HOW TO GRASP THE PUBLIC?

GOVERNMENTAL COMMUNICATION IN THE NETHERLANDS

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Abstract

The Dutch government, like many other governments of advanced democracies, finds itself confronted with political disaffection. Recent cabinets have searched for ways to reconnect with citizens. The main argument made in the article is that these efforts are saddled with constructions of the public, which pre-empt the transformation of citizen-government relations that the government seeks. The article shows that there are many instances in which we find that government's theories and practices of communication for reconnection are rooted in constructions of the public as a present and clearly defined entity, as ready and eager for constructive interaction, and for interaction about specific policies. It is argued that both assumptions about citizens fitting these constructions and attempts at connection through these constructions are problematic. Finally, the article discusses possibilities for alternative constructions of the public, which suggests that the connection is possible if the public is constructed differently.

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Introduction

In the Netherlands, the "gap between government and citizens" is a household concept and concern in political circles. Political leaders struggle with the fact that they can often hardly fall back on a stable support base. Many citizens' political behaviour can no longer be predicted on the basis of their membership of fixed social or ideological categories. Trust in government has declined, especially from 2002 to 2005 (Van Praag and Van der Brug 2006). According to research administered by government itself in late 2005, a majority of people have a negative attitude towards politics and government. They perceive that the administration does not care about what ordinary people think and that citizens have no way of influencing the government. Only a small minority sees politicians as capable (Communication Council 2005). Tumultuous episodes have contributed to the political class' discomfort with "the gap." In 2002, the great and unexpected popularity of Pim Fortuyn and the public anger at politicians and government that followed his assassination fed the feeling that "something must be done." The rejection of the government-supported European Constitution through a referendum in 2005 similarly contributed to feelings of crisis and urgency.

Even though analyses have differed on the extent and nature of these and related problems, variously discussed in terms of distrust, disaffection or disengagement, recent cabinets (Kok, Balkenende) have taken it as their task to search for ways to create better connection with citizens.

One main route has been governmental communication. Communication has thereby been conceived as key for enhancement of the legitimacy of government and its actions (Commission Future Governmental Communication 2001; Mixed Commission Communication 2005). Cabinets have had themselves advised on how to communicate with citizens, have accepted key parts of the conceptual framework forged in that advice, and to some extent also developed and carried out actions rooted in it. With this, these cabinets have ventured into relatively unknown terrain. The idea of governmental communication as something that could possibly counter problems of "connection," related to problems of distrust and lack of governmental legitimacy, has received little focused academic attention so far. Certainly, there is a wide literature on problems of inclusion in democratic process (e.g. Young 2002). Some recent publications do explore how governments can engage disengaged sections of society (McKinney *et al.* 2005; Coleman 2004, Johnson *et al.* 1998). But even these publications do not really zoom in on the challenges and possible benefits of governmental communication with citizens who, because of negative attitudes towards government, appear hard to communicate with to begin with, nor do they take up the challenges of governmental communication as a multidimensional, coordinated effort of government to engage with society as such.

One basic challenge for governmental efforts at "connection" with citizens is the conceptualisation of "the public" that can guide governmental communication. The government-society duality employed here could be seen as problematic in it own right, "blackboxing," the actors involved (Innes and Booher 2004). Still, how this duality itself presents in governmental communication has hardly been explored yet. At the same time, this is a crucial issue: "connection" is to take place with "something," and the conceptualisation of that "something" is of crucial

importance for the nature of the communicative effort. Barnes *et al.* (2003) take up this issue when they explore how in the U.K. "the public" has been defined for the purposes of public participation. Following Burr (1995), they start out from the idea that that "the public" is a social construction, formed out of discourses and ideologies that are historically embedded in institutional practices. Barnes *et al.* focus on local politics, and on processes of exclusion and inclusion within local projects. In the forums that they studied, they saw definitions of the public being negotiated and remade on the spot. They conclude that general theories of the constitution of subjects through discourse are inadequate for capturing the complexity and diversity of the ways in which conceptions of the public were negotiated and remade within forums that they studied (Barnes *et al.* 2003, 396).

Coleman (2004) discusses the ambiguity around "the public" in public administration in the U.K. at the national level, and claims that in the U.K. there is, in circles of government, an obsession with connection with citizens, but also a pertinent question that remains unanswered: connection *to what*? Whereas the ambiguity Coleman and Barnes *et al.* describe, while different, may seem to go hand in hand, the argument that I seek to develop here points into an opposite direction. The Dutch administration too has struggled with this question of "connection to what," but rather than the question remaining unanswered, or filled in by negotiation and remaking, I would rather argue here that certain answers that government has come up have important delimiting effects. I will argue that in this Dutch national level case, we find that general notions of the public, formed out of discourse and embedded in institutional practices (as in the cases Barnes *et al.* describe), delimit and define possibilities for connection. The main argument here, illustrated with case material from the Netherlands, is that conceptualisations of the public can saddle efforts at governmental communication with barriers that pre-empt the transformation of citizen—government relations that government may seek. I will substantiate this thesis by presentation and discussion a set of implicit constructions of the public that can be found in communicative efforts of the Dutch national government. With the aid of recent theoretical and empirical work from the fields of political science and communication science, we will identify these constructions and argue how these fall short in the effort at connection because of the constructions being arguably inadequate.

