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Minding the gap: Applying a service marketing model into government policy communications

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Abstract

In order to bolster the emerging but still underdeveloped conceptualization of public communication over potential policies, we apply a framework primarily used in business service marketing to improve service quality (“gap analysis”). We argue that this model has strong heuristic qualities that can alert practitioners who are interested in improving communication regarding potential policies. While we recognize problems implementing the model, we suggest some ways that both practitioners and the public ameliorate the identified issues. Seeing communication about potential policies as a crucial part of the political process, we argue that such efforts have democratic merit.

1.0 Introduction

This article deals with a specific kind of policy communication – communication about potential policy – which can be defined as a policy considered or adopted by, for example, a government, but that has not yet been adopted by a higher body such as the parliament.¹

The discussion of communication prior to policy adoption connects to a vast compendium of public policy process literature (e.g., [Parsons, 1995](#); [Weimer & Vining, 1999](#)), in which two main visions on policies can be distinguished: the analytical vision ([Hoogerwerf & Herweijer, 2003](#)) and the political vision ([Lindblom & Woodhouse, 1993](#); [Kingdon, 1995](#)). According to the analytical vision, a policy process can be seen as a cycle of subsequent phases in which problems are solved (agenda setting, policy formulation, policy adoption, policy implementation, policy evaluation). According to the political vision, policies are continuously formulated and are subject to continuous discussion. We will demonstrate that communication issues pervade both the analytical and political views of policy formulation.²

Public communication about potential policies is important for a variety of reasons. For instance, an empirical study published by [Kleinnijenhuis and van Hoof \(2006\)](#) showed that public satisfaction with the government is increased more by the communication of ambitions (potential policies) than by the communication of results (implemented policies). In another empirical study, [Kampen, van de Walle, Maddens, and Bouckaert \(2005\)](#) concluded that a “lack of transparency” (secrecy, falsification, spin, etc.) is a major impetus for citizens' criticism of government. Furthermore, misperceptions by government and citizens lead to confusion between potential policies, real policies, and faulty implementation as demonstrated by several surveys (i.e., [Gelders, 2005a,b](#)). According to [Thijs \(2004\)](#), citizens expect more

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and more from government and they are inclined to compare the service delivery in the public and private sector. Ringeling (1993) claims that the negative image of government has more to do with the manner by which citizens evaluate the government than by the government's actual public performance. According to Ringeling, when evaluating governments, citizens tend to focus too much on negative aspects and have high expectations, which do not take into account the peculiar challenges governments face. National governments also find themselves in a new situation where other actors – e.g., the media, multinationals, and public actors at supranational/local levels – have increased their power. Bovens, Derksen, Witteveen, Becker, and Kalma (1995) called this phenomenon the “move of politics.” As policies cannot always be delivered and some problems are inadequately solved (due to a variety of reasons: lack of autonomy, conflicts of competence, supranational interferences, rules, and practical burdens), politicians will typically focus on their good intentions (Buurma, 2001; Huyse, 2003). While some research indicates that journalists look favorably upon communication about potential policies (Gelders, De Cock, Neijens & Roe, 2007), the practice may also draw criticism concerning politicians' attempt to “spin” the issues (Downes, 1998; Esser, Reinemann, & Fan, 2000; Palmer, 2000). While acknowledging that government public relations also has a “dark” side, we will suggest a model for ethical communication about potential policies.

Many scholars have pointed out that there is relatively little research on public sector communication (e.g., Graber, 2002; Lee, 2007; Liu & Horsley, 2007). Most scholars seem to agree that experiences from the private sector can be applicable to the public sector if scholars and practitioners pay attention to some of the specific peculiarities of the latter (Falcione & Adrian, 1997; Gelders, Bouckaert & van Ruler, 2007). Gelders et al. (2007) point to four characteristics of the public sector that distinguishes it from the private sector: a more complicated, unstable environment; additional legal and formal constraints; more rigid procedures; and more diverse products and objectives. While keeping these differences in mind, we will apply a business service model that is intended to increase customers' service satisfaction to public sector communication. While using the word “customer” in the public context, we are aware that there is debate on this issue in public administration literature (e.g., Osborne & Gaebler, 1993; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2003). Citizens can be seen as subjects (who are expected to obey the law), voters, customers, and participants in (interactive) policy-making processes. Although there are differences between the public and private sectors, we maintain that citizens also receive services such as health care and education and thus that the use of the “customers” concept is relevant in the public sector (e.g., Bouckaert & Thijs, 2003).

