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article

What determines the audiences that public service organisations target for reputation management?

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Why do public sector organisations target different stakeholder audiences in their reputation management? Despite the recognition that reputation management is an audience-based exercise, the field lacks studies that systematically analyse which audiences matter for reputation management by different public service organisations. This article examines reputation management by public service organisation in a multi-audience framework. The relevance of different audiences is surveyed at public service organisations that differ in formal-legal distance from government, task, size and environmental turbulence. The strongest and broadest effects are found for more autonomous organisations, who focus their reputation management more on politicians in general and the media and less on their directly responsible Minister.

Key words organisational reputation • reputation management • audiences • stakeholders

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Introduction

In the last decades, the evidence is mounting that public sector organisations (PSOs) are conscious of the value of a favourable reputation and that they treat reputation management as a matter of strategic importance (Carpenter and Krause, 2012; Maor, 2015). Reputations are composed of symbolic beliefs about an organisation – its capacities, intentions, history, mission – and these images are embedded in a network of multiple audiences (Carpenter, 2010: 33). An organisation's reputation relies on audiences' perceptions concerning the unique qualities that distinguish the

organisation from others in the polity (Maor, 2015). Audiences do not observe the reality of the organisation, but rather a partial image of the organisation's effectiveness (Carpenter and Krause, 2012). This fuzziness leaves some leeway for PSOs to strategically participate in the construction of their own image.

Reputation management is observed in the strategies PSOs apply to manage audiences' perceptions that form an organisation's reputation (Elsbach, 2006). Reputation management relates to the presentation of self in everyday life (Goffman, 1959), as it is about PSOs' management of their audiences' perceptions. Several literatures on bureaucratic and corporate reputation have become increasingly interested in reputation management. These literatures reflect different understandings regarding the rationality of actors and their degree of agency (Maor, 2015).

Christensen and Lodge (2018) distinguish between social constructivist, institutional and political science perspectives on reputation management. On the one hand, social constructivist scholars stress the limited control of PSOs over their reputations, which are formed in processes of social interaction with stakeholders. Likewise, institutional scholars grant relatively little agency to PSOs, emphasising the relevance of the larger institutional context in which PSOs operate. On the other hand, political science scholars stress the ability of PSOs to craft a good reputation as a source of bureaucratic power and a political asset (Carpenter, 2001; 2010; Maor, 2015).

This article examines how organisational characteristics are related to the audiences that PSOs perceive to be important for reputation management. Five generic audiences are considered: the 'political principal', 'politicians in general', 'users and target groups', 'interest groups' and 'the media'. The relative importance of these audiences is related to PSOs' formal-legal distance, primary task, environmental turbulence and size. Doing so positions this study in existing literatures interested in the relative attention that is given by PSOs to distinct audiences for the purposes of reputation management (Carpenter and Krause, 2012; Maor, 2015; Busuioc and Lodge, 2017).

We seek to contribute to these literatures in several ways. First, we focus on the puzzling role of two organisational characteristics that have been identified by previous research as important for understanding organisational behaviour in general (Verhoest et al, 2012): the formal-legal distance of PSOs from government, and the primary task that PSOs perform. While an increase in formal-legal distance from central government is typically treated as one outcome of good reputation management in the political science approach (Carpenter, 2001), other literatures tend to stress the challenges posed by public organisations' formal context (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot, 2012). Concerning task, ample evidence demonstrates how PSOs direct more attention to specific activities that are central to their reputation (Busuioc and Lodge, 2017), or that pose a reputational risk (Moffitt, 2010; Maor et al, 2012). Yet to our knowledge no studies have theorised and tested whether PSOs' primary task affects the audiences they choose for reputation management. Also, research has typically zoomed in on single PSOs (exceptions: Maor, 2007; 2011, Christensen and Lodge, 2018; Christensen and Gornitzka, 2018), often performing regulatory tasks (Carpenter, 2001; 2010; Maor, 2010; Moffitt, 2010). The current study will examine potential differences in the choice of audiences for reputation management between 41 PSOs that perform policy formulation, regulation (or tasks that involve other kinds of authority) or service delivery as a primary task.

Second, reputation scholars have broadly focused on two types of reputation management: discursive strategies, which are related to PSOs' communication efforts (for example, Christensen and Lodge, 2018; Maor et al, 2012; Gilad et al, 2013), and substantive strategies, which are related to PSOs' actions to change the timing or

observability of their decisions (Carpenter, 2004; Moffitt, 2010) and outputs (Maor and Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2015). In the political science approach in particular, most studies have focused on reputation management as a strategic effort to protect the organisation from external threats (for example, Maor, 2015). This specific focus has resulted in increasingly rich and nuanced models of reputation management. However, its scope is rather limited in two respects: studies tend to reduce reputation management to protecting the organisation from threats, and scholars have primarily focused on organisation-specific responses to threats that are difficult to compare across organisational contexts. The current study is not focused on reputation management as organisation-specific reputation-protective behaviour, but on the audiences that count for the reputation management of PSOs (Busuioc and Lodge, 2017).

Our data does not allow for an examination of *how* reputation management is performed towards these audiences, nor does it allow for an analysis of whether and how PSOs prioritise their attention across audiences. Yet given the scarcity of academic attention on the antecedents of the choice of audiences by PSOs for reputation management, our approach allows us to shed a first light on this poorly understood aspect within the reputation literature.