This article does not seek to make statements about the whole of Dutch governmental communication. The Dutch effort at connecting with citizens is complex and wide-ranging, containing many different types of activities, addressing multiple publics, multiple problems and multiple goals. In any case, the different efforts cannot be taken as part of a unified whole. There is diversity, disagreement and debate, and much that goes on has sprouted from individual initiatives within government institutions. At the same time, there are connections between many of the initiatives that justify a discussion in terms of assumptions about publics that can be identified as such and that we see recurring in different efforts that take place. As we will see, a number of prominent and guiding advisory reports to the government on governmental communication, together with the government's responses to these reports and action plans based on them, have shaped ideas within government about the desired nature of governmental communication for connection. Though not always in agreement with everything said in reports,

cabinets, single ministries as well as cross-departmental initiatives have worked further along lines set out.

Focus will be on conceptualisation of the public at national level communicative efforts that the Dutch government has undertaken since 2001. The analysis is based on official documents showing conceptualisations of how to communicate for connection, as well as on actions reflecting those conceptualisations. A number of prominent and guiding reports as well as prominent efforts that have been carried out in recent years are brought in here, illustrating conceptions of the public as we find them and their empirical significance of the conceptualisations of the public and their limitations when it comes to connecting with the public.

Focus will be on three conceptualisations about the public that can be identified. We find, first of all, in certain efforts, an assumption of a public as an entity that is present. With the aid of a number of theoretical and empirical works from the fields of political science and communication science (primarily Schudson 1998 and Warner 2002), we identify this assumption and show its problematic nature in the context of efforts at connection. Secondly, we identify efforts that assume a public that is ready and eager for constructive interaction. With the aid of, primarily, Andrew Perrin's recent research on "the democratic imagination" (2006) we show how this assumption comes in and falls short in the effort at connection. Thirdly, we identify, with the aid of, primarily, Maarten Hajer's work on deliberative democracy (2003), the presence and delimiting consequences of assumptions of the public that come in with efforts that focus on policy rather than politics.

Developments in Dutch Governmental Communication

A central and guiding idea around which advisory reports, cabinet responses to those reports and consecutive action plans converge, is that of the necessity to take citizens as interlocutors, with whom government must engage, and to whom government must become more responsive. Starting point for many of the arguments presented in reports is that citizens are to be engaged with in a different way than before. Government discourse grounding the new framework for communication for connection assumes, often explicitly, that citizens have become opinionated and politically independent, and demand to be taken seriously, as comes through in their assertions of opinion and political will. Connection then is to be attained through developments in different areas. Four elements in this effort at achieving connection, largely shared across the cabinets and advisory bodies that have led the effort, stand out.

First, leading documents argue for making citizens more central to communication, and present governmental communication as interaction between citizens and government. The same documents also state that communication on policy must be started at the early stages of policy processes, bringing citizens in as co-producers of policy, rather than receivers of messages about policy already shaped and/or decided on. Also in a more general sense documents plead for more two-sided communication. Paramount is the principle that citizens' perspectives and concerns ought to have a more guiding role (Commission Future Communication 2001; Mixed Commission Communication 2005; Ministry of General Affairs 2001, 2005).

A second key dimension highlights the importance of better access to governmental information for citizens. Documents state that citizens must be informed

early, completely and transparently, in principle but also to facilitate their role as voters and co-producers of policy. Government should disclose agendas and policy-related documentation from an early stage onwards (Commission Future Communication 2001; Mixed Commission Communication 2005; Ministry of General Affairs 2005).

Thirdly: documents acknowledge that mass media offer important platforms for gaining the public's trust, and state that this is another reason why communication should be a central part of governing. At the same time, media dependency is seen as problematic and the idea of a media strategy centred on image and spin is not acceptable within the framework. Documents argue for an information-centred media strategy that focuses on provision of facts to the mass media to help provide citizens with correct information about government. A further guiding idea in this area is that communicating on policy through the media from an early stage can help government keep control over what happens through the media (Council for Public Administration 2003; Ministry of Education, Culture and Science 2004; Mixed Commission Communication 2005).

Fourthly: documents stress that government continuously needs to have "a sense of what goes on" in society. Government should get itself informed through direct contact with citizens, opinion research and societal debate. In that way, these documents argue, it can attain a broad and realistic view of societal opinions about concrete policy questions and neglected themes, and become aware of "undercurrents" of (dis)satisfaction with government and society. This information can direct future policy and communication about it and help predict reactions that concrete policy plans may meet with later in society, is argued (Mixed Commission Communication 2005; Ministry of General Affairs 2005).

