

Summary

In this study, we want to contribute to increased knowledge about government agencies' communication activities. 'Communication' can mean a variety of things, from the transfer of information to being a strategic tool and the foundation of an organisation's existence. In this report, we also discuss the line for communication activities linked to the public commitment. An important starting point is efficiency, i.e. that government activities and government funds are used so that they provide the greatest possible benefit. Are the state's resources being well spent?

The questions we are looking for answers to are:

- How extensive are the government agencies' communication activities?
- Is there information available to assess whether this is effective?
- What do government agencies do when they inform and communicate?
- What communication is compatible with the public commitment and the state's values?
- Does anything need to change to get the greatest possible benefit from state funds?

To find answers to these questions, we have studied existing research and the government agencies' appropriation directions, assessed the number of people who work with communication activities, looked at the agencies' annual reports and conducted case studies of how agencies communicate (Södertörn University, the Swedish Police Authority and the Ombudsman for Children).

Why do government agencies communicate?

The question of why government agencies communicate can be linked to commitments, laws and regulations, as well as the state's values. In this study, we also find other explanations. Communication has emerged as an important ingredient in what an organisation does and is. All organisations today have a need to be seen and considered legitimate. Trust-building is also an important element. Communication activities contribute to building the reputation and brand.

In this study, we apply an organisational theoretical perspective. Communication activities seem to have developed from being an administrative support activity to becoming a core activity in public organisations. Those who work with communication have been assigned a more important role and are often part of organisations' management teams.

All government agencies must provide information about their activities and observe the principles of good administration. The basis for communication activities is found in specific laws and regulations that govern the activities of the agencies. Nearly half of all government agencies (160 agencies out of 341) have the special task of conducting communication activities. This may, for example, deal with promoting knowledge about something, following the development of knowledge, disseminating information, making information available or participating in the public discussion.

Government agencies communication activities have grown

Our study shows that government agencies communication activities have grown over time. The number of employees in communications operations increased between 2006 and 2019 in relation to the total number of state employees. In total, about 3 600 people worked at least 40 per cent of a full-time position in information and communication in 2019. This is an increase of 46 per cent compared with 2006, which is a larger increase than for the total number of employees in the same period (11 per cent). The proportion of those working with communication activities at

government agencies during this period increased from 1.1 to 1.5 per cent. The highest proportion of employees is found in relatively small agencies. The communication activities are probably more extensive than can be measured with employed information officers and communicators. Government agencies can purchase external communication services, and activities that can be considered 'communication' can be found in all parts of an agency's area of operations.

Limited information about communication activities

For the state as a whole, there is no comprehensive account of costs for communication activities. Only for a small number of government agencies, corresponding to 20 per cent of those required to submit an annual report, present costs for communication activities. This is slightly less than expected, as about half of the agencies have the specific task of conducting communication activities. One possible explanation is that the activities in the accounts are still seen as support activities, despite the fact that there are many indications that they have become increasingly important and, as in our case studies, regarded as both support and core activities.

In general, the reporting of communication activities accounts for a small part of government agencies' annual reports. It is common for agencies to describe various initiatives, such as the dissemination of knowledge, campaigns or information initiatives via websites and social media. The agencies report various output measures, such as visits to websites, participants, number of followers on social media, etc. The outcome of communication is rarely described.

Communication activities within three government agencies

Our case studies highlight the different purposes of government agencies' communication. The Swedish Police Authority's communication primarily aims at creating trust in their work, with the target group being the general public. The Ombudsman for

Children communicates to disseminate information about the Convention on the Rights of the Child and pursues a children's perspective. According to its appropriation directions, the agency must play an opinion forming role on these issues. Södertörn University's communication is primarily intended for new and existing students. Our case studies show that digital development has increased the use of social media. It also means that the boundary between what is internal and external communication has to some extent become blurred.

In general, the communication mission of government agencies has been stable. Both the Swedish Police Authority's and the Ombudsman for Children's communication is compatible with their ordinances and appropriation directions, while Södertörn University's communication can be interpreted as an overproduction of communication. Competition between universities creates a need to communicate and strengthen the brand to recruit students.

Something that all three government agencies struggle with is the question of how to link communication activities to outcomes. For example, followers are measured on social media. But it is difficult to find a connection between specific efforts and the outcome of these efforts.

Communication has become an important part of government agencies' work

In summary, our study shows – in addition to the increase of communication activities at the agencies – that communication has been assigned an increasingly important role, that communicators have several different tasks, that the use of social media has become more frequent and that communication activities can involve both support and core activities, depending on the mission of the agency and how they interpret their mission. The fact that central government communication activities have increased without a corresponding change in appropriation directions or job descriptions can be seen as an expression of an agency's own priorities.

There are several explanations for this development, including:

- The transition to an information society and the emergence of the communicator as a profession.
- The delegation of administrative policy, where government agencies have been given greater responsibility for their own organisation.
- A development towards management, with agencies increasingly striving to become complete organisations.
- Communication is considered to contribute to increased trust and reputation.

The effects of the communication efforts are difficult to assess, and thus also whether their costs are reasonable. Against this background, government agencies' communication activities should continue to be studied. Our study raises questions about how the connections between communication activities (interventions) and effects (long-term outcomes) can be assessed. There are difficulties in measuring effects. Something that can be easier to study are different outputs or immediate outcomes. A problem with these measures, however, is not only the question of whether they measure what is relevant but also whether these measurements can lead to a shift in goals, i.e. that what is measured becomes the goal.

Recommendations

Based on the study, we make the following recommendations:

- A continued analysis and dialogue on government agencies' communication activities, their content, scope and expression, to ensure efficiency in the activities.
- That government agencies' communication tasks be adjusted and clarified if necessary. There is reason to clear up uncertainties.
- Initiatives to be taken for a more complete picture of the costs of government agencies' communication activities.
- That government agencies' communication efforts are evaluated systematically.

- That advantage is taken of economies of scale – consider costs for communication activities when setting up new, small government agencies. Dialogues are needed on what can be done together to reduce the costs of government agencies’ communication activities.

This study has provided suggestions for further studies, including:

- What needs related to information and communication efforts can be managed collectively on behalf of the state – possibly together with municipalities and regions – and what must be kept close to government agencies’ activities?
- Is there a need to set further limits on government agencies’ efforts aimed at promoting their own image (building a brand)?
- In what way can changes in the scope of communication activities be linked to changes in the agencies’ tasks?