The focus on generic audience groups can be compared across PSOs that differ in a series of characteristics, which is important in a field that lacks comparative studies (Maor, 2015). While there are examples of studies analysing how single PSOs manage several audiences (Carpenter, 2010; Moffitt, 2010), or how several PSOs manage a single audience (Krause and Douglas, 2005), to our knowledge no studies have focused on *several* audiences targeted differently by *several* PSOs for purposes of reputation management. Given that the animating concept of a reputation-based account of PSOs is that of audience (Carpenter and Krause, 2012: 27), understanding variations in the relative importance of audiences for reputation management is crucial.

We address the following research question: *how are the formal-legal distance and primary task of PSOs related to the choice of audiences for reputation management, when controlling for organisational size and environmental turbulence?*

In the next section, we first introduce our theoretical framework in which we formulate hypotheses related to the structure and task of PSOs. Next, we turn to the research design, after which we present the results of our analyses. We end with a discussion of the results in light of existing research, followed by the conclusion.

Theorising which audiences matter for reputation management

Reputation theorists recognise that being parts of networks is crucial for PSOs to manage external dependencies (Carpenter, 2001; Groenleer, 2009). Contemporary organisations face what Brunsson (2003) calls a rising tide of frequently contradictory demands. Under such circumstances, it may be difficult for organisations to satisfy one set of constituents without disregarding the interests of others (Busuioc and Lodge, 2017).

Not all audiences have a meaningful impact on PSO behaviour, but at least some of them are being watched by public administrators for the purposes of accurately gauging and managing external expectations. Carpenter and Krause (2012: 27) note that ‘audiences are multiple and diverse, so satisfying one audience often means perturbing another’. PSOs have limited resources and, given the very different nature and needs of their audiences, they must prioritise their primary target-audience for recognition of their organisational reputation (Busuioc and Lodge, 2017).

Previous research has focused on several generic audience groups which PSOs may address for reputation management. [Waterman and colleagues \(1998\)](#) address 14 potential audiences of two environmental protection organisations. Given the larger scale of this study, we follow [Yesilkagit and van Thiel \(2012\)](#) in their approach to focus on fewer audiences, but which are nonetheless sufficiently generic and meaningful for all PSOs. We take the following five audiences into account: the ‘political principal’, being the portfolio minister (including staff) responsible for the parent ministry in which the PSO is active; ‘politicians in general’; the ‘users and target groups’ to which the PSO delivers services; the ‘interests groups’ representing these users and target groups; and ‘the media’ which are increasingly recognised as powerful influences on the politico-administrative system ([Schillemans, 2012](#)).

Two fundamental organisational characteristics have been identified by previous research as important for understanding organisational design and behaviour ([Verhoest et al, 2012](#)): the formal-legal distance of PSOs from government, and the primary task that PSOs perform. Before we turn to the formulation of hypotheses, we want to stress that these expectations are not absolute in the sense that certain audiences are (or are not) important for reputation management in different organisational contexts, but that they are relative in the sense that certain audiences are more or less important.

Formal-legal distance

We first focus on the formal-legal distance of organisations from government, a multi-dimensional concept that relates to PSOs’ legal status (ministerial unit versus agency), legal personality (public law agency or not) and governance structure (governing board or not) ([Verhoest et al, 2012](#)). As such, the formal-legal distance encompasses a range of elements that reflect the formal structure of PSOs.

How is a PSO’s degree of formal-legal distance from government related to the perceived relevance of ‘political principal’ for reputation management? First, we discuss a negative relationship, which corresponds to some of the basic ideas in the literatures on institutional design and agencification. Two important motives for placing PSOs at arm’s length from politics from the 1980s onwards was to lessen political interference in order to let managers manage, and in order to promote impartiality and neutrality in bureaucratic decision-making ([Pollitt et al, 2004](#)). In addition, PSOs with a high formal-legal distance are positioned outside the legal identity of the state, which means that they are able to act before courts, to have their own assets and their own governing board. In European parliamentary systems, such PSOs would need to present their budgets and accounts separately to parliament ([Verhoest et al, 2012](#)).

Overall, these characteristics make PSOs at formal-legal distance more identifiable and recognisable as distinct from their political principal, and hence more likely to be held to account by a wider array of audiences. Stakeholder theory argues that actors are particularly relevant from an organisational perspective when they have more influence on the organisation ([Fassin, 2009](#)), particularly in terms of accountability ([Van Puyvelde et al, 2012](#)). Given that account-giving and reputation management are intrinsically related ([Busuioc and Lodge, 2017](#)), one may expect relatively more reputation management of PSOs at a higher formal-legal distance from government towards audiences other than the political principal. Research with a broader interest in political-administrative relations and stakeholder influence demonstrates that the external orientation of independent PSOs negatively affects the weight that PSOs

give to signals from their respective executive politicians (Egeberg and Trondal, 2009) and the perceived influence of the Minister of the parent department (Yesilkagit and van Thiel, 2008).

Second, more recent insights from agencification studies and the bureaucratic reputation literature point at more complex relations between formal-legal distance and reputation management towards the political principal. In a setting of high formal-legal distance from government, the principal might become more reliant on the PSO (agent) for the endorsement of, and compliance with, its role (Carpenter and Krause, 2015; Busuioc and Lodge, 2017). In turn, scholars have observed the occurrence of so-called voluntary account-giving, that is, when PSOs willingly subject themselves to scrutiny (Busuioc and Lodge, 2017).