What actions have sprouted from these ideas? If we take up the espousal of interactivity: at lower levels of government, the desirability of participatory policy development has been accepted widely as the preferred way to democratic renewal. Even if predominantly in specific policy areas, such as spatial planning, participation of citizens in policymaking has, at local level, become part of relatively normal practice. However, at the national level communication with citizens is generally not a full-fledged part of the policy process (Gelders 2006). The espoused media strategy, centring on information provision and communication on policy from an early stage through the media, has as yet not been enacted to a noticeable extent. Still, the idea that citizens ought to be more central to governmental communication has been translated into action in several other ways at this national level. Government increasingly attempts to take as starting point for communication the perspectives of citizens, "receivers" of messages – not the perspectives of "senders," such as ministries. When it comes to providing information, the website www.regering.nl publishes policy agendas by policy domain, providing quick and easy access to information, often including advisory reports and other relevant documentation. The website www.overheid.nl presents citizen-oriented information on government, policy and services. In addition, through a range of initiatives the government "listens" to citizens. Through opinion polls, focus groups and direct interaction between office holders and citizens, perceptions of the Dutch citizenry around specific policy issues are documented.

Prominent innovations have thus taken place in the provision of information, in the facilitation of participation and in efforts at "listening." But how is the public

then conceptualised in these efforts and how are these conceptualisations problematic for the achievement of the connection so sought? This we will turn to now.

The Public as a Presence

In many documents that circulate within the Dutch administration, including many of those referred to in this article, the task of recreating relations with society is presented as a serious task for government. Striking in the documents is how duality assumed in relations between government and citizens shapes the imagining of relations between them. There is an implicit assumption of government as problematically self-referential. Society, in many of these documents, is commonly conceived as "the outside" to public administration that has to be brought "in," across organisations and policy domains. Literally, idioms like "the outside world" and statements stressing the urgency of "thinking from the outside in," and an "external orientation" have become standard part of discourse on what constitutes good policymaking. What this means is that perspectives, priorities and interests of actors literally outside of public administration buildings are to be taken into account. Within this discourse, citizens are a prime part of "the outside," and documents abound with references to the importance of "listening to citizens," "the citizen," "the opinion of citizens," and "citizens' perspectives." The communication for connection effort engages with this discourse by building ideas about communication on acknowledgement of a set of citizenship rights and government duties: citizens have a right to information and a right to be heard; government has to inform and to listen to its citizens. However, this conceptualisation tends to make sense mainly if there is at the same time an image at work of an active, engaged citizenry. And this we indeed see in the approach. As we can read in one of the central advisory reports: "deep changes are occurring in relations between government and citizens. One can see the more independent attitude with which citizens see government as a sign of emancipation" (Commission Future Governmental Communication 2001, 7). Some guiding documents explicitly call out to stimulate "the active participative citizen" (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations 2005) to further democratic renewal. But also implicitly, through government actions, we see that an image of citizens is entertained that actively seeks information on policy and acts on the basis of this information, or at least should be doing so. It is these active citizens that the approach mostly speaks to, and through whom connection with society is to be achieved. Participation of citizens in participatory policy development is facilitated: citizens are to turn up and indeed participate. Information is made available: citizens are to take it in and act on it. Conceptions of citizenship valid for the safeguarding of democracy, rooted in democratic theory, are transposed to the area of communication. There are thus no distinctions between conceptual citizenship and actually existing manifestations of the public here.

The approach thereby also assumes active citizenship as a constant – and thus assumes a constant public for policymaking. This approach to citizenship thereby fails to engage with an important aspect of its actual manifestation. Actual citizens' involvement with political affairs is far from constant. Verhoeven, analyzing citizenship in the Netherlands, suggests that "forms of political involvement and participation have adapted themselves to the discontinuous rhythm of the private life of citizens and the unevenness of policy preparation and execution by the

government. Much more than before, political citizenship appears to have become a matter of waiting, and acting when necessary" (Verhoeven 2004, 67). Another analysis of Dutch citizen politics argues that Dutch citizens appear inactive for long periods and may then suddenly rise to the occasion; and not necessarily in response to an invitation from government (Dekker and Hooghe 2002). We can connect these observations with the concept of monitorial citizenship as developed by Michael Schudson (1998) that suggests that most people will not be involved in politics as a day-to-day routine. Rather, they monitor the political system from a distance, relying heavily on the information provided by the mass media. They become active only when they believe developments demand this and activity remains short-lived and connected to specific issues or incidents. Monitorial citizenship seems particularly relevant to political citizenship in the Netherlands. In recent years we have seen a set of upsurges of public involvement and debate in society, most notably with the rise and assassination of Pim Fortuyn. Fortuyn was a political outsider who rose to unforeseen success in 2002. Almost on his own, Fortuyn challenged and destabilised established politics, denouncing existing policies but also the functioning of government as such. After his assassination in May 2002, many of his supporters vehemently turned against government, expressing anger and disgust at established politics which they saw as arrogant and self-centred, if not as a criminal bucket of filth. The referendum on the "Treaty Proposing a Constitution for Europe" on June 1, 2005, led to another sobering moment for government. Around 62% of the voters rejected the proposal, whereas the Cabinet as well as 84% of members of parliament were in favour. In political circles, the rejection by citizens came to be spoken of as a debacle.