In order to bolster the emerging but still underdeveloped conceptualization of communication about potential policies, this paper more specifically aims to

- (1) apply a framework primarily used in business service marketing to improve service quality;
- (2) identify some problems practitioners may experience when attempting to implement this framework; and
- (3) draw normative conclusions looking both at what practitioners may do and what the public can do in order to improve public communication about potential policies.

The following section briefly discusses the concept of service before introducing the business service framework (“gap analysis model”).

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2.0 Service and service quality

Based on literature about “goods” and “services” (e.g., Bouckaert & Thijs, 2003), we consider the communication process about potential policies in the first instance as a service. The quality of service delivery strongly depends on customers' expectations and perceptions.

Services are intangible and short-lived: they are first “sold” (delivered) and then produced and consumed in nearly the same moment while goods are first produced, then sold (delivered) and finally consumed. Consequently, the role of the consumer in determining the output of the service delivery is important. Moreover, the consumer can be the source of his or her own dissatisfaction with service delivery. For example, the fact that citizens can be confused about the status of announced potential policies can partly be explained by their own role in the receiving process. People may believe their version of reality regardless of the clarity with which ministers or the media communicated the status of the potential policy. Services are immaterial – they have no material body or form – and thus, expectations about their consumption play an important role. Expectations are determined by several factors such as interpersonal communication, personal needs and experiences, and external communication about the service delivery. Each service results from the interaction between producers and consumers and is thus unique. Consequently, services are not standardized products. This implies that standardization and monitoring of services is complicated, a fortiori in a public sector characterized by political and media interference (Gelders et al., 2007).

The intangibility, heterogeneity, and shortness of service production and consumption imply a lack of objective yardsticks with which to measure the quality of service delivery organizations. Consequently, subjective customer value judgments are especially important. But, as Bouckaert and Vandeweyer (1999) state, “customers are not sufficiently able to formulate a proper judgment about the quality of the services delivered in all circumstances” (pp. 108–112, 276). In the case of communication about potential policies, there is a limited repetitive administrative process: it is mostly a whimsical, party political communication process in which politicians publish and reformulate their intentions.

3.0 Gap analysis

The gap analysis model shows why producers and consumers see quality in different ways and demonstrates the importance of expectations and perceptions in service delivery. The model offers a “gap analysis;” in other words, it provides a formal means of identifying and correcting gaps between desired and actual levels of performance (in this case communication about potential policies).

Kleinnijenhuis and van Hoof (2006) state, “From the point of view of the government, public information provision is the key to open the gateways to the general public... Satisfaction with the information on government policies is nevertheless one of the least studied variables in political communication” (p. 3). The gap analysis model of Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry (1990) helps to explain the lack of satisfaction towards services, which we will apply to public information about potential policies. The model maps five gaps (see Fig. 1). The final, or fifth, gap is the one that can occur between customers' expected and perceived service delivery.³ The consumer in this model is the citizen experiencing a gap between the expected service (what he/she expects of communication about potential policies) and the manner in which it is perceived. The producer is the government composed of

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ministers who communicate about potential policies and who often have political goals in mind. This central gap may be explained by the four possible preceding gaps.

We describe these four gaps and specifically argue what they may mean for communication about potential policies and the way in which the gaps may be bridged. In order to specify the characteristics of these gaps we use several kinds of data in this overview paper. First we use indications from specific (but limited) research on communication about potential policies, for example, the Dutch audience study and media analysis from Kleinnijenhuis and van Hoof (2006), and our own surveys among Belgian citizens and spokespersons (Gelders, 2005c; Gelders, De Cock, Neijens & Roe, 2007). Second, we present some other empirical studies on broader issues such as opinion polls and their media coverage in order to give insight into how gaps might be bridged (e.g., Sonck & Loosveldt, 2007). Third, we use ideas from literature on the quality of government information and ethical guidelines in public relations (e.g., Seeger, 1997; Scholten, 2002; Terrill, 1994), which are fruitful in elaborating our arguments.

