

## Introduction

In recent years, communication science has produced numerous models and methods for designing public communication campaigns. Most of these are prescriptive models, presented under such headings as “checklist” or “heuristic”, and generally having a rational and logical structure. The design process is typically divided into several steps, with the required design activities specified for each step. Although the models are explicitly aimed at improving the quality of design practice, the applicability of these models appears to be limited. There is a gap between theory and practice. To narrow this gap, or even to eliminate it, empirical research into daily design practice is required. This thesis examines a specific type of communication design process, namely that of public communication campaigns of the Dutch government. Here, the main research question was:

*How are public communication campaigns of the Dutch government designed in practice, and how does this practice relate to existing prescriptive design literature?*

The main question has been translated into five sub-questions. Accordingly these were used to structure the data collection and focus the analysis.

The sub-questions are:

- 1 How is the design process organised?
- 2 How are policy design, public communication design and design of communication means related?
- 3 How does the selection of goals, target groups, messages and means occur in the design process?
- 4 What is the role of intermediary organisations in the design process?
- 5 How is research applied in the design process?

## Research design

The study consisted of a preliminary study, a retrospective multiple case study and a series of in-depth interviews with designers. In the multiple case study, the design process of four campaigns was described and analysed in detail. For the data collection, interviews with the designers involved and an analysis of design process documentation (all the documents produced during the design process) were used.

The results of the case studies were used as input for the in-depth interviews with the campaign designers. The respondents were interviewed about their design practice in general, i.e. without focusing on specific cases. In this way, the crucial factors and patterns that became apparent from the case studies could be compared with the experiences of other designers. Moreover, it allowed for a more detailed exploration of these factors and patterns.

For the selection of the four cases, three criteria were used: different departments, the type of campaign goal and the relation of the campaign to the policies or legislation involved. Furthermore, additional practical criteria were formulated.

The following campaigns were selected:

- *De nieuwe Bijstand: Een andere instelling* ('The new Social Security Benefit: A different approach'), Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, 1995.
- *Het Bromfietscertificaat: Ook voor snorfietsers* ('The Moped Certificate'), Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management, 1996.

- *De Electronische Aangifte* ('The electronic tax form'), Ministry of Finance, 1997/1998.
- *Duurzame energie: Vanzelfsprekend* ('Durable Energy: Naturally'), Ministry of Economic Affairs, 1998-2000.

For the series of in-depth interviews a total of 31 respondents were interviewed. These respondents constituted a representative sample of the most important designer-types in practice: policy makers, public communication officers, external subcontractors (advertising agencies etc.), intermediary organisations and officers of the Rijksvoorlichtingsdienst (Netherlands Government Information Service).

In the next section, the results for each of the five sub-questions are presented.

## Results

### *Organisation of the design process*

Two levels of design process organisation can be distinguished: the procedural organisation (involving the planning of the consecutive design steps) and the functional organisation (involving the division of labour and the allocation of tasks).

For the procedural organisation, a certain degree of standardisation has been reached in the design processes of the ministries studied. Public communication design processes follow a linear outline. In practice, a number of consecutive design phases can be observed. Most campaigns commence at policy-making level by a policy department, often after consultation with the communication department. Next, a communication workgroup is set up to develop a communication strategy outline. This strategy is then translated into a detailed communication plan after which it is rendered into concrete means of communication. This final phase is generally commissioned to advertising agencies