These insights indicate that reputational considerations, both on behalf of the principal and on behalf of the PSO, might provoke an increase in the mutual relevance for the reputations of principals and PSO at formal-legal distance from government. This observation corresponds to recent insights in the agencification literature, which points at the relational and dynamic nature of autonomy (Verhoest, 2018), and to a transactional authority perspective, which stresses the continuous re-negotiation of authority between principals and agents (Carpenter and Krause, 2015). In a similar vein, the managerial approach within stakeholder theory emphasises the relational aspects between stakeholder and an organisation (Fassin, 2009). While political influence on autonomous PSOs might be relatively limited, the absence of more frequent direct political control makes reputation management all the more relevant in terms of securing an overall favourable image in the eyes of political principals. Under these conditions, one may expect a continuing reputational relevance of the political principal among independent PSOs, in order to maintain this base of support (Roberts, 2006; Carpenter, 2010).

A third possibility is that formal-legal distance has no influence on the relative importance of the political principal for reputation management, either because the contradicting mechanisms mentioned above neutralise each other or because there is no effect at all. The latter option would correspond to an interpretation that sees as a basic starting point of reputation theory that formal provisions fail to explain the level of support for PSOs (Carpenter, 2001; Busuioc and Lodge, 2017). Krause and Douglas (2005) find that bureaucratic outputs are generally unaffected in an ex ante fashion by the extent to which an organisation is formally removed from political influence. A core message of the reputation literature is that reputation is a source of bureaucratic power that bureaucratic actors use to bolster their autonomy.

This study uses the first possibility as the impetus for our first hypothesis that *as PSO's formal-legal distance from government increases, these organisations will perceive the 'political principal' as less relevant for reputation management* (H1) as a starting point for discussing our results. Yet we will also take into consideration the possibility that the formal-legal structure of PSOs has a negative or no effect on the relevance of the political principal for reputation management.

Taking into account previous theoretical and empirical work that points at distinct effects of formal-legal distance depending on the type of political actor, this study distinguishes between the 'political principal' and 'politicians in general'. Institutional design scholars have argued that by placing PSOs at formal-legal distance from government, politicians manage to preserve influence on the organisation even when they are temporarily not in power (Yesilkagit and Christensen, 2010). In particular,

given that research shows that independent PSOs are particularly vulnerable for being terminated when political coalitions change (Lewis, 2004), we would expect a continued and proactive effort by formally-legally distant PSOs to maintain or improve their reputation towards politicians in general. This argument fits well with a transactional authority perspective (Carpenter and Krause, 2015), which stresses the dynamic nature of repeated interactions among politicians and PSOs as a series of repeated games. From a stakeholder theory perspective, politicians form an interesting group on the intersection between *stakewatchers* – intermediaries that protect the interests of real stakeholders (citizens) – and *stakekeepers* – actors which impose regulations and constraints on the organisation (Fassin, 2009). This dual role makes them highly relevant for reputation management purposes. We therefore expect that *as PSO's formal-legal distance from government increases, these organisations will perceive 'politicians in general' as more relevant for reputation management (H2)*.

We further consider the relation between formal-legal distance and the choice for 'users and target groups' and 'interest groups' for reputation management.

On the one hand, one may expect PSOs at higher formal-legal distance to be more oriented towards these external audiences in their reputation management. Institutional design scholars have argued that a high formal-legal distance ensures that relevant interest groups have a say in the governance of PSOs that manage policies that are relevant to them (Moe, 1995). PSOs at a high formal-legal distance from government are directed by governing boards (Verhoest et al, 2012). In these boards, non-political audiences are part of the PSO's governance structure, which brings a dynamic to the control of independent PSOs that is lacking in organisations that operate under full ministerial authority (Christensen and Gornitzka, 2018).

Reputation scholars have pointed out how governing boards provide a forum for these PSOs to defend their reputation vis-à-vis important stakeholders, and to learn about and manage stakeholder perceptions. Stakeholder theory sees governing boards as interface stakeholders, due to their connecting function between the organisation and its environment (Fassin, 2009). Groenleer (2009, 171) found that the representation of stakeholders in governance boards made it easier for PSOs to exert influence through networking and to establish a reputation in those networks. Governing boards, thus, pose both a reputational threat and an opportunity for reputation management. Furthermore, PSOs at formal-legal distance from government may develop a distinct organisational culture and identity, as they adopt business-like values that separate them from integrated units within ministerial departments (Waeraas, 2014). Research with a broader interest in political-administrative relations and stakeholder influence demonstrates that independent organisations give more weight to signals from users and target groups (Egeberg and Trondal, 2009), and that legally independent PSOs attach more importance to interest groups (Yesilkagit and van Thiel, 2008).

On the other hand, reputation scholars might argue that PSOs that are institutionally located close to their political principal would have more to gain from building coalitions of support in networks of external audiences. Tighter ties with politics means exactly that these PSOs will try to enhance their reputations with others, since this is what would grant them autonomy despite institutional ties.

This study uses the first line of argument as the impetus for our third hypothesis that *as PSO's formal-legal distance from government increases, these organisations will perceive the 'users and target groups' and 'interest groups' as more relevant for reputation management (H3)* as a starting point for discussing our results. Yet we will also take into consideration

the possibility that the formal-legal structure of PSOs has a negative or no effect on the relevance of these audiences for reputation management.