3.1. Gap 1: Expected service vs. management perceptions of customer expectations

Gap 1 refers to the difference between the customers' expected service delivery and the management perceptions of customer expectations. Gelders (2005c) interviewed government communication professionals on their practices and opinions vis-à-vis communicating about policy intentions. More specifically, he interviewed the spokespersons of Belgian ministers keep in office and the spokespersons of the Belgian central departments (groups of civil servants working in a non-partisan manner). Applying this to public communication about policy intentions, Gelders (2005c) concluded that spokespersons of Belgian ministers and departments have no idea what kind of information citizens would like regarding potential policies, the preferred format (i.e., state of the unions, policy letters of individual ministers, trial balloons), how often citizens would like to be informed about these issues, or how the message is formulated (are citizens offended by messages that do not communicate the status of the policy issue within the policy-making process?). Speaking about the timing of such communication, several spokespersons pointed out contradictions: "Citizens sometimes state that policies are implemented too fast even if you have announced them a year in advance" and "If you keep something quiet for a long period, then they [citizens] will complain that they are put up against the wall. But if you say it long beforehand, then they will state: 'Why are they saying this now?'" (Gelders, 2005c, p. 248).

As far as we know, Kleinnijenhuis and van Hoof (2006) and Gelders (2005c) are the only scholars who have studied the reception of public communication regarding policy intentions and results. Based on a survey of approximately 1000 Dutch citizens and a media content analysis, Kleinnijenhuis and van Hoof (2006) rejected the hypothesis that "the more attention an issue receives in the news, the more satisfied citizens will be with the government information regarding that issue" (p. 18). They admit that in today's age of the media, silence is not feasible with journalists and communication advisors everywhere, but they also state that "governments seem to have forgotten when 'speech is silver, but silence is gold'" (Kleinnijenhuis & van Hoof, 2006, p. 22). They confirmed the hypothesis that "the less ambiguous the news regarding policy plans of the government with respect to an issue are, the more satisfied citizens will be with the government information" (Kleinnijenhuis & van Hoof, 2006, p. 6). According to them, people do not like pointless information that is typical of

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coalition governments in multi-party systems, in which “ongoing negotiations and negotiation outcomes often result in ambiguous and contradictory statements from the parties involved” (p. 18).

This contradicts what Gelders (2005c) found in two surveys among 700 and 800 Belgian citizens. About 70% of the respondents clearly appreciated the several, although sometimes contradictory statements, from politicians about potential policies. This result is at odds with the frequent statements from leading journalists and politicians during this same period, which express that citizens dislike the current practices and prefer to be informed only about policy decisions and clear policy intentions.⁴

Thus, based on the research findings, one cannot deduce what citizens expect from public communication about potential policies. However, knowing this is important as the first gap indicated in the model significantly influences the final customer satisfaction (Bouckaert & Vandeweyer, 1999). In addition to the limited research results mentioned above, other factors can also explain the faults in “management perception” including poor marketing research, too many management levels, or failure to implement two-way communication systems. Additional audience analysis as recommended by Garnett (1992) would provide much of this information.

In order to gain better insight into how much information, what type of information, and through which communication style citizens wish to receive information about potential policies, politicians may focus on several kinds of formal and informal “market intelligence” techniques such as opinion polls, citizens' complaints, conversations with individual citizens, and intermediary organizations. One should carefully interpret the marketing intelligence techniques and results if they intend to bridge the first gap as such techniques are difficult. We illustrate this complexity by looking at how the media uses opinion polls.

Today's politicians are constantly campaigning (Norris, 2000), and thus opinion polls are used frequently. Good scores in such polls are often seen as an indication of citizens' appreciation for the politician's communication style. For example, in 2007, Belgian opposition leader Yves Leterme did better in the polls than then-Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt; this was interpreted by many political analysts as a sign that people did not like Verhofstadt's communication style, which included many public communications about potential policies. The strong results for Leterme were considered to be a call for more realism in politics as he was known for his more cautious and closed communication style.

