubtedly institutional being “basically task-related” and involving “at least one participant who represents a

<sup>1</sup> Information about the “healthy cities” project can be retrieved at: <http://www.who.int/about/en/>, <http://www.euro.who.int/healthy-cities>, accessed on 21/08/2004.

formal organization of some kind” (Drew and Heritage: 1992). They do pursue a well-defined goal, i.e. getting the journalists’ attention in order to be ‘continued’ as accurately as possible.

A case in point is the structure of the press releases being examined here. As previously said, if press releases are aimed to get journalists to incorporate and re-use the text in their articles, to fulfil this task they need to be specially adapted and to comply with a conventional format. As shown in the following examples, headlines are prefabricated to meet the requirements of newspaper reporting. Preferably, bold and/or block letters and a syntax conforming to that of most newspaper headlines, including the suppression of the definite article and predominance of past participles and non-finite clauses. And finally, the opening paragraph has all the content features of a lead (Van Dijk: 1988):

(1)/ Belfast

Belfast Healthy Cities Presents Successes at World Summit

Achievements in developing health in Belfast, and future visions for a healthy Belfast were presented among best strategy cases worldwide last week, when Belfast Healthy Cities represented the City of Belfast at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg.

(2) 13.02.04, Belfast

New health assessment piloted in Ards

Four communities in the lower Ards area will this spring get a novel opportunity to influence planning for their area. They will be the first community in Northern Ireland to undertake an assessment of how a project targeting the area might impact on local residents’ health, and present recommendations to the project developer on how to maximise health benefits.

The four communities involved in the pilot project are Ballywalter, Kircubbin, Portaferry and Portavogie. The pilot is co-ordinated by Belfast Healthy Cities, but it is led by a local community steering group with members from the community as well as organisations working in the area, including Peninsula Healthy Living, Ards District Council and local community organisations.

(3) 19.02.2004, Belfast

New health assessment piloted in Ards and Ballybeen

Four communities in the lower Ards area alongside the Ballybeen community will this spring get a novel opportunity to have a say in how their area is developed. They will be the first communities in Northern

Ireland to assess how a project targeting the area might impact on local residents' health, and present recommendations to the project developer on how to maximise health benefits.

(4)/ Belfast

Ballybeen residents choose regeneration of Enler House site for new health assessment

Ballybeen residents have chosen proposals for the Enler House site for a detailed assessment of potential health impacts, under a pilot Community Health Impact Assessment being undertaken in the community. An open evening with entertainment and Ms Iris Robinson MP, MLA as speaker will be arranged on 5 May to allow local residents to give their views on the proposals.

At first glance, the most obvious features of the genre are present with the typical headline style playing the double role of carrying information and attracting the reader's attention and the lead paragraph containing in brief detail the relevant information corresponding to the five Ws (who, what, when, where and why). By their very nature, press releases represent the view of the organization that issued them, so "most news is not what has happened, but what someone says has happened" (Sigal: 1973, 69). This 'someone' obviously refers to PA itself, the news-managing institution which produces a discourse oriented to instrumental goals, aimed to get results, i.e. to promote itself, increase its visibility, generate interest and persuade the reader to support its policies. Communicative ends thus become strategic and, in this context, vocabulary acquires an important role within strategic discourse and word choice represents a powerful tool for establishing an ideological stance as meanings vary ideologically (Fairclough: 1989).

Let us take an example of a word which figures prominently in our texts: "healthy". In this sort of contexts, healthy has a number of meanings and may be interpreted as:

- physically strong and not likely to become ill<sup>2</sup>, or
- the adequacy of medical health services, or, more importantly:

<sup>2</sup> Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 1995, ad vocem.

- the physical, social and economic environment, as well as people's lifestyles and behaviours.