Last, we consider whether a PSO's formal-legal distance from government affects the extent to which 'the media' are considered relevant for reputation management. Scholars studying the role of the media as an accountability forum have addressed the crucial role of the media to alleviate the democratic deficit that results from politicians delegating autonomy to PSOs at formal-legal distance from government (Maggetti, 2012). Having their own legal identity, and being required present their budgets and accounts separately to parliament makes the performance of these PSOs more recognisable as distinct from their political principal (Bertelli, 2016). The literature on blame avoidance claims that delegation of tasks to independent bodies open up room for blame avoidance by politicians (Mortensen, 2016). Given that the media are more prone to report about recognisable and negative stories, it can be expected that the media are more likely to report about PSOs at formal-legal distance from government (as evidenced by Deacon and Monk, 2001; Schillemans, 2012). Since negative media coverage can have a major impact upon these organisations' continuing existence (Bertelli and Sinclair, 2015), this creates an incentive for these organisations to secure a favourable media reputation and to invest in their relations with the media. Therefore, it can be expected that the media, as stakeholder, will allocate disproportional attention to independent PSOs and, in doing so, make a claim on these organisations' attention (Fassin, 2009). Not surprisingly, then, independent organisations have been found to develop distinctive identities and to invest in their capacities for strategic interactions with the media (Schillemans, 2012; Fredriksson et al, 2015). From a reputational perspective, the media offers an important forum to build, maintain and protect their image to a broad array of audiences.

We have so far discussed the role of the media as an audience in itself. Yet the media also serves as a communication channel through which PSOs reach other audiences. From this perspective, less independent PSOs might also perceive the media as more relevant for their reputation management, as an instrument to build positive reputations and coalitions with non-political audiences. However, because it is difficult a priori to predict *how* the media will be used as a medium to reach other audiences, we formulate our hypothesis along the former line of argument. Therefore, we expect that *as PSO's formal-legal distance from government increases, these organisations will perceive 'the media' as more relevant for reputation management* (H4).

Task

The task of PSOs is expected to matter because it relates to the nature of activities that are performed by PSOs in order to reach their objectives, and also to the (stakeholder) environment in which PSOs are active. We argue that, similarly as with structure, the task environment creates an institutional setting that signals to PSOs which aspects of their reputation can be stressed to which audiences. Carpenter (2010) states that reputations are not singular, but that they bind to specific types of activities of PSOs. The activities that are performed by a PSO in order to achieve its mission affect the audiences it is likely to reach and the feedback it will get. Organisations will seek to enhance the perception of their performance primarily among those stakeholders for which they perform their tasks. Otherwise, the support of those stakeholders may diminish, jeopardising the organisation's existence. Task, therefore, is an important

aspect in shaping the ways in which agencies seek to manage their reputation (Christensen and Lodge, 2018).

PSOs perform three groups of basic public tasks (Verhoest et al, 2012): (a) policy formulation, (b) delivering general public services, and (c) regulation (inspection and scrutiny) and exercising other forms of public authority (including taxing, subsidising, fining, granting individual monetary benefits). To date, reputation scholars, particularly in the political science stream, overly focused on PSOs performing regulatory tasks, leading to calls to examine a wider range of organisations without enforcement as part of their task profile (Carpenter and Krause, 2012; Maor, 2015). Furthermore, studies have mostly relied on organisation-specific measurements of functional areas (Maor et al, 2012; Gilad et al, 2013), rather than on generic sets of activities that are comparable across PSOs. We distinguish between the concepts of functional area (closely linked to the objective of an organisation) and task. The tasks of an agency are related to the activities it performs and the instruments it uses in order to reach its objectives. This article examines the relational strategies pursued by policy-formulating and service-delivery PSOs and formulates expectations related to these tasks.

First, we consider the role of primary task for the perceived relevance of the 'political principal' and 'politicians in general' PSOs for their reputation management. Policy-formulating PSOs derive their legitimacy foremost from the support and advisory activities they provide to political actors. Empirically, policy-formulating PSOs have been shown to give priority to signals from the political principal (Yesilkagit and van Thiel, 2008; Egeberg and Trondal, 2009). In contrast, regulators and PSOs exercising other kinds of public authority are, by design, more insulated from political interference in order to maximise their independence (Maggetti, 2012). Furthermore, the evaluation of policy-formulating organisations is difficult since politicians know little about the work required of bureaucrats to perform policy and administrative tasks, and since their outputs are hard to measure (Wilson, 1989). When the performance of PSOs requires subjective evaluations, organisations are empowered and incentivised to manage the perceptions of political actors through reputation management (Carpenter and Krause, 2015). The relevance of political audiences for policy-formulating PSOs thus follows from a combined effect of the influence these audiences hold due to the direct role as recipients of support and advice, and the influence these organisations themselves have on the image that is portrayed to these political audiences. Therefore, we expect that *policy-formulating PSOs will perceive the 'political principal' and 'politicians in general' as more relevant for reputation management, compared to PSOs performing other tasks* (H5).

