

MODINET
Center for Media and Democracy in the Network Society

MODINET is a research project with the purpose of developing an innovative interdisciplinary research agenda investigating the effects of globalization and the new media culture in politics and democracy as well as the effects on the traditional media institutions and every day life in the information and network society.

The MODINET project is funded by the Danish Research Agency. Activities formally commenced in September 2002 and will conclude by September 2005

**Niche Nursing Political Networks:
Priming and Framing before Spinning**

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Working paper no. 9, 2004
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Print: Det Samfundsvidenskabelige Reprocenter
University of Copenhagen

ISBN 87-91394-08-2

Niche Nursing Precedes Spin Doctoring

The news media often presents the political public sphere as an arena where powerful elites wrestle before a passive public. Power is portrayed as an attribute of wealth and status out of reach of the powerless masses. From these premises spring the equation of the administration of political authority with the undemocratic abuse of power. This perception of power creates the foundation for conspiracy theories where inherently undemocratic special interests, with help from their well-paid henchmen, systematically manipulate and work against the common interest.

The emergence of 'spin doctors' can be interpreted as the latest 'villain' of this tradition. Spectacular circumstances in the USA and UK are chosen to illustrate the use of strategic public sphere communications as pure manipulation, which then is presented as an extreme departure from the ideals of fairness and transparency in the democratic decision making process. The question is: Can one conclude from this the common claim that the public sphere in general is in decay?

The Department of Journalism at the University of Southern Denmark has made a systematic analysis of political journalism from 1999-2003, partly financed by MODINET, in order to shed light upon this issue. This database makes it possible to register patterns that could remain hidden to the third party analysis of individual cases and spectacular election campaigns (Lund, 2002; Jønsson & Larsen, 2002).

Our systematic content analysis of newspapers, radio and television shows that in Denmark there are more or less professional attempts to manipulate the news and creation of public opinion. But the examination of the data also shows that effective spin doctoring, as we know it from the American and British arena, is the exception and not the rule in Danish politics. On the other hand there is the widespread use of the techniques that are referred to in the English language literature as *framing* and *priming* (Goidel, 1997; Jochen, 2002) which together we shall examine as *niche nursing*. Our thesis is that only when these techniques are strategically mastered shall political actors be able to 'doctor' journalists and other salient parts of public opinion networks.

This point of view does not premise a conspiratorial claim that journalists or other members of the news media are systematically abusing power or privilege. The point is that political networks do not produce and maintain themselves. People actively construct and choose newsworthy aspects in an environment where they influence each other. This occurs with communicative initiatives and involuntary events as raw materiel, which is processed with the help of professional tools and work routines. Newsworthy materiel is collected or created and then edited by more or less professional actors. But "making news" is not necessarily the same as "faking news" (Gans, 1980; Golding & Elliott, 1979). With the unlimited supply of events and initiatives occurring in the political arena it is necessary to sort and choose. Proactive *niche nursing* in political practice is therefore more important than reactive *spin doctoring*: Triage – via priming and framing - precedes spinning public opinion.

Prime verb trans **1** to put (something, especially a pump) into working order by filling or charging it with something, especially a liquid: *to prime a pump with water*. **2** to apply a first coat, e.g. of paint or oil, to (a surface), especially in preparation for painting. **3** to give (somebody) instructions beforehand; to prepare (them). **4** to prepare (a firearm or charge) for firing by supplying with priming or a primer. (The New Penguin English Dictionary, 2000)

Priming

Just as a professional painter cleans and primes a surface before painting the communications strategist must prepare his 'surface' (materiel and audience) before applying the final coat - at least if the goal is to have a message that 'covers and holds'.

Priming in political communication concerns first and foremost an attempt to define the premises that makeup the foundation for strategic debate (McCombs, 1997; Norris, 2000). In parliamentary circles Christiansborg-jargon refers to this as 'the soil is fertilized' or 'the rank in file is under oath'. Where elected politicians and the media are preoccupied with the parliamentary give and take, our interview data shows that a large part of the voting public is clearly more interested in questions of political identity, such as refugees and immigration - issues that have been taboo for a dominant portion of the political community.