The press releases issued by both Belfast and Stoke-on-Trent municipalities seem to refer to meaning 3, highlighting "improvement to health for the local population", tackling "health inequalities" caused by differences in "income, access to services and lifestyle choices", and implementing initiatives in specific areas such as "healthy ageing", "health impact assessment" and "healthy urban planning". Sheffield openly declares that its main aim is to achieve a "healthy public policy that supports wellness of individuals and societies", that "goes beyond health care or even other public services".

A common and paramount feature is represented by the massive use of terms related to the concepts of people and community rather than local authorities and government, a reiteration aimed at giving emphasis to the PA's commitment to look for possible solutions to the problem of health inequalities. The following extracts are worthy of attention as they display the dual role played by the community as the ultimate addressee of the impact assessment operation performed by the institution and, more importantly, as the true actor capable of influencing policies on the matter:

(5) /, Belfast

Community Health Impact Assessment (CHIA) will give communities an opportunity to estimate impacts of both government and district council policies and their own projects. This, in turn, will enable community groups to bring forward concerns to policy planners, and influence the planning process. The particularly novel aspect of this approach is that community groups themselves will be able to identify concerns with a policy or programme, and also that they will be key players in the development of the assessment tool.

(6) 13.02.04, Belfast

The Community Health Impact Assessment is a new model developed by Belfast Healthy Cities, which uses the basic health impact assessment process, but is different in that it is completely led by the local community. The ultimate aim of this process is to enable local communities to continue influencing policy making in the future.

(7) /, Belfast

The aim of Belfast Healthy Cities' programme is to provide training on issues surrounding inequalities in health, in order to enhance partici-



pants' skills to enable them to influence action within their own organisations.

Such "empowerment" of community groups is expressed throughout the texts making use of verb forms such as "will give", "will enable", "will be able", "will be the key players", and again "to enable".

The role of the community is reinforced by the relationship established between participants. This is achieved through a specific verb choice designed to stress the empowerment of community groups, e.g. "to estimate impacts", "to bring forward concerns to policy planners", "to continue influencing policy making", as well as "to influence action". Such structures thus underlining the importance and weight given to on-going community involvement.

Local authorities represent local people and at the same time local people are the target of their discourse. They try to win the support of what is their ultimate audience by projecting a configuration of assumptions, beliefs and values. Ethical issues are thus socially constructed to be consistent with the ideas of a controlling group, specifically an institution. In this context, 'power' and 'solidarity' act as the main ideological constructs which give meaning to and shape the concept of ethics.

The Stoke-on-Trent press release, dated 10 August 2004 epitomizes the concept:

(8) The World Health Organisation (WHO) has announced that Stoke-on-Trent is one of the first five cities to gain Healthy City status in Phase IV of the WHO Healthy City Project.

The WHO Healthy City Project started in 1986 to support cities in developing themed five-year action plans towards improving health in the local community.

Stoke was first awarded Healthy City status in 1998 when the WHO theme was to promote a united approach to health through City Health Development Plans. The Plan for Stoke set about recognising local health issues, finding out local people's priorities for health and setting out how these challenges could be dealt with to improve health.

This Plan will be further developed under Phase IV, concentrating on three specific areas over the coming five years towards sustainable improvements to health for the local population. The first is 'healthy ageing', developing policies to make sure people enjoy good health in their

later years.

The next two areas are 'health impact assessment' (focusing on working with communities to check out if projects and programmes being developed in the City are going to improve people's health); and 'healthy urban planning' (creating an environment that is healthy to live in, for example, improving housing).

The Health and Well Being Strategy Group of Stoke-on-Trent's Local Strategic Partnership will be driving forward the next Healthy City Phase for the City. The Group is made up of representatives from the public sector, business, community and voluntary organisations working in partnership to make a positive difference to the health of local people.

Healthy City Manager Paula Hawley-Evans said: "For the people of Stoke, Healthy City means there are representatives from all areas of the City working in partnership to make health top of everyone's agenda so that we can tackle health 'inequalities'; the differences in health between different people and communities caused by things like income, access to services and lifestyle choices".