In both these instances, citizens showed themselves opinionated and involved with the issues at hand, but not with established political processes such as interest aggregation or deliberation, and not as a start or outcome of stable or purposeful organisation. The activity was momentary, and largely characterised by, and limited to, an expression of will by a section of the population.

How does the stated ambition to "listen" relate to this coming together in relation to moments and issues? Key guiding documents explicitly indicate that the collective, momentary manifestations mentioned above were an important motivating factor for rethinking communication. As we can read in explanations of why new forms of relating to society are necessary, "since 2001 a lot has happened that has put further tension on relations between government and society. The rise of the LPF [Pim Fortuyn's party] and the reactions after the assassination of Fortuyn show that the gap between government and citizens is even much larger than anyone could assume" (Mixed Commission Communication 2005, 3). And citizens "have the feeling that the process of administration is not for them, they cannot influence it, and that diminishes their trust. The rejection of the European Constitution by the Dutch people is unmistakable in this respect" (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations 2005). However, in the activities that have been developed we generally find not ideas on how to engage with this mobilised opinion, but a central, if implicit, notion that public opinion is some sort of untapped resource, merely waiting to be accessed. Society primarily comes in as a collection of opinions of individuals, to be included through opinion research (polls, focus groups) and interactive policy processes. The relevance of societal process is taken only into

account in the sense that opinions on policy fluctuate: some initiatives attempt to identify, through opinion research, citizens' policy priorities (Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment 2006; Communication Council 2005).

Looked at from some angles, the focus on individual views on policy issues and policy development makes sense. Party loyalties and ideological commitments have lost directing power (Thomassen 2000), and some scholarly publications describe present-day citizenship as something increasingly personal and "everyday." In this view, politics get to be ever more a matter of the individual. Politics, thus understood, becomes a matter of personal judgment, an expression of individual authenticity, or a matter of translating personal conviction into actions in day-to-day life, be they the buying of goods, the contribution of money, or the choosing of a school for one's child (see e.g. Bennett 1998; Lichterman 1996). But recent research in the Netherlands has problematised the notion of individualisation, showing how individuals choose collectively in a wide array of societal domains. Duyvendak and Hurenkamp (2003) argue that, in social and cultural matters, the population of the Netherlands is growing less diverse and more homogenous. Individualist values are held up collectively, and plurality in attitude and behaviour are much less common than people think. Scientific analyses in the area of citizen politics in the Netherlands point towards collective processes as important for a re-imagining of Dutch politics. Formal participation in politics through membership of political parties has waned. But there has been a notable rise in informal political activity (Verhoeven 2004, Dekker and Hooghe 2003). We have seen, in particular with the turbulence of 2002 (around the rise and assassination of Fortuyn) and 2005 (around the referendum on the European Constitution), collective mobilisations around political issues that were largely disconnected from formal organisation. However, the nature and potential communicative significance of societal processes in these cases have not been taken into account as important for developing new ideas for governmental communication.

This is not to say the governmental organisations do not attempt to stay in touch with society as something that organises itself and can be approached as such. All through government we see a discursive acknowledgment of the horizontalisation of politics and ideas on policymaking grounded in this acknowledgement. Government does give room to influence of societal organisations on policy making; documents present interactions between government and intermediary organisations for policy development as an important part of sound communication policy (Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment; Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment 2005). Through development of ideas and programmes for support of so-called citizen initiatives, government attempts to encourage citizens and citizen groups to take responsibility for society (Inaxis 2007).

However, relatively fixed and stable organisations continue to be taken into account much more than what could be called subpolitics: new, informal, diffuse collective processes in opinion formation and action that have come up, such as momentary mobilisation around a specific issue, but also the citizen initiatives that are geared towards action rather than political debate. Government's own analysis concludes in 2007 that when it comes to citizen initiatives, government organisations are often not prepared, institutionally or culturally, to break out of set vertical and bureaucratic ways of engaging with citizens (Inaxis 2007). And how more fluid,

shifting collective political processes could be made significant for "The Hague," how they could be accessed, made valid, and incorporated, remain open questions that have not been addressed yet. Even if a governmental institution seeks to include these forms of collective process, the existing institutional forms are ill-equipped for practically and justifiably incorporating new ways in which society manifests itself. The manual for "target group consultation" of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, for example (2006, 14), identifies "the environment" of a policy by focusing on actors that "in one way or the other have an influence on the topic," and then discursively constructs those as "organisations, institutions and individuals." The manual for participatory policy development of the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment speaks of the necessity of taking into account diversity of opinion on a topic that exists in society, but the interactions themselves are to take place with "citizens" in the abstract, conceived as individuals or aggregates of individuals to be engaged with as such, through different forms of opinion research and government-organised public debate (Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment 2005).