Sonck and Loosveldt (2007) argue that the media plays an important role in constructing a certain image of public opinion, but they acknowledge the media does not always do a good job. According to Brettschneider (as cited in Sonck & Loosveldt, 2007), media coverage does not consider the opinions measured by polls as exploratory variables of underlying attitudes or behavior. Poll results are primarily used because of their news value. Sonck and Loosveldt (2007) conclude that the Dutch-speaking media in Belgium do not take its responsibility to correctly interpret polls seriously and do not (correctly) inform the public about methodological deficiencies. Billiet (2000) criticized the existence of several problematic and contradicting poll results. He concluded that small and superficial changes are often blown out of proportion and that the margins of error are often larger than the changes. Thus, it is concluded that less but better polling techniques are needed to help bridge the first gap.

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3.2. Gap 2: Management perceptions of customer expectations vs. service quality specifications

Gap 2 deals with the differences between management perception and service quality specifications and begs the question: “What specific criteria for good communication must be met when communicating about potential policies?”. Customers' wishes may not be translated correctly into detailed product specifications. Some believe wishes cannot be formulated with specific standards, but this statement is contested by [Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry \(1990\)](#) who argue that a lack of involvement of the management is the cause for poor service quality specification.

[Gelders \(2005a\)](#) analyzed a series of quality criteria (e.g., factuality, completeness, and timeliness) for communication that governments integrated in legal and deontological stipulations about public communication regarding potential policies in several countries. These criteria cover acceptable principles but are insufficiently operationalized like many governmental guidelines ([Terrill, 1994](#)). It is hard to determine the quality of “specific information for specific use,” or the so-called “applied information quality,” which is a judgment on information quality that is made by particular persons in a specific situational context and based on the characteristics of this information. Each of the three assessment elements may influence the outcome ([Bradley, 1998](#)). Other authors, such as [Graber \(2002\)](#), stress that the assessment of the quality of information is highly subjective and that it is difficult to set up objective evaluation standards that measure the quality of information for all variables.

Besides the fact that politicians or their advisors should be informed about the relevant criteria for good communication and the difficulties of operationalizing these criteria, there is also another problem: the apparent lack of willingness on the part of politicians to formulate criteria. Most civil servant communication professionals interviewed by [Gelders \(2005c\)](#) stated they cannot imagine ministers or the personal ministerial spokespersons writing a deontological code stipulating criteria for good communication about potential policies given the strategic party political importance of such communication. Some of the civil servants added that it is not their duty to write such a code, and that if they did, the code would be “too strict” in the eyes of the personal spokespersons of the ministers ([Gelders, 2005c](#), p. 243). These results suggest a difference in opinion about the quality criteria for good communication about potential policies between communication professionals. There seems to be a lack of willingness to operationalize the service delivery of communicating about potential policies.

3.3. Gap 3: Service quality specification vs. service delivery

Gap 3 refers to the difference between the quality specifications of service delivery and the service delivery itself. Ministers cannot or do not want to reach the specified quality criteria. Ministers must not only know what customers expect (see Gap 1) and must specify this into clear standards (see Gap 2), but they also need to realize these standards. Based on interviews with (personal) ministerial spokespersons, [Gelders \(2005c\)](#) concluded that they evaluate their own practice as being far from ideal. They call criteria such as complete and factual communication extremely important but admit that they do not often meet such criteria in practice. One of them stated: “We do not explicitly explain in which stage of the policy-

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making process the issue is situated (like it is now treated in Parliament etc.). Why? Because otherwise people will think that the policy will never be adopted. We will not consciously give disinformation, but we do not pay explicit attention to such criteria” (Gelders, 2005c, pp. 264–266). Scoring political points is often so important that even if governments stipulate strict conditions for communication about potential policies, they do not follow such stipulations.

3.4. Gap 4: Customer service delivery vs. external communication

Gap 4 deals with the difference between service delivery (communication about potential policies) and the external communication about this service delivery. One can find this “meta-communication” in deontological communication codes and interviews with ministers about their communication style. For example, if a government states in a deontological code to strive for a cautious way of communicating about potential policies, this will likely influence citizens' expectations. The objectives one formulates in such meta-communication should be realistic and the ministers should behave accordingly. A proper metacommunication policy is necessary as such communication influences the customers' expectations as well as their perceptions of quality (Bouckaert & Vandeweyer, 1999). Thus, there may be a gap between the way one claims/aims to communicate and the manner in which one actually communicates (Argyris & Schön, 1974). In such situations, the question is whether such external communication policies are more than window dressing (Terrill, 1994).