Second, we consider the role of primary task for the perceived relevance of 'users and target groups', 'interest groups', and 'the media' by PSOs for their reputation management. Policy-formulating organisations perform activities – such as legislative proposals – that only indirectly affect societal actors (Egeberg and Trondal, 2009), which makes these societal actors indirect stakeholders over whom the organisation has little power and responsibility (and vice versa) (Fassin, 2009). As a result, policy-formulating organisations are less visible, less recognisable and less prone to be covered in the media (Schillemans, 2012). In contrast, regulators and PSOs exercising other kinds of public authority operate among numerous societal actors, including interest groups, civic associations, organisations of professional and scientific expertise, the mass public, regulated businesses and clientele, all of which rely on these PSOs for benefits and order (Carpenter, 2010: 34). Regulative organisations engage more in

strategic self-presentation by communicating – often through the media – values that support or justify the basis for their rule-enforcing functions and legitimacy (Waeraas, 2014). Therefore, we expect that *policy-formulating PSOs will perceive ‘users and target groups’, ‘interest groups’ and ‘the media’ as less relevant for reputation management, compared to PSOs performing other tasks* (H6).

Service-delivery PSOs are in closer and more direct contact when delivering their services to users and target groups. This makes their work easier to evaluate, as their behaviour and outputs are more easily observable and measurable, which allows target groups, interests groups and the media to discriminate between good and bad performance of such agencies (Bertelli, 2016). Furthermore, the outcomes of their work are more easily directly attributable to their actions. This in contrast to regulatory and subsidising agencies, of whom the ultimate results of their actions depend on the actors they regulate or subsidise. Service delivery PSOs perform activities that are more visible and recognisable to the general public, making them more susceptible to media coverage (see also Schillemans, 2012). In contrast to regulatory PSOs that perform more technical, difficult to measure and uncertain tasks, service-delivery PSOs perform tasks of which the outputs are less technical and easier to communicate to external audiences (Wilson, 1989). Therefore, we expect that *service delivery PSOs will perceive ‘users and target groups’, ‘interest groups’ and ‘the media’ as more relevant for reputation management, compared to PSOs performing other tasks* (H7).

Last, we include two control variables. First, larger organisations have more capacity to develop and sustain relational strategies which focus on multiple audiences. Moreover, such organisations are generally more salient to different audiences as they work with larger budgets, which might be scrutinised by politicians, users and target groups, the media and interest groups (Pollitt et al, 2004; Schillemans, 2012). Second, a core assumption of reputation-based research is that PSOs are sensitive to situations during which their reputation is under threat (Maor, 2015). Parliamentary attention (parliamentary questions, debates in commissions or substantial legislative initiatives), as well as media coverage, signal to PSOs that external audiences are following the organisation and its activities closely (Egeberg and Trondal, 2009). This awareness might trigger organisations to invest even more in reputation-building and -strengthening with political, market and media audiences.

Research design

Research context

The research context is the civil service of the Flemish government. Flanders is a region in the Federal Belgian state with its own parliament, government and public sector. The regional governments in Belgium exercise the powers accorded to them without any interference from the federal government. In this sense, the Flemish government is comparable with a full-fledged nation-state for the competencies it is accorded, such as education, health and labour market policies.

Data

Our analyses made use of data from different data sources, significantly reducing the likelihood of having problems of common method/source bias. The first source

relates to a survey sent to the PSOs' Chief Executive Officers (CEOs). The survey included several items from the Comparative Public Organisation Data Base for Research and Analysis (COBRA) questionnaire concerning the autonomy, control and internal management tools of PSOs. In addition, several new items were added that were specifically designed for studying reputation management. These new items tap into the (management of) stakeholder audiences and more general environmental conditions surrounding PSOs.

First, the survey was used to measure the dependent variable, that is, the strategic choice of audiences by PSOs for reputation management. The exact formulation of the question was: 'Which of the following strategies does the senior management of your organisation usually use to maintain or, if necessary, strengthen the reputation of your organisation?' (answers ranging from '1 – not at all' to '5 – to a very large extent'). The following questions relating to relational strategies were asked (see Table 1).

Second, the survey was used to operationalise one of the independent control variables. An index of 'environmental turbulence' was used of three items to measure the degree to which PSOs and its activities were subjected to legislative attention (item 1), parliamentarian (item 2), and media attention (item 3) in the last five years (for each question: from '1 – not at all' to '5 – to a very large extent'). The Cronbach's alpha value for the index equals 0.704. Index scores lie between 0 and 1. The variable has been log-transformed since it is non-normally distributed.

Each CEO was sent a personalised link to their personal e-mail account, addressing them by their own name and emphasising the importance of capturing the view of the CEOs themselves. Also, in order to increase the response rate, we personally called a large number of CEOs to convince them to complete the survey and to emphasise the importance of having themselves filling in the survey. This brought the response rates up to 75 per cent. During none of these phone calls or email conversations on this survey was there an indication that the CEOs would not fill in the survey themselves. As people responsible for maintaining the organisation, CEOs must identify the external pressures and audiences the PSOs target (Wilson, 1989). They are thus well-positioned to make a grounded assessment of external relevant audiences (Yesilkagit and van Thiel, 2012). We use data from 41 organisations that responded in full to the survey questions regarding reputation management. Importantly, these organisations proved to be representative of the total population with respect to legal

Table 1: Dependent variable: items

Audience 1: political principal	We aim to maintain as close contacts as possible with our portfolio Minister or his political staff
Audience 2: politicians in general	We aim to have good relations with and a good perception by politicians of the most important political parties because their support for our organisation and activities is very important to us.
Audience 3: users and target groups	We aim to be as responsive as possible to the needs of our target groups and users in order to maximise their satisfaction.
Audience 4: interest groups	We build intensive and good relations with the interest groups which defend the interests of our users and target groups, because their support to our organisation and activities is very important to us.
Audience 5: media	We aim for positive coverage of our organisation and its activities by the media.

type (Mann-Whitney statistic comparing legal type across both samples equalled $z = -0.842$ with a $\text{Prob} > |z| = 0.4000$), and to have a broad distribution across type of public organisation, tasks, ministries and policy fields.