Creating the Public

Communication efforts that assume constancy of the public are poorly equipped for engaging with the dynamic and social nature of the public's manifestations. But the same assumption of constancy also fails to confront the challenge of the public's *creation*. Almost a century ago, Dewey (1927) made clear how a public is not a stable entity, a constant physical presence, but an ephemeral phenomenon built through people's shared perceptions of problems that they collectively experience and organise around. Warner (2002) adds to this insight ideas that are particularly relevant for a government that attempts to connect with citizens who appear "disconnected" from government. Warner argues that a public is a form of organisation of which the existence has to start with its being addressed by a speaker. By making a discourse public, the creation of *a* public can be initiated – a social entity created through the discourse itself. But it is only through response to that address or rather, the sharing of attention and exchange connected with that attention, that a public truly is constituted. Interaction has to take place between parties – then a public comes into existence. For Warner, a public is the social space created by the reflexive circulation and characterisation of discourse. Furthermore, he states, "a public can only produce a sense of belonging and activity if it is self-organised through discourse rather than through an external framework" (Warner 2002, 52). To take this to the present discussion: government can address, but this address must resonate and incite response and circulation, independent from government. A public comes to be through mobilisation leading to interaction on the matter brought up. To get response (citation, characterisation, reaction), the addresser needs to connect with interests and perspectives that have the potential of bringing response about; a public cannot come to be only on the basis of the addressing party's views and intentions. To compare these ideas with the Dutch efforts just discussed: a collection of individuals included through polls, debates and interactive policy processes, cannot stand in for a public, in Warner's sense. Such aggregations or representations can, perhaps, stand in for a population – which is an entirely different matter.

If government takes seriously the goal of connecting with those citizens who appear "disconnected," it cannot assume an audience for its communicative endeavours and thus cannot assume to be rebuilding relations with the public through much of the "listening" and "interactivity" instruments it presently employs. A public does not lay in waiting for governmental communication. It would have to be found and created before anything fruitful can happen in terms of truly connecting.

Relevant here is also how the role of the media has been taken up in Dutch governmental communication. What is made central is how government and politics get to be presented in the media. Advisory organs and Government have framed developments, challenges and solutions using Altheide's concept of "media logic," according to which media to construct race horse news and focus on incidents and conflicts rather than help citizens understand policy issues, dilemmas and processes (see e.g. Council for Societal Development, 2003; Ministry for Culture, Education and Science 2004, Ministry of General Affairs 2005) . The officially preferred strategy towards the media that has arisen from this discussion is that of taking back control. Guiding documents stress that office holders should make sure that the media work with correct information (Commission Future Governmental Communication 2001; Mixed Commission Communication 2005), but that they should take an independent stance and get into discussion with citizens on the basis of government's own agenda rather than issues and frames imposed by media logic. Focus is, in line with other elements of the approach, on informing citizens in order to facilitate the formation of informed opinion (Commission Future Governmental Communication 2001; Council for Public Administration, 2003; Ministry of General Affairs 2005, Mixed Commission Communication 2005). At the same time, the role of the media in the Dutch democracy is taken as one of interpreting and commenting on government information for citizens, as the place where public debate takes place, and as a platform where government gains or loses credit for policy on which government has to act strategically (Commission Future Governmental Communication; Voorlichtingsraad 2001; Mixed Commission Communication 2005). However, how government should actually engage with the media as actually *mediating* between citizens and government - setting public agendas, shaping public debate, aggregating public views - is not taken up. The documents are silent on how government should actually engage with the public debate that takes place; whether these should be taken as manifestations of what citizens think and what that should mean for government. This framework thus does not really conceptually incorporate mass media into the strategy for connecting with citizens as public that manifests itself through the media.

But the conceived framework also does not *make productive* an insight that many positive and negative analyses of media's role in politics share: the media form a space where not only images of politicians and politics take shape, but also forms of citizen relations with government and politics that define the possibilities of interaction. A range of recent publications argue that citizens respond to terms handed to them through the media rather than express themselves independently, of their own accord, at their own moment and on their own terms (Bennett and Åsard 1997; Manin 1997; Lewis *et al.* 2005). In a society in which much of politics reaches citizens through the media, a government that seeks to stimulate construc-

tive engagement could consider how handing terms through the media could help create the connection so desired, but this possibility is not truly taken up.

Governmental communication that takes citizens seriously must account for the public as an entity through which ideas circulate, and one that government can help mobilise and create through communication that resonates. In its interaction with society, government thus depends on societal dynamics that it can influence but never fully control. For governmental communication this would entail presenting discourse that can find a public, and also taking part in circulation of discourse initiated by other actors, in order to help create a public for government that organises itself and becomes an entity to be taken into account, and carried further into conversation.

If that happens, information provided by government – another matter prominent in Dutch governmental communication – attains a new form of significance. As Patterson put it: "it is pointless to increase the supply of useful information without increasing the demand for it. Citizens do not have a fixed amount of attention to give. The more engaging ... moments are, the more attention they will pay" (quoted in Graber 2002, 64). This is a pertinent issue: how government information is used by citizens and how knowing that could help to recreate relations is an open question. It is only the principles of transparency and entitlement to information that Dutch governmental communication efforts pay attention to.