Ethical guidelines can help in realizing at least the following three goals (Vancoppenolle & Brans, 2003): (a) making the values of an organization explicit and sharpening the organizational image; (b) offering tools for internal coordination and analyzing organizational problems in unforeseen and difficult politicized situations (see also Seeger, 1997); and (c) activating the “deontological consciousness.” Research among Dutch government communication professionals (van Vugt, 2002) showed that the assumed existence of deontological guidelines about political and government public relations results in fewer breaches of the rules. If people think that there are organizational rules, they will behave in a more deontological way. Deontological guidelines can be an alternative for legislation or help to specify legislation and can more closely follow practices. Consequently, they can exert a more direct influence than traditional legislation (Bouckaert & Thijs, 2003, pp. 37–38).

Deontological guidelines are mostly criticized. Some authors believe that deontological guidelines are aimed at steering people's behavior and reducing the organization's own responsibility. Others stress that most people live according to personal values and group values before following organizational values (as summarized by Seeger, 1997). Another criticism is that organizations would only publish deontological guidelines for window dressing (Scholten, 2002). Finally, it is argued that most government communication guidelines start from an unrealistic image of “government” and a misunderstanding of what “communication” should be. Terrill (1994) argues that such guidelines should recognize the tensions between government and political communication. He stresses that political communication is not the “devil” but is generally accepted in practice, which is not clearly expressed in many governmental communication guidelines. He states that organizations do not write guidelines for vital activities. Terrill (1994) rhetorically asks whose interests are

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served by guidelines set up by politics, controlled by politics, and in which public interests are not guaranteed.

An often-cited condition for successful guidelines is “walk the talk” or “practice what you preach” (Garnett, 1992, pp. 234–241, 246–248; Seeger, 1997; Scholten, 1999). Seeger (1997) and Scholten (1999) point out the importance of the process through which guidelines are established. Scholten (1999) also states that one should avoid making the communication department responsible for replying to questions and for maintaining and verifying breaches of the rules. Finally, Seeger (1997) remarks that organizational members are not always able to find a consensus about the interpretation to reduce ethical ambiguous situations. Johannesen (1991) argues that a well-considered application of deontological stipulations is not always obvious as sometimes the pressure to act is too high or because people are uncertain about which ethical criteria are the most proper to use and how they may be applied in unique situations.

4. Discussion and conclusion

In this concluding section, we discuss (a) the most important lessons for the use of the business service model, (b) suggestions for practice, and (c) recommendations for further inquiry.

4.1. Important lessons for the use of the business service model

Communicating about potential policies may be considered, like many topics in the public sector, as a predominantly experience-based service. Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) point to trust as a critical success factor in successful service relations. Although there are differences between the public and private sectors (Gelders et al., 2007), the business service model advocated in this article seemed to be useful for the analysis of government communication about potential policies. In addition, trust in government, more than trust in business, is a delicate issue given the unreasonably high citizen's expectations as explained by Ringeling (1993). Politicians lost some of their power to the advantage of media, multinationals, and other actors but try to compensate by frequently communicating about their intentions. It is often considered a problem that politicians are too ambitious and promise more than they can realize. For instance, subsequent surveys indicate that 60% of the Belgian people believe this (ISPO, 1997, 2002; Billiet, 2005). However, 40% do not agree with this statement and are subject to dissatisfaction. Negative customer experiences, which are a result of the many factors hindering the implementation of an announced policy, are almost inevitable for this type of “service industry.”

4.2. Suggestions for practice

The gap analysis model dovetails with the basic idea advocated in several communication management publications that during all phases of the policy-making process, communications should be analyzed and managed (Damoiseaux & van Ruler, 1998). As a result, this means that communication needs to be managed during the preparation stage of policies (van Ruler, Elving, van den Hooff, Smit & Verhoeven, 2005). Albeit not obvious in the strategic political context of communicating potential policies, the gap analysis model may be used as a rudimentary conceptual framework to assess the process of communicating

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about potential policies (Bouckaert & Vandeweyer, 1999) and as a step towards guides for action at each gap level aimed to improve communication between governments and citizens on potential policies, as illustrated by Table 1.