While the professional actors are busy painting their political visions on the public agenda the audience is networking in the form of unauthorized *priming*. To maintain a cooperative and effective working environment it is therefore critically important that elected politicians and civil servants realistically address controversial issues and make use of strategic communication. Strategic communication concerns not only efforts to profile a message but requires that the pulse of the public be monitored to anticipate the mood of the public.

In a modern network society the audience plays an active interpretive role. One place this finds expression, at least for a small articulate group, is in letters-to-the-editor. Though it cannot be posited that these letters reflect the opinion of the general public, our data shows that it is politically unprofessional to ignore tendencies expressed by this segment of public opinion.

For example, our analysis shows, that in the period from 1999-2001, it was via letters-to-the-editor that a breakthrough was created for "politically incorrect" viewpoints in the debate surrounding refugees and immigration. Up until that period this type of expression was limited to marginal grey areas such as hate sites on the Internet. Towards the end of the 1990's editors in the news media chose to - thru a more or less systematic process - give space to viewpoints that were critical of ethnic minorities. This enabled a politically marginal group to - over time - set the agenda for issues that were central to the parliamentary decision making process.

The presentation of an issue thru the news media by an authoritative source with politically correct arguments does not necessarily result in a corresponding effect among political decision makers. Critical segments of the public can be considered niches in public opinion. These niches can in turn exert proactive powers of definition. From the fall of 1999 it was legitimate to politically debate the administration of immigration laws. By that means the silence was broken and its effect on the following election in 2001 was decisive.

Strategic public sphere communications, in political journalism, concerns to a high degree defining, which issues politically correct decision makers should address. Participation in this definition struggle was once limited to amateurs in the political parties and special interest organisations. They often had party faithful newspapers at their disposal while requirements

of fairness for the electronic media attempted to guarantee equal access for all legitimate viewpoints.

Now the playing field is totally different. The media is dominated by competition - which is not necessarily free and certainly not equal. If one is unable to present opinions and issues in a understandable and newsworthy manner then it is by in large impossible to influence the political agenda. This development has led just about all the political actors in Denmark (and the countries we normally compare ourselves to) to engage professional consultants for media and communications.

This professionalisation of political communication engenders mixed reactions from the Danish public. A large majority believes that democracy is strengthened when the media is made independent from the political parties. But only about half of those asked agree or partially agree to the statement: "When political parties hire professional media consultants so politicians can handle the media better democracy is strengthened". Approximately just as many disagree. 75 per cent of journalists and two thirds of the decision makers disagree with that statement.

Political amateurism gets high marks when both journalists and their authoritative sources discuss "spindoctoring" in general. However in practice amateur and self taught party politicians find conditions difficult among a primed media public. Journalists in the daily news media work from the premise that ideology (in the form of the greater political narrative) is dead and without authority. Despite this political viewpoints on well known issues are routinely identified on the traditional left/right scale, which then are set upon the political agenda in sharp competition with spectacular cases and impertinent personal stories.

The political dependence on publicised opinions contributes to a situation where the agenda of decision makers is influenced by a whirlwind of conflicts with many tradeoffs among various participants. In this milieu the journalist routinely distinguishes between those who possess power and the powerless: Political actors who are perceived as possessing power receive harder treatment than the so-called "ordinary people", who are perceived as the victims of power.

In the struggle over the political agenda, a key element of the political *priming* process becomes the ability to make so called "ordinary people" or "powerless victims" available to the news media to illustrate problems and their potential solutions. In this manner authoritative and institutional actors can manage chosen political niches, for example marginalized voters, vocal consumer groups and potential coalition partners.

A wide range of devices and techniques are used to these ends: opinion polls, focus groups, and public hearings are widely referred to. Critics claim that elected officials no longer exercise political leadership, but instead only function as passive followers of articulated opinion. This is not necessarily the outcome - especially if authoritative decision makers base their analysis on focused strategic *framing*.