The other independent variables were not drawn from the survey, but from another non-obtrusive data source: the 2013 organigram of the Flemish public sector. This data source provides objective information about the legal status, task and staff numbers of the PSOs under study.

Formal-legal distance is measured by the legal-structural type of the PSO and the formal-legal distance from government (largely based on van Thiel, 2012): '1 = department'; '2 = semi-autonomous organisation without legal independence'; '3 = legally independent organisation under full ministerial authority (no board)'; '4 = legally independent organisation with a board'.

The task environment is taken into account by the inclusion of two dummies: 'Policy formulation' (organisations active in policy preparation, evaluation, or in formulating advice to policy makers) and 'Service delivery' (organisations active in direct service delivery to societal actors); 'regulation and exercising other kinds of public authority' refers to PSOs setting norms and standards, applying them to individual cases, and monitoring and sanctioning compliance with them or granting subsidies. Organisational size has been operationalised as the number of full-time equivalents working in the organisation. Just as with environmental turbulence, the variable proved to be a non-normal distribution, hence it is log-transformed.

Table 2 shows the summary statistics and correlations for all variables included in the analysis. We also test for multicollinearity using the variance inflation factor (VIF). The mean VIF equals 1.55 whereby, and the highest VIF being 1.98 for strategy 3: media. The VIF values indicate that no collinearity exists between the variables.

Results

Our analyses make use of a Tobit model where one can set the lower and upper bounds. In order to test the normality assumption, we estimate the Tobit model with polynomials (quadratic, cubic) of the fitted values as additional regressors. A Wald test is then performed to check whether these polynomials have jointly significant explanatory power. For all of our models, the null hypothesis of normality could not be rejected. Therefore, we also estimated heteroscedastic models where we model a heteroscedasticity term (the variable organisational size). When performing LR-tests on heteroscedasticity for all models, we notice that the null hypothesis (homoscedasticity) cannot be rejected in any of the models. The results of the Tobit estimations are presented in Table 3. As a robustness check, standard OLS regression has also been employed, this led to similar results (same sign and significance level).¹ These analyses are available on request.

Concerning formal-legal distance, we find support for expectations that as PSOs operate at a higher formal-legal distance from government, they will perceive (a) the political principal as less relevant for reputation management (H1), (b) politicians in general as more relevant (H2), and (c) the media as more relevant (H4). No support is found for the effect of formal-legal distance on the perceived relevance of users and target groups, and interest groups (H3).

Contrary to expectations, the primary task of PSOs has little effect. The task dummies prove to be jointly significant only in model 2 (which means that no

Table 2: Descriptive statistics (N=41)

Variable	Mean	SD	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Audience 1: political principal	3.78	0.79	1								
Audience 2: politicians in general	2.85	1.13	0.1309	1							
Audience 3: users and target groups	3.34	0.69	0.0489	0.2887	1						
Audience 4: interest groups	3.98	0.72	-0.0532	0.1177	0.3158	1					
Audience 5: media	3.46	1.12	-0.0798	0.5879	0.435	0.0451	1				
Task	1.29	0.78	-0.338	-0.0352	0.1799	0.1453	0.0981	1			
Formal-legal distance	0.44	0.50	-0.428	0.2807	0.0801	-0.0143	0.2949	0.5865	1		
Organisational size	480.73	783.46	0.043	0.3364	0.3524	0.3747	0.2578	0.2195	0.1657	1	
Environmental turbulence (log)	-0.57	0.22	0.2871	0.1149	-0.1272	0.0645	0.1118	-0.1866	-0.0302	0.1631	1.0000

Table 3: Regression results (Tobit)

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Strategy 1 Principal	Strategy 2 Politicians	Strategy 3 Users/target groups	Strategy 4 Interest groups	Strategy 5 Media
Formal-legal distance	-0.34** (0.17)	0.82*** (0.23)	0.02 (0.12)	-0.15 (0.26)	0.54** (0.25)
Task (policy formulation =ref. cat.)	F(2.36)=0.21	F(2.36)=5.20**	F(2.36)=0.32	F(2.36)=0.73	F(2.36)=0.92
Regulation	-0.09 (0.55)	-2.03*** (0.65)	-0.21 (0.39)	-0.22 (0.97)	-0.85 (0.70)
Service delivery	-0.25 (0.54)	-2.13*** (0.72)	0.02 (0.31)	0.38 (0.83)	-0.80 (0.63)
Organisational size (log)	0.07 (0.13)	0.36** (0.18)	0.22** (0.10)	0.47** (0.22)	0.25 (0.21)
Environmental turbulence (log)	0.95** (0.46)	-0.67 (0.75)	-0.68 (0.53)	0.07 (1.18)	0.39 (0.89)
Constant	5.03*** (0.89)	0.01 (1.31)	1.75** (0.70)	1.62 (1.50)	1.64 (1.42)
Observations	41	41	41	41	41
Cragg-Uhler R ²	0.272	0.342	0.198	0.199	0.191
<i>For Strategy 2 (Politicians):</i>					
Task (Service delivery=ref. cat.)					
Policy formulation	$\beta=2.131***$ (0.723)				
Regulation	$\beta=0.097$ (0.469)				

support is found for the effect of primary task on the perceived relevance of users and target groups, interest groups, and the media – providing no support for H6 and H7). Model 2 shows partial support for H5: while we find no effect of having policy-formulation as a primary task (compared to any other task) on the perceived relevance of the political principal, policy-formulating PSOs are more likely than organisations performing other tasks to target politicians from the most relevant political parties for their reputation management.