There are evident examples of an abnormal frequency of terms related to three lexical fields: 'development', 'improvement' (underlined) and 'community' (doubly underlined). Lexical cohesion is obtained through the use of three patterns:

- *semantic field*: the use of words and phrases from three specific areas of meaning (development, improvement and community);
- *direct repetition*: the same word(s) repeated. For example, 'people' recurs five times and 'partnership' three times;
- *synonyms*: use of words and phrases with very similar meaning. For example, 'local people' and 'local population' or 'developed' and 'promote'.

The emphasis thus obtained seems to suggest that the process of development and improvement is to be realized not by political commitment, but by a partnership with members of the community, as it is stated in the last two paragraphs. Furthermore, by using 'everyone', the writer of the press release seems to stress his/her solidarity with the reader.

The patterns of word choice identified in the text not only help form complete and coherent units, but also allow the ideological approach of the text to develop coherently.

The strategy of promoting the argument for individual respon-

sibility, shifting the focus from local authorities to individuals is further enhanced by the strategic use of pronoun references. The local authority has a clear advantage in not being named. On the one hand, it announces a policy and on the other, by calling the people into question, it ‘invites’ them to agree with it. So, responsibility for success and failure are presented as shared and this contributes to building consensus by assuming that there is no difference in the interests and values of the population and those of the institution (Fowler: 2003). It should also be noted that in the texts under discussion here the emotional involvement of the reader is also achieved through the insistence on the negative connotations of certain lexical items (underlined in the extract that follows) that promote empathy as they sound menacing and evoke common fears:

(9) The mortality rate from circulatory diseases in the lowest socio-economic groups is more than twice that of the highest groups.

About 24 % of households in Northern Ireland live in poverty – defined as low income and deprivation of a number of items considered to be necessities. Over 40 % of single parents, 19 % of single pensioners and 18 % of couples with children defined themselves as being in “absolute poverty”.

24 % of the working age population have literacy or numeracy problems. Levels of educational attainment, and subsequently employment, are lower in the most deprived areas.

Another meaningful recurrent feature in the corpus is the presence of *self-referencing* (Jacobs: 1999). Writers of press releases often report their institutions’ programmes and actions using as subjects in the first person either the institution itself or some spokespersons acting on its behalf, perfectly in line with the preformulation rationale underlying the genre of press releases.

For Lerman (1983; 1985), such third-person self-reference is a typical feature of institutional discourse which she defines as “that broad category of language use in which the speaker is a representative of an institution, speaking not as ‘I’, the personal ego, but as a public identity or role” (1983: 77). Furthermore, through third-person self-reference, press release writers seem to anticipate the typical reference forms of news-reporting, an irresistible invitation to journalists to simply incorporate their texts into their articles.

The reference to partnership in the third person is reinforced by the Healthy City Manager's statement, as showed in extract (8) and in the following extracts:

(10) / Belfast

Joan Devlin, Programme Director of Belfast Healthy Cities says: "We hope this programme will lead to common understanding of the complex issues involved in tackling inequalities, and are delighted that experts such as Professor de Leeuw are interested in taking part. Participants in the course are staff at senior levels in statutory, voluntary and community organisations, and we believe future collaboration between these organisations has the potential to make a real difference to action on inequalities."

(11) / Belfast

Ms Joan Devlin, Programme Director at Belfast Healthy Cities, said: "Inequalities in health is a very complex area, with difficult and overlapping issues to address. Therefore, collaboration between agencies, or intersectoral working, is necessary if initiatives are to have a lasting impact. We believe this programme will introduce skills that will make joined-up working possible, and also provide the impetus to do so as participating organisations will participate in developing the tool that organisations thereafter will be encouraged to use."

In these statements, the institution is presented as an efficient service-provider capable of understanding in full the issues involved in its mission, making use of its "staff" and "skills", taking adequate measures to achieve its purposes, developing a specific "tool" to tackle inequalities in health, and working in close connection with the local communities. Let us return to the web presentation of the project (see note 1) provided by the WHO:

Healthy Cities provides national and local governments with an effective means of dealing with health related issues such as poverty and social exclusion, pollution and sustainable development, lifestyles and living conditions, care and social support, urban planning and transport, and the special needs of vulnerable groups.