Frame verb trans **1** to place (a picture) in a frame **2a** to plan or work (something) out, to formulate (it): *A committee is already at work framing a bill to legalize cannabis.* **b** to shape or construct (something). **3** to fit or adjust (something) for a purpose; to arrange (it). (The New Penguin English Dictionary, 2000)

Framing

Effective network communications may be based on the long held tradition where competing actors in a democratic society have a stake and differing possibilities to take part. For all

practical purposes only a limited number of political actors participate in the struggle to define premises for the political agenda. The impact of a 'primed' viewpoint depends to a high degree upon the networked contexts in which competing claims and proposals are 'framed' (Entman, 1993; Reese, 2001).

Framing connotes more or less what Danish journalistic jargon calls "*at vinkle en historie*": to put a specific angle on a story. Those who can successfully provide the context to a message can exert political influence on the audience's impression by containing and shaping their own and other actor's initiatives. Media professionals consider this activity the essence of the craft of editing. Journalists regard attempts by authoritative sources to frame their message as misplaced meddling while they consider their own angling as apolitical (Rich, 1997).

Recent Danish research (Hjarvard, 1999; Pedersen, 2000), demonstrates that the mass media, independent of the influence of political parties, have framed and angled the political debate since the 1970's. This bending in Danish politics has gradually morphed from party-political one-sidedness to a journalistic homogeneity that can be predicted (and manipulated) by professional strategists. At the same time the battle to maintain the attention of the media has become essential to gain and maintain political power. This can be achieved by presenting issues in a way where one's own viewpoints are in harmony with accepted journalistic frames of reference.

From this perspective the strategic use of *framing* is an important element of modern "campaign-democracy" (Carlsen, 1999), where groups of decision makers are constantly struggling to promote their own special interests (often presented as common interests) in the constant battle for public attention. To make oneself heard in the political debate one must be able to establish the relevance of the issue to the public. Even the most spectacular story can wither away in silence if the authoritative experts of *framing* choose to ignore it to death (Noelle-Neuman, 1994).

"Well informed sources report" was a commonly used phrase when *Pressens Radioavis* (Public Service Radio News) was Denmark's primary alternative to the party controlled written press. Today the constellation of power is rather less simple. If an institution in the news media defines a case as a question of national economy and equality of the distribution of material wealth then the news media institution loyally follows the government and parliamentary majority after the motto: "A responsible finance policy requires..." In this environment bureaucrats and economic sages enjoy high status, while statements from special interest groups are met with far greater scepticism.

On the other hand, when it comes to issues that rest upon conflicting values and attitudes, such as environmental issues, special interest organisations command more respect. The constellation of authority is much more fluid when these issues are on the agenda. Many different actors can offer newsworthy angles in connection to this sort of theme. These conditions provide the news institutions greater political elbowroom in the editing process even when some political decision makers disparagingly refer to the pundits as "flag bearers of the worry-industry".

When we come to issues of political identity, for example, the European Union, or ethnic minorities, the constellation of authority becomes more complicated. In the end it is the public, in the roll as citizen and voter, that defines who can act on behalf of the community's "we", and who is cast in the dissident roll as "the other". In practice, opinion polling and letters-to-the-editor become an important journalistic proving ground when clarifying the myriad of us/them-conflicts which present news making institutions with so many difficulties in the 'angling' process.

Generally conflicts make good stories. Trustworthy public sphere communications require some degree of political consensus. If a political actor can convince elements of the trendsetting news media that his or her "frame" is more "politically correct" or "progressive" than the opponents, then this actor can be assured that, all things being equal, his or her argument will enjoy more exposure.

Public and private interest groups negotiate behind closed doors while activists among the public express their demands and make the media aware of their everyday problems. Influence is exerted upon the political agenda through administrative and extra-parliamentary means. Losers in this game are the large national parties (Antorini, 2001; Krogh), who had heretofore ideologically "framed" formation of public opinion, in both the parliamentary apparatus and in the news media, through their symbiotic debate.