The Public as Ready for Constructive Interaction

Different guiding documents acknowledge and even stress that citizen attitudes towards government are differentiated, and that it is specifically with certain societal groups that new ways of connecting need to be developed. We can read, for example: "a question that runs through all aspects of the communication process is ... how we establish contact with hard to reach groups. We think then first of all of youth, and of groups sometimes denoted as 'dissatisfied', who are almost impossible to reach with messages or questions from government" (Mixed Commission Communication 2005).

At the same time, certain Dutch governmental communication efforts assume a public that is ready for constructive interaction. Documents detailing how citizens are to be included tend to focus on the role of government in creating this inclusion by facilitation of participation in policy making. It is through this facilitation that inclusiveness is supposed to come into reach. The question what to do to make sure the relevant citizens will actually show up is not addressed (Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management 2006; Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations 2005; Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment 2005; Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment 2006). The problem of inclusion of different groups does get attention in some of the documents, but this attention focuses on the problem of representation of different views, interests and/or demographic categories (Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment 2005; Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment 2006). This is a second problem in the conceptualisation of the public that we can identify in the construction of the public we find here. Many efforts at communication are equipped to deal with a form of citizenship that is constructive and government-directed, assuming (surprisingly!) citizens' faith in the quality of political process and the sufficiency of simply routing

activity through means and towards ends predefined by government. Other, less ideal forms are not truly engaged with.

Even if the current approach to governmental communication accepts that not all citizens seek involvement, by pointing out, on the basis of psychographic analyses, opinion polls and focus groups, that there are groups in society that are dissatisfied with government, distrust government, or are not interested in communication with government, it does not actually take these complexities into account in the development of ideas on how to communicate for connection, and therefore does not touch where it really hurts. If citizens' forms of relating to politics are not taken into account in the strategy, learning about society's views, inclusion of views and convincing are all problematic – the targets are moving, not fixed, and, moreover, they often do not want to be hit.

Interlocution takes place in a constellation of interlocutors, and the behaviour of interlocutors in that constellation shapes and delimits what others do in it (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). A government that seeks to develop communication as a route to recreation of relations therefore has fundamental questions to ask first: why do people interact with government the way they do? In spite of much discussion in the Netherlands of how citizens do not act as constructively as desired, how the habitus that lies behind shapes citizens' perceptions of their relations with government and their possibilities for interaction as a dimension of governmental communication for "connecting" has remained largely unexplored. Behind current conceptualisations of the public we find there is no analysis of the role of government and citizens as interlocutors. How communication or its absence between government and citizens comes to be, and from which understanding of what is right or possible in terms of communication with government, remains therefore poorly understood.

Moreover, the challenge of making government more communicative in the sense of being able to engage with the problem of achieving inclusiveness finds attention, but little of this attention has led to action that engages with dissatisfied, distrusting or otherwise "disconnected" sections of society. There has been, within the administration, extensive discussion and research on definition of "target groups" on the basis of psychographic profiling, and we do see departments using psychographic profiling for the purpose of "getting to know" citizens in their differences along lines of lifestyle and mentality (see e.g. Communication Council 2005), and also for selection of participants in participatory policy development. This fits the "listening" element of the "bringing the outside in" adage, and does engage with issues of differentiation within society. However, these explorations do not really zoom in on the "difficult groups" that were pointed out as highly important motivators for reshaping governmental communication: dissatisfied, distrusting citizens. Furthermore, apart from research on differences in lifestyle and mentality between citizens and what they mean for views on policy, there is as yet little use of this knowledge for other domains of governmental communication.

The way of dealing with the problem of "difficult target groups" that has been getting most concrete attention in terms of government-sponsored research and translation into communication strategy so far has been the development of communication strategies for specific social categories that share demographic or social background, or significance in connection with specific policy areas: immigrants,

youth, elderly and small and medium entrepreneurs (see e.g. Ministry of General Affairs 2004).

A related way in which the problem of connecting with differences in society is addressed is through engagement with the notion that the language of the administration is often far removed from the language of citizens (Van Woerkum 2003). Efforts are therefore made at present to adapt language to audience. Policy makers are often encouraged to take note of the way citizens perceive policy issues and policy proposals in order to develop "frames" that resonate with citizens' perspectives. Messages are to be framed connecting the goals of government with the experiences and perceptions of citizens, as we can read in materials government makes available to its communication professionals (National Communication Agency 2006). Ambitions at reaching "target groups" employing the idea that groups can be "reached" better if "audience" perspectives and language are taken into account, have resulted in some notable innovations such as a website for youth addressing youth criminal behavior using forms and language appealing to youth, and a rap single by Justice minister Donner about drug use (www.watvooreikelbenjij.nl and "De Don," respectively). However, questions of framing as an issue in creation of connection are not brought in when in comes to participatory policy development and provision of policy-related information; in these areas assumptions of universality are maintained (see for example Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management 2006; www.regering.nl). The use of ideas on how to connect with specific sections of society thereby often has an instrumental quality, the goal not being creation of a common space that truly brings together different understandings, but rather to inform, persuade or enhance the acceptance of policy.