We are aware that the communication guidelines mentioned above strive for an idealistic scenario with active and interested citizens and not the citizenry at large. Although idealistic, it is worthwhile to specify guidelines for effective and efficient communication with citizens. Currently, these action guides offer reasonable principles but they are insufficiently detailed to be utilized as criteria and often require the application of subjective and informed judgment by politicians and bureaucrats. Communication between citizens and the government is negotiated rather than being absolute (Grunig, 1992). Therefore, it is extremely important to develop policy while maintaining ongoing dialogue between the actors involved in communication needs and standards. Gelders (2005a) showed that such dialogues are currently limited to discussions within closed groups (i.e., between communication advisors within one political party or within an association of civil servant communication professionals), but that these groups seldom discuss deontological dilemmas about the tension between propaganda and public relations with each other. To facilitate this dialogue, think tanks and universities can be involved as “honest brokers.”

Customer satisfaction will only be achieved when the service meets the expected performance. Promotion of realistic expectations through performance communication will yield service validity (matching service expectations) and thus promote customer satisfaction (e.g., Galetzka, Verhoeven & Pruyn, 2006; Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry, 1990). Politicians should learn from businesses to communicate less ambitious promises that are easier to reach. They should be inspired by the IKEA company, which announced that reorders of missing material will be sent within three weeks all the while knowing that it is normally sent within two (Rijnja, 2007). Such announcements can lead to more customer satisfaction than bold political promises. As mentioned, trust is an important element in this perspective.⁵

4.3. Recommendations for further inquiry

We showed that there is limited research regarding what people expect or appreciate vis-à-vis public communication about potential policies. Given the different outcomes of these studies (Kleinnijenhuis & van Hoof, 2006; Gelders, 2005c), further analysis seems to be necessary. One can examine if different opinions between citizens in several countries can be found parallel to the studies by Gelders, De Cock, Neijens, and Roe (2007) on the opinion of communication professionals in the Netherlands and Belgium.

One can also study the influence of political and psychological factors explaining citizens' opinion vis-à-vis communication about potential policies. For example, does this opinion differ depending on the stage in the election cycle? It is likely that when the honeymoon period of a new government has passed, people are more critical towards such communication (e.g., Kleinnijenhuis & van Hoof, 2006). Kleinnijenhuis and van Hoof (2006) assumed that people do not like ambiguous communication, but further research should take into account the results of psychological studies demonstrating that people differ in terms of “need for closure” (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994; van Hiel, Pandelaere & Duriez, 2004) and in terms of “need for cognition” (Pieters, Verplanken & Modde, 1987). The former refers to the preference for order and predictability and the latter refers to the extent to which people

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engage in and enjoy demanding cognitive activities. We hope that this study can be a step forward to more audience-oriented research in the government policy communication field.

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Notes

1 Our research is conducted in the West European context with parliamentary governments in which the Executives are composed of teams of Prime Ministers and ministers that emanate from Parliament.

2 This sheds light on two complicating aspects regarding the relationship between the “policy adoption” and “policy implementation” (van de Graaf & Hoppe, 1996): (a) policy can formally be adopted but in practice it may be necessary to specify several aspects of these policies, or (b) it may be the case that policies are not yet formally decided but some parts of the policy are being implemented.

3 Although there are some differences between the American perspective studied by Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry on perceived quality with the Nordic model of Grönroos, the main idea in both models is the gap between the expected and perceived service explained by several actors and factors (Brady & Cronin, 2001).

4 Another indication of the citizen's view on public communication about potential policies in line with Gelders' surveys (2005c) is a TNS Media survey conducted among approximately 1000 Belgian people in September–October 2004. It revealed few changes in party preferences when compared to the Flemish regional elections on June 13, 2004. However, the TNS Media survey was conducted after politically turbulent times; there were many conflicts and contradictory public declarations of policy intentions in the case of the night flights at the Brussels National Airport (Gelders & Facon, 2004). “Apparently, citizens do not care so much about the day to day political wrestling as the policymakers and the media,” explained a Belgian political journalist (De Standaard, October 30, 2004, p. 24). According to him, people are willing to “see what will come” and have time to transform their opinion into a political choice. Van de Walle (2004) also found that people do not quickly change their attitudes vis-à-vis governments.