This is not to say that journalistic "angling" and political frames of reference are completely incidental or can be chosen independently of a political network. Making an impression in the public debate depends upon traditional values such as legitimacy and reputation. Neither members of the media nor the audience at large assign all political actors the same trustworthiness in the public debate. Visibility is therefore a crucial political asset (Thompson, 2001), but exposure in the media is and will continue to be a risky enterprise.

In the end trustworthiness can only be measured among the audience. Professional opinion-leaders therefore work with a strategic, long-term approach when profiling issues and key actors. This activity is best summed up as "ethos" (Femø, 2000:186-192), which in political communication can be understood as a combination of legitimacy and reputation.

Strategic influence can result in enhancing one's own reputation, or by weakening your opponent's. Poul Nyrup Rasmussen's reputation was definitively "framed" by the reaction to broken election vows in the so-called 'redundancy-case'. Even though the initiative was taken off the table the damage was done. Prime Minister Nyrup Rasmussen lost a significant part of his own and the Government's credibility. At the same time the opposition leader, Fogh Rasmussen, worked systematically to shed his image as the 'caveman' of the minimal state. Both had a considerable influence on the result of the parliamentary election in 2001. This also marks a watershed in how one can communicate about changes in the welfare system in Danish politics.

But reputation alone is not enough. Political actors must also be able to legitimise their position under conditions that go beyond their own personal traits and trustworthiness. One must act 'politically responsibly', as it is said at Christiansborg. It is not enough to say one is elected and enjoys the mandate of the people. One must also show respect for the parliamentary rules-of-the-game, a relevant expertise, and consistency of argument. Legitimacy is not only associated to people, but also to institutions. Political actors gain authority by approving and rejecting current norms. But there are limits to how far one can diverge from traditional values such as freedom, equality and community (Lund, 2002: 20-24).

The struggle for reputation and legitimacy means by in large that modern news production is marked by a paradox: On the one hand news journalists appear autonomous and unregulated. News institutions can, apparently independently, "frame" their heroes and villains. That is the description that typically appears in the media critique. On the other hand the news media is portrayed as being heavily dependent upon sources and a paying public – i.e. dominated by external forces. That is the perception that many of those who practice journalism experience everyday: News media can strengthen or downplay certain aspects of the political reality, but this occurs within the framework of the actor's tradition, reputation, and legitimacy.

On solemn occasions the mass media is referred to as the "watchdog of democracy" which tirelessly exerts critical control over society's power elite on behalf of the powerless masses.

From the standpoint of strategic *framing* the news media plays the role of the “community sheep dog” which maintains order among the networking masses in close cooperation with primers from authoritative elites (Donehue, 1995).

Nurse verb trans **1** to tend (e.g. a sick person) **2** to suckle **3** to rear or nurture **4** to attempt to cure **5** to hold lovingly or caressingly **6** to hold or handle carefully **7** to hold (a drink), drinking it slowly **8** to nourish and promote the growth of (a plant etc.) **9** to harbour (a feeling) in one’s mind **10** to attend to the needs or whims of (a person) to keep their goodwill **11** in billiards, to play shots that keep (the balls) together (The New Penguin English Dictionary, 2000)

Nursing

With priming and framing as a strategic context for political communication, the spinning of public opinion can be regarded as food chains in an ecosystem where networkers with varied interests create political niches. It is therefore hardly realistic to refer to the political public sphere in the singular (Schudson, 1995). The political ecosystem more precisely consists of public sphere segments – niches – that are managed by more or less professional communicators in their struggle to influence salient aspects of a common, public agenda (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999).

A niche in ecology theory is a (w)hole in a (w)hole, where a limited number of tenants can coexist in mutual dependency (Smith & Varzi, 1999). A niche, in the political sense, is not a position that is freely chosen. In practice the expectations of other actors can enhance or limit an individual’s ability to shift position and care for his or her niche interests. Political actors may enhance their communicative effectiveness or weaken each other through network-conflicts nursing their niches by priming, framing and spinning.