Important questions on communication for connection with citizens who appear distrusting, dissatisfied or otherwise "disconnected" have remained unaddressed and therefore unanswered. What routes towards political expression do citizens find that they have in their relation with government? What do they feel that interaction with government can be about? What forms of interaction match peoples' desire for inclusion and how does that compare to present possibilities? Perrin's concept of "democratic imagination" (2006) may provide some useful concepts here that can be employed to point out important "silences" in Dutch governmental communication. Perrin's democratic imagination is a kind of "filter" we use to interpret new and changing information about politics and the social world around us. As citizens, we constantly seek new ideas on how to process these "inputs," he says. We turn to a collection of ideas, experiences, stories, narratives and preferences that tell us how to understand what is going on around us. The repertoire of political logics that constitutes the democratic imagination can be understood as the set of resources and experiences that people "think with." Perrin argues that "these political logics consist of ways of thinking and arguing about social issues that determine (1) the range and scope of the public sphere; (2) the range of possible outcomes from public-sphere activities; and (3) the menu of legitimate and useful actions that can be taken in pursuit of these outcomes" (Perrin 2006, 20). Learning about the logics informing citizens' democratic imagination, therefore, can help us get beyond present approaches to governmental communication in the Netherlands that favour the model of the active, independent citizen ready to be called for constructive interaction with government.

First, there is silence when it comes to citizens' understandings of the range and scope of the public sphere: Dutch efforts at governmental communication do not problematise what citizens feel interaction with government can be about, and what the answer to this question could mean for governmental communication for connection. The guiding documents on governmental communication leave no doubt that it is the Government that is to direct on what topics interaction is to take place, and what the political consequences can be (Commission Future Governmental Communication 2001; Mixed Commission Communication 2005; National Communication Agency/Communication Council 2002). We can add here that interactivity is generally developed in connection with pre-planned policy development, not dynamics in public perceptions and priorities. Even practically speaking, these dynamics can hardly be integrated effectively with the present set-up. In any case, citizens can only learn from this that for government, citizens' priorities or perceptions can on their own not be cause for communication. Interesting in this context is that the question whether the hundreds of participatory policy development projects that have taken place have actually enhanced the legitimacy of government and/or of policy, remains to be answered and even asked.

Secondly, there is silence about the menu of legitimate and useful actions that citizens can take in relation to government: is it possible for people who have negative attitudes towards government as such, to find in our present society another potentially more constructive way of relating to government as citizens? Presently, there are few situations in which ordinary citizens can in fact experience a form of contact with government that appeals or speaks to the political content of their citizenship. Political parties have lost significance as representatives of social categories (Thomassen 2000). Interest groups and advocacy organisations are numerous, active and influential. However, much of the interaction with these groups takes place behind closed doors. Often there is no telling for citizens whether differences in society are represented adequately and whether their interests, or the causes they identify with, do indeed find attention. Moreover, much of inclusion of the citizenry in the Dutch polity pertains to specific, organised, sections of society and experts, excluding much of informal and weakly organised citizenry. We lack arenas where citizens force each other, or get forced, to come to a serious weighing of views and interests – or are even confronted with the same. This potential problem remains unaddressed so far.

Thirdly, the menu of useful and legitimate action in the public sphere: though aiming for inclusion, Dutch efforts at developing communication do not problematise existing standards for inclusion that assume and privilege a model of citizenship that expresses itself as reasoned, constructive and regulated. The extensive problematisations of diversity, difference and power that run through much literature on modern democracy and its problems are notably absent here.

Connection through Policy

A third conceptual barrier to the development of connection between citizens and government lies in the assumption that relations are to be recreated through communication about policy.

Communication in connection with policy development is the primary route through which government sees possibilities for recreating relations with citizens.

The idea is that through communication about policy from an early stage onwards, citizens will come to experience government as theirs, will be informed, will experience that they are listened to, and will be engaged. In certain ways this makes sense. According to some recent analyses, the Dutch polity is shifting from a democracy organised around the representation of packages of interests, worldviews and identities, to a democracy organised around domains of policy, in which networks of actors converge around policy issues and policy making processes (Bovens 2005; Hajer 2003). If government wants to recreate relations between citizens and government, these institutional transformations point to policy as the domain where actors, problems and solutions can come together. But also the fact that citizen politics is at least for a significant part a matter of temporary, issue-bounded political activity (Dekker and Hooghe 2002), points to policy. In short, recreating citizen-government relations through communication about policies appears to agree with institutional conditions as well as elements of the democratic imagination and behaviour of at least part of citizenry.

However, connecting with people through policy – what kind of connection could it be, and could this in fact recreate relations as envisaged by government's efforts to communicate for connection? It is striking to see in the documents discussing the role of interactivity in the recreation of relations through communication that the understanding of interaction about policy remains rather a-political, in the sense that political oppositions in society are not clearly part of the equation. Focus is on development of workable solutions, not working with differences and conflicts in society in a broader sense. Thereby, the approach cannot engage with confrontational elements that we find among citizens that are in fact political.