Concerning the control variables, organisational size does not affect the PSO's willingness to strive for a positive media profile as part of their reputation management. Size is also not related to the extent to which PSOs aim to maintain close relations with their political principal. Larger PSOs, however, are more likely than smaller ones to target politicians of the most relevant political parties, as well as to address their users, target groups and interest groups, in their reputation management. Last, our findings suggest that PSOs that experience environmental turbulence turn more to their political principal.

Discussion

Our results demonstrate that as PSOs have more formal-legal distance, they consider their political principal as less relevant for their reputation management. This finding supports H1, which expected that arm's length organisations would be more shielded from political influence (Moe, 1995; Yesilkagit and Christensen, 2010), more recognisable and identifiable towards audiences other than the political principal (Verhoest et al, 2012; Bertelli, 2016), more externally oriented in their identity (Waeraas, 2014) and more attentive to signals from executive politicians (Egeberg and Trondal, 2009).

In support of H2, we observed that formal-legal independence was positively related to the reputational relevance of politicians in general. This finding fits well with previous studies who indicate that independent organisations' survival is particularly at risk when a change of government coalition occurs (Lewis, 2004), which demonstrates the relevance of maintaining good relations with a wide array of political audiences. Our results also relate to scholars arguing that one reason for having formal autonomy is that the PSO has been good at relating to political actors in the past (Carpenter, 2001; 2010; Roberts, 2006), and to the transactional authority perspective that stresses the dynamic and repeated interactions between political and bureaucratic actors over time (Carpenter and Krause, 2015). However, it should be reiterated that we do not observe a similar positive relation between formal-legal distance and the relevance of the political principal.

These findings contribute to the political science literature on reputation management, which takes as a basic starting point that successful reputation management can bolster a PSO's independence (Carpenter, 2001; 2010; Krause and Douglas, 2005). Our findings do not invalidate this claim, but they suggest that the focus of reputation management in terms of audiences might be affected (but not determined) by their formal-legal distance. This notion has not yet received much attention in the reputation literature, which has been dominated by single case studies (Maor, 2015).

We find no significant relation between PSOs' formal-legal distance and the relevance of 'users and target groups' and 'interest groups' for their reputation management.

This is surprising in light of H3, and also nuances a basic tenet of institutional design scholarship (Yesilkagit and Christensen, 2010), and earlier research which found arm's length bodies to be more insulated from signals of executive politicians in favour of those of users and clients (Egeberg and Trondal, 2009). We see several potential explanations. First, there is a difference in contextual focus between, on the one hand, many institutional design scholars and their focus on the United States, and, on the other hand, the current study on Flemish (Belgian) public organisations. Belgium is a setting where powerful political parties exercise a major influence on the political system in general (Devos and Sinardet, 2012); this in contrast to the United States, where the political system offers more opportunities for local interests to influence the political-administrative sphere (Wilson, 1989). Where structurally disaggregated PSOs in the United States are more dependent on the support of target and interest groups in their local constituencies for their continued survival, it is likely that arm's length PSOs in Belgium have more to gain from broad political alliances with politicians from the relevant political parties. Second, there is a difference in focus between these previous studies that are related to *signals from audiences coming into the organisation* (Egeberg and Trondal, 2009), whereas this study is related to *reputational signals going out of the organisation* to manage audiences' perceptions.

Last, formal-legal distance is related to a higher perceived relevance of the media for reputation management. This supports H4, and the notion that more autonomous PSOs seek to develop and promote distinctive identities (Waeraas, 2014), and to invest in their capacities for strategic interactions with the media (Schillemans, 2012; Fredriksson et al, 2015), in order to deal with the increase in negative media attention they experience (Deacon and Monk, 2001).

Concerning task, we found that policy-formulating PSOs were more likely than organisations performing other tasks to target politicians from the most relevant political parties. This suggests that policy-formulating PSOs are comparatively more preoccupied with gathering a wide range of political support either for the policies or advice they develop or for their own organisations than regulators (which aim for an independent profile) and service delivery PSOs (which are more insulated from the centre of government and its proximity to the political sphere) (Pollitt et al, 2004; Maggetti, 2012). Task, however, has no effect on the extent to which PSOs consider the political principal, the media or users, target groups and interest groups relevant for reputation management. We thus find mixed support for the relevance of task, which mirrors the inconclusive findings of previous studies that examined task as a determinant of the content of symbolic reputation management (Christensen and Lodge, 2018; Christensen and Gornitzka, 2018).