By regarding a political public sphere as a network of niches we shift our communicative focus from the dichotomy powerful/powerless in the direction of mutual dependency in ecological networks: Where power is exercised opposing power is simultaneously provoked. The ecological balance is rarely static. Practical politics is more aptly described as networks of unstable relations between social actors who (to a greater or lesser degree) manage their special interests within and between niches - thereby constituting salient issues of a public sphere.

Ecologically speaking, strategic communication in the public sphere is performed whenever networks are managed among hunters, foragers, and prey. By shifting the focus from society as a whole, the niche-perspective accentuates strategic communication as a dynamic function central to the analysis of the practice of managing the media. In order to perform effective *niche nursing* networking actors must understand the editing practices performed by competing interests.

From this ecological perspective the arrangement of political actors does not rest upon a static left-wing/right-wing scale. Conflicts within niches and coalitions of niches are as essential to survival and influence as the traditional antagonism between given power positions. The Press Lodge of the Danish Parliament may serve as an illustrative example of a significant niche routinely nursing political networks – and simultaneously (as the lodge moniker implies) the journalists themselves are being niche nursed by their political sources.

For most practical purposes an elite of ministers and leading party politicians together with the Press Lodge journalists prime and frame the national political agenda. Opinion forming definitions and premises are not chosen exclusively by journalists. This is a result of niche nursing. Preconceived notions of legitimacy and the actor’s reputation exert a considerable influence upon the spinning of the daily news flow.

Many elected and appointed officials still believe that journalists should loyally relate what authoritative sources want to inform the public. They may present themselves as representatives of the public sphere, but actually represent mere niches of the larger political system. News media function as connective nurses among networks of special interest segments. In present day Denmark authoritative decision makers have few party-loyal media organs at their disposal. In spite of authoritative unease, professional journalists are recognised as an independent factor in political power equations (Adamsen, 1998; Bro, 1998; Jørgensen, 1997; Kjølner, 2001; Thulesen Dahl, 2001).

Instead of the party controlled media of the past we may refer to media nursed parties that depend upon journalistic attention in order to do communicative governance. In so doing the news media constitute a public sphere by proxy (Lund, 2001). Evaluating practical niche nursing we may consider the proxy public sphere as a normative framework for legitimate exercise of political power – not as a political reality. The fact that networks of niches are neither an open nor an equally accessible space, however, does not necessarily prove to be a sign of democratic decay – if it is still possible to promote and discuss political interests across institutionalised borders of the political system.

The news media collectively play the role as a boundary-breaking network in Danish politics. From this perspective, developments in the media have not only created a basis for top-down manipulation. Changes in the character of public communications have also facilitated the bottom-up exercise of power. The very ethos of professional journalism makes the press more politically susceptible to unauthorised participants from niches at the fringes network society (Sørensen, 1997).

Instead of making spin doctoring a badge of dishonour in the political debate, it seems more appropriate to speak of niche nursing as a necessary tool to establish and maintain dialog in a fractionated network society. In as much as political activity is divided in segments of interest, the mass mediating news providers function as diligent bridge builders. While journalists maintain their ideal of political independence, it is unavoidable that authoritative (and protesting) niche actors make use of strategic communications in their attempts to set the public agenda.

In these strategic games, it is essential to make other actors participate in your political efforts. It is not enough to present some new information. It must be possible for others than the story's originator to confirm and follow up on facts and opinions. Editorial routines, characterized by a peaceful competition and niche nursing, maintain an orderly calm in the proxy public sphere:

- Only a small part of the initiatives and actions that affect the authoritative distribution of values are covered by the news media, in spite of a high degree of journalistic productivity.
- A large amount of those political events that are in fact covered end up as solo-nolo stories that are not processed by the news institution as a whole. This is especially true of local issues.
- The few issues that receive coverage by various news media are covered with a high degree of homogeneity. This is especially true of national issues.
- Authoritative initiatives, emanating first and foremost from Danish ministers, are crucial for the coverage of international relations, for example the EU, which is only to a limited degree afforded continuous coverage in the Danish news media.