This matter is relevant here also because the forms of interaction through which communication with society is presently sought, do imply that the individual opinions of citizens that are to be brought in, do in fact stand for something bigger – that they actually represent society. Indeed, that would be the main legitimisation of the whole exercise of interaction. However, the representation is not framed in political terms, but in other ways: demographically, in terms of relation to policy or in terms of interest (Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment 2005). Citizenship is thus not taken as political and dynamic, but as stable, bounded, and in some respects predictable. Discursively, the significance of interaction is thus kept within limits: there is no reference to politics beyond the issue, without engagement to larger-scale, higher-level conflicts in society. One could suggest here that participatory policy development tends to be just that, and that we as yet do not have envisaged forms of politics that could facilitate such a thing. But we also see this delimiting of citizenship at moments when it could in fact be otherwise. An example: the Cabinet Balkenende IV that took office in the spring of 2007, started out with what it called a "first 100 days" of what it "dialogue with society," to be able to incorporate citizens' views on specific policy issues and test its own plans on "implementability" before finalising its policy program. Ministers and state secretaries toured the country visiting neighbourhoods, schools, institutions, local governmental and non-governmental organisations and companies. Even if this exercise was meant to incorporate society, the views of people heard remained "ideas," judged to be valid or not by office holders and their staff. Dialogue would have involved, as literature on deliberative democracy has it, exchanges and ar-

gumentation. This was not a visibly meaningful part of the process here though. Discussions that took place were never made public. The supporting website www.samenwerkenaannederland.nl did give citizens opportunities for discussion, but these were exchanges between individual citizens, without moderation, without conclusions and without involvement of office holders in the discussions. Also in the final "result," citizens' policy "ideas" were presented to be just that: isolated statements, and no more, as we can see in the final policy program that literally presented citizen input as such (Ministry of General Affairs 2007).

In spite of government's acceptance of the notion of direct democracy as an important element in governance, tensions between representative and direct democracy remain unresolved here. Taking into account citizens this way, however, means not only that important dimensions of present-day citizenship are ignored; it means also that the potential benefits of political citizenship for recreating connection between citizens and government through communication are not taken advantage of. The potential of connection with citizens through communication may be more significant if inclusion is given more political content, actually acknowledging citizens as political. This is particularly relevant in the context of recreating relations with citizens who appear to be turning away from government – the group government's own analysis shows most concern about.

Hajer (2003) argues that citizens could be seen as political activists on "stand by" who often need to be ignited in order to become politically involved. He points out that "in many cases it is a public policy initiative that triggers people to reflect on what they really value, and that motivates them to voice their concerns or wishes and become politically active themselves. Public policy, in other words, often creates a public domain, a space in which people of various origins deliberate on their future as well as on their mutual interrelationships and their relationship to the government" (Hajer 2003, 89). Policy can become the starting point of politics, rather than the result, in Hajer's view.

Developing policy making arenas as places where citizens can develop and express themselves in a political sense appears beneficial for the reshaping of relations between citizens and government if we take into account the confrontational stance that many citizens appear to take, also in the analysis of government itself – without opportunity for channeling it in any constructive fashion. Policy making arenas can also be places where citizens can get forced to engage with dilemmas that stay out of their horizon at present, when "listening" and interaction is about "ideas" that citizens can contribute to policy. Hajer's political perspective can provide part of an answer to this. His argument primarily speaks of the benefits of deliberative democracy, but could be taken as meaningful for the development of governmental communication in a broader sense. Communication about policy could become communication not only about single policy proposals but also about dilemmas and guiding ideas, in a dialogic fashion. It could help develop, facilitate and incorporate political citizenship. This could be taken as potentially undermining for representative democracy, but it could also just as well contribute to its reinvigoration.

Discussion: Terms of Engagement

Communication demands that you deal with how your interlocutor addresses you, or turns away from you, and why. But certain conceptualisations of the public that we can identify in Dutch governmental communication as way to connect with citizens fail to engage with a set of important issues when it comes to the way in which society actually relates to government and politics. The abstract, idealised conceptualisation of the public as constant and as ready for constructive interaction on policy leaves significant manifestations of the public out of the framework and fails to ask basic questions before acting. The goal of creating connection by interaction on policy as policy alone is limiting of citizenship, maintaining it to be a-political. The limits that the conceptualisation of the public in terms of abstract, idealistic and a-political notions of citizenship imposes here are all the more notable since the administration's own analysis, grounding and legitimising the efforts at connection through communication, does in fact construct citizenship as collective manifestation, as distrusting and as political. Even if communication is newly conceived on the basis of ideas on how the public manifests itself, with the conception of the public that has resulted government is not able to actually engage with those same manifestations.

Confronting this discrepancy effectively would not have to mean that government do away with the primacy of representative government. It also does not suggest we ought to take the probably untenable position that the only good democracy is one where all citizens relate to government in an involved and constructive way, or all forms of citizenship are accounted for by those in office. However, a democratic government that seeks to develop its democratic qualities through communication can do better than stick with an approach to the public that in important respects does not truly take up the challenge at hand.

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