Via the WHO European Centre for Urban Health, WHO works directly with local governments through a network of committed cities and national networks, promoting commitment and change through strong leadership, strategic guidance, capacity building and networking, to implement the goals of its Healthy Cities and Urban Governance Pro-

gramme.

Here local authorities are effectively dissolved as subjects in favour of an operational presentation of the project. This feature, as we have already noticed in previous examples, contrasts with the presentation provided by Belfast Healthy Cities, where the actions being performed by the communities are all nominalised:

(12) /, Belfast

Community Health Impact Assessment Introduced in Belfast

A new type of health impact assessment will be developed in Belfast under a new programme at Belfast Healthy Cities. This impact assessment is aimed in particular for the use of community groups, and will be developed in close collaboration with the community sector.

(13) / 29.07.2003, Belfast

Key information for older people in one booklet

Help is now available for all older people tired of the time-consuming search for contacts and phone numbers. Belfast Healthy Cities has produced a *Contacts for Older People* directory, which aims to make all central numbers easily accessible in one booklet.

“Assessment” and “help” make the action become subject, allowing the announcement to look more objective.

The same could be said for (*self-*)*quotation*, a simple but powerful trick that helps turn ‘internally persuasive’ discourse into ‘authoritative’ discourse through the use of ‘speaking persons’ (Bakhtin, 1981: 339, 348), although the quoted words were never spoken by the named source, but simply written up by a press officer. However, the use of self-quotations make press releases more lively, objective and reliable. Journalists themselves use quotations to be objective and hence more credible. So, self-quotation serves to objectify press releases, just as quotation serves to objectify news reporting. It makes press releases look more objective, but as no real objectivity is possible in the news, the notion of ‘objectively-voiced’ proposed by Jacobs (1999: XVI) appears more suitable. In this context, self-quotations perform the task of personalizing the communication, supporting a quality of newsworthiness. References to people allow the organization to be presented as anthropomorphic, i.e. with a human face.

One final remark regards *modality*. The predominant modali-

ties mainly refer to the relational meaning of ‘capability’ expressed by the modal ‘can’ and the expressive modality of categorical truth expressed by the present tense. On the one hand, through the use of ‘can’ (see (8) and (11) above), the author gives the impression of not imposing his conclusions on the reader, preferring them to be inferred, logically drawn by the evidence produced. On the other hand, verbs in the simple present tense (see (8), (9) and (11) above), imply a categorical commitment of the producer to the truth of the proposition (Fairclough: 1992). The prevalence of categorical modalities, in news reports as well as in press releases, confers validity to statements and supports a transparent view of the world where facts are reported as categorical truths.

### 3. Conclusions

As has been observed, a very typical phenomenon of our times in Western societies “is the rapid transformation of textual traditions and orders of discourse” (Fairclough: 1992, 96). Any change brings about new combinations, the co-occurrence of contradictory elements, which give rise to a mixture of styles. The press releases issued by Public Administration reflect this trend perfectly. Therefore, the model I have tried to propose is inherently heterogeneous as it integrates the multiple concerns of two very often overlapping specialized domains (institutional and promotional) resulting in a mixture of features which partly draw upon a promotional discourse type and partly upon a traditional discourse type of public information. In this context, PA addresses the *citizen/customer* performing the role of service-provider – on the matter of health as in the case of our corpus.

In conclusion, the communicative activity performed by PA can, on the one hand, preserve its informative and factual character, while it can in effect reduce or even eliminate the discrimination and arbitrariness to which institutional language has traditionally lent itself. This, of course, is due to a shift of perspective between writer and reader. On the other hand, if the citizen is considered to be a ‘customer’ and no longer a ‘user’, persuasive, self-promotional and image-communication phenomena are more likely to be interspersed among more institutional language features.

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