In journalistic practice, one can hide a great deal by setting focus on relatively minor details. In that sense *niche nursing* can be said to obscure by disclosure. By such means one can define which situations require political regulation and conversely those that should remain private or receive tacit acceptance. Journalists and their authoritative sources undoubtedly practice *spinning*, as they themselves are also influenced by external *priming* and *framing*.

The results of effective *niche nursing* are greater when the majority of media actors react to the same agenda or when journalists universally omit discussion of certain events or alternative political themes. The result of communicative power play is neither accidental nor pre-ordained. In the end it is the audience as news consumers that define the premises for the choice of the political news themes that are relevant to public opinion forming (Jensen, 1998).

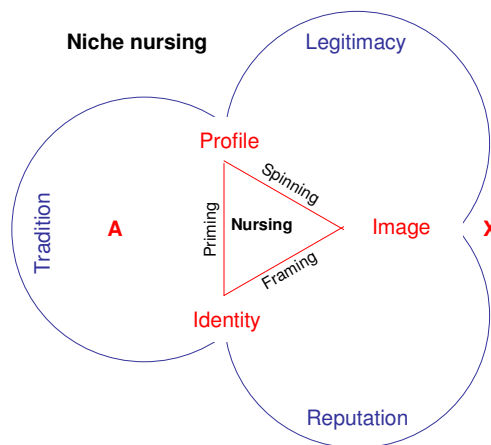
This puts limits to the management of political influence understood as *niche nursing*: Journalist and editors can only with exception determine what the public should believe. But the news media can to a great degree determine what political authorities should consider. Our data shows that this is rarely a case of coercion or absolute dominance. As a rule strategic communication is integrated in the routine decision making process on the basis of accepted premises. This is characterised by reciprocal interplay among the competing actors. One must therefore be careful not to draw an unambiguous picture of the placement and direction of power relations.

Spin verb 1a to revolve rapidly, to whirl **b** said of wheels: to revolve rapidly without gripping, e.g. in mud or wet grass **c** said of a ball: to revolve in the air and deviate from a straight line on bouncing **d** to have the sensation of spinning, to reel **2a** to draw out or twist fibre into yarn or thread **b** said of a spider or silkworm or insect **3a** said of an aircraft: to fall in a spin **b** to plunge helplessly out of control **4** to fish with a spinner **verb trans 1a** to cause (something to revolve rapidly **b** to project (a ball) so that it revolves in the air and deviates from a straight line on bouncing **2a** to draw out and twist (fibre) into yarn or threads **b** to produce (yarn or thread) by drawing out and twisting a fibrous material **3** to form (e.g. a web or cocoon) by spinning. **4** to shape (something) into threadlike form in manufacture, or to manufacture (something) by a whirling process **5** to spin-dry (clothes) **6** to compose and tell (a usu long involved tale) **7 informal** to present (information, news, etc.) in a way that highlights certain aspects of it and creates an impression favourable to a particular political party, politician, or other organization or individual [Old English *spinnan*] (The New Penguin English Dictionary, 2000)

Spinning

We shall conclude that niche based nursing *frames* actions facilitating strategic *spinning* of media events. As a rule the perspective that is created in the editing process is conditioned by the political actors' proactive *priming*. Routine journalistic processes then take over in what may be regarded as journalistic food chains nursing networks of niche actors constitution an ecological whole – normatively referred to as “the public sphere” or “the agenda” (Lund, 2002).

Within this frame of reference we shall claim that political actors (A) *nurse* their *niches* by producing news worthy material coexisting in an environment with journalists and other political animals. Whether or not a concrete input successfully influences the public agenda depends to a high degree upon the tradition said actor is enrolled- through previous practice in the field - and upon the reputation the actor has built up, as well as the legitimacy that can be appealed to by participating in a given decision making process.