Last, we briefly discuss the findings for the control variables. First, organisational size significantly and positively affects the relevance of politicians in general, and of users and target groups, and interest groups. One explanation is that larger PSOs have more capacity to maintain relations with broader and more dispersed audiences such as political actors, target groups and interest groups. Yet from this perspective it is surprising that large organisations are not more likely than smaller organisations to perform reputation management to the media (though this finding echoes Fredriksson et al, 2015). Another explanation comes from the literature on agency termination, where recent studies indicate that organisational size, contrary to longstanding assumptions, might be related to a greater risk for being reorganised or even terminated (Corbett and Howard, 2017). In order to manage these risks,

bigger organisations might be more prone to perform reputation management towards broad political and external audiences to build networks of support. Second, environmental turbulence is positively related to the perceived relevance of the political principal. In a parliamentary system such as Flanders (Belgium), individual ministers are privileged actors in the governmental dealings with the bureaucracy. Our results tentatively suggest that PSOs distinguish between actors that have a close and direct influence on the *immediate survival* of the organisation during times of environmental turbulence (that is, political principal) versus actors that have a more *long-term impact* on the functioning of the organisation (that is, politicians and external stakeholders). We should stress, however, that environmental turbulence is an index of different perceptual measures drawn from the same survey as the dependent variable. Given the risk of common method bias, results should therefore be interpreted with care.

Conclusion

This study addressed the question which audiences matter for PSOs' reputation management. We theorised the role of two fundamental and puzzling organisational characteristics – formal-legal distance from government and primary task – and tested for their distinct effects when controlling for organisational size and environmental turbulence.

The strongest and broadest effects on the choice of audiences for reputation management were found for formal-legal distance, which is positively related to the perceived relevance of politicians in general and the media, and negatively related to the perceived relevance of the political principal. Although partial support was found for the orientation of policy-formulating organisations towards political audiences, overall the results show task had little effect on organisational behaviour. In contrast, organisational size had a significant effect on the reputation management towards politicians in general, users and target groups, and interest groups.

Our findings have several implications for scholars interested in reputation management and political-administrative relations. This study included a wide range of PSOs that vary in formal-legal distance from government and primary task. Our focus was not on the discursive (Maor et al, 2012; Gilad et al, 2013; Christensen and Lodge, 2018) or substantive (Moffitt, 2010; Maor and Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2015) content of reputation management, but on the stakeholder audiences that are deemed relevant by PSOs for reputation management. Our approach offers some advantages. The focus on distinct audiences can be compared across PSOs that differ in a series of characteristics, which is important in a field that lacks cross-case studies (Maor, 2015). Furthermore, given that the animating concept of a reputation-based account of PSOs is that of audience (Carpenter and Krause, 2012: 27), understanding variations in the relative importance of audiences for reputation management is crucial.

We call upon future research to advance on this study and to address the limitations of the present article. First, our findings are based on cross-sectional data. While ideal for comparing differences between organisations at a fixed point in time, our analysis could not shed light on time effects. Future research might further illuminate how PSOs target different audiences at different points in time. Furthermore, some data are self-reported and collected through the same questionnaire. To reduce the likelihood of having common method bias (CMB), information on the formal-legal status of the organisation, organisational size and task has been verified by the authors by

examining official sources. As we cannot fully exclude the possibility of CMB, results should be interpreted with care.

Second, our focus on the Flemish (Belgian) case raised some interesting insights in a field of study dominated by cases based on the United States and its separation of powers system, where PSOs are controlled by at least three formal political principals (Yesilkagit and van Thiel, 2012). While the Flemish government is comparable with fully-fledged nation states for the competences it was accorded, it also has properties that are not generally applicable, such as (a) the rather dominant power of political parties, and (b) the role of individual ministers as privileged actors in government dealings with the bureaucracy.

Third, the small (but representative) sample size of 41 PSOs prohibited us from testing the likelihood of certain interaction effects, or from adding detailed variables that tap into more fine-grained differences in task (for instance, including secondary tasks) or structure (for instance, delving deeper into the composition of governing boards).

Fourth, we opted to distinguish between five audiences that are sufficiently generic and meaningful for all PSOs. Future reputation studies could also focus on more detailed audience descriptions in more homogenous research contexts (for example, agencies within the same policy domain). Doing so would also allow to unpack some of the audiences. For instance, Wilson (1989) categorises organisations based on their interest group environment as he distinguishes between client politics (dominant interest group favouring a PSO's goals), entrepreneurial politics (dominant interest group hostile to a PSO's goals), and interest group politics (two rival interest groups in conflict over a PSO's goals). The latter group is particularly interesting from a reputation management perspective as it poses both opportunities for reputation management to pick and choose elements from both rival sides, but also challenges as competing ideas will lead most organisational actions to be criticised by one side or another: '*The EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] also gets heavy political flak. If it fails to approve the use of a pesticide, committees representing farmers attack it; if it does approve the pesticide, other committees representing environmentalists attack it*' (Wilson, 1989: 85). Sharon Gilad (2008) also addresses the question of how organisations with ambiguous mandates resolve tensions between the demands of their environments. She argues that the Financial Ombudsman Service's role articulation intended to enhance the PSO's autonomy to act on behalf of consumers, while maintaining industry support and cooperation. Furthermore, this specific articulation served to highlight their distinctiveness from the courts and other (semi-) regulatory organisations. Future reputation-based studies should continue to unpack the audiences that influence, and are influenced by, PSOs, since managing the perceptions of diverse sets of audiences goes to the heart of reputation management.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Note

¹ To complement these robustness tests, we also performed a reduced model estimation. The results remained unchanged. Analyses are available upon request.

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