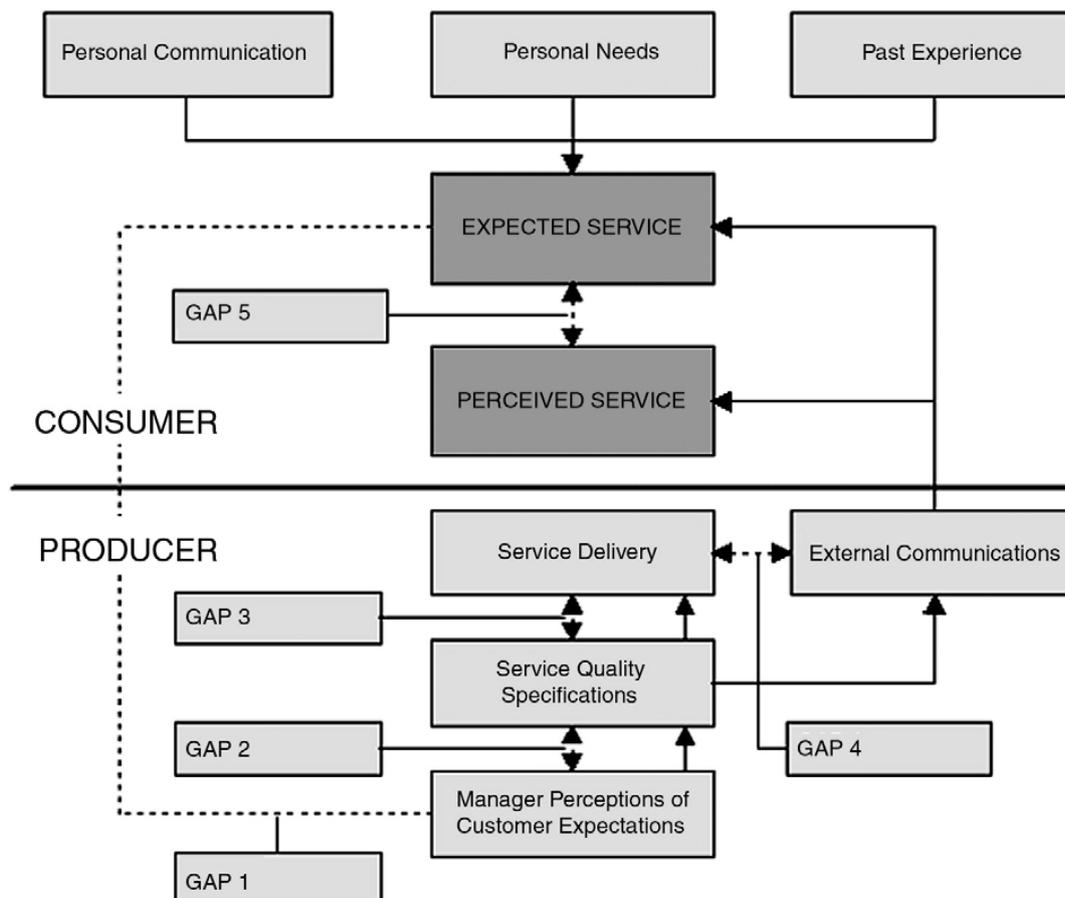
5 For example, Americans' trust has increased with the election of President Barack Obama, who created hope for change but also tried to temper the public expectations just before and after his election.

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Table 1
Communication guidelines to overcome communication gaps about potential policies.

Gap level	Governments should	Citizens should
Gap 1	Systematically assess citizen communication needs and preferences (frequency of communication, choice of medium, length and style of message, etc.).	Proactively make their communication needs, expectations, and preferences known to government officials.
Gap 2	Stipulate relevant criteria for good communication specifically and discuss them with all relevant actors (spokespersons, journalists, citizens, etc.).	Realize that it is not obvious for the government to specify criteria as quality has a subjective component but it must develop criteria for effective communication in cooperation with the government.
Gap 3	Once the government has stipulated specific criteria for good communication, it has to meet these standards daily.	Be critical and involve politicians and journalists when the government does not apply the standards it stipulated.
Gap 4	Clearly communicate the manner in which you will communicate about potential policies; be realistic; do not create expectations of a certain communication style as you probably cannot follow such a communication approach.	Be critical and involve politicians and journalists when government fails to communicate as promised.

Fig. 1. Gap analysis model by Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry (1990).



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