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With the objective to make an impression upon a chosen part of the audience (X) many public and private organisations employ professional media consultants or create public relations departments to manage the images and impressions which (X) receive. But in a niche-based network society there are no effective means to seduce a public. Drawing their inspiration from advertising, most political actors rely upon systematic *branding*. This should secure coherence between the outward image and identity the actor has built up as well as the profile one intends to express to the outside world (Nielsen, 2000).

Branding, however, in the traditional sense rarely suffices in political communication because journalists as professional communicators are especially critical of commercial sources and watchful when they encounter traditional advertising techniques. The degree of scepticism depends on current expectations related to the communicator's tradition, legitimacy and reputation. In sum this produces a public image that may be challenged or acknowledged via journalistic surveillance. It takes long term nursing to profile a given identity into a credible brand, and in spite of valiant efforts yesterday's hero can be transformed into tomorrow's villain.

Ideological connections, for example an impressive track record of a political party, cannot in the long run secure a high profile public sphere image. Political identity relies to a great extent upon a systematic priming and framing and cannot be reduced to a question of manipulative spinning. In the end it boils down to trust (Bordum & Wenneberg, 2001). There must be a reasonable degree of harmony between a communicator's image, profile and identity.

Professional communications efforts can to some degree control and manipulate profile. But the legitimacy and reputation of identity is difficult to manage strategically. One can derive sociological inspiration from Goffman (1963 & 1971), who sharply differentiates personal and social identity. Consultants in the field of media management have tried to achieve a sense of control by psychologising social identity. But recent research (Schultz and others 2000) reveals problems with that approach and recommends relational nursing of communicative identities in the interplay of image and organisation culture. As long as niche nurses are unable to effectively manipulate social identity they are hampered in their efforts to frame and spin (Linneman & Stranton, 1991).

Another frustration for niche nurses is that political activity is not considered a lofty enterprise by journalists or by the greater part of the audience (X). Authoritative status is no longer a direct result of a democratic mandate, or as the representative of a special interest. In the modern network society authority is more likely connected to the role of the expert (Albæk and others 2002). The category "expert source" becomes a privileged though heterogeneous identity: It is far from clear what the expert in any given situation actually is expert in. Expertise, however, is usually legitimised via a tradition and reputation connected to a specific niche, for example an area of research, a profession, or a local community.

The role as "expert source" does not only include specialised experts, but all identities who manage to profile themselves as experts as a result of the political initiative of others. Add to this the fact that critical journalists seem to have a great deal of respect for niche-actors who do not seem to represent a political special interest. The normative ideals of a general civic and public interest persist as the premise for representative democracy. Public sphere theory remains the conceptual basis for the effective practice of niche nursing in relation to political news production, even though one may indeed question the existence of a public sphere as the factual foundation of the parliamentary procedures (Lund, 1999).

It is upon these normative premises that actors strategically struggle to improve their image in the news media by building up (or at least paying lip service to) a credible profile in the eye of the beholder. There is, however, no simple recipe for effective reputation management. The legitimacy of political action rests upon negotiable ideals of free speech before a well-educated public.

On the other hand, the formation of public opinion by niche-actors by means of news institutions is a far cry from the public sphere in the traditional sense of classical liberalism (Habermas, 1962). Consequently, there is still plenty of room for conspiracy theories while the news media habitually present the exercise of political power as a game for political gladiators wrestling before a passive audience of spectators.

In a modern network society of niches, however, there is neither an indisputable authority nor a stable mass public to be dominated by an institutionalised elite. The public agenda is influenced not only top-down but also bottom-up. Cast in unstable alliances political actors are priming and framing special interests as essential for the common good. High and low political actors make efforts to define which problems need (not) to be collectively acted upon. In such processes manipulative spin doctors may be calling the shots, but they have little political import without the proactive efforts performed by networking niche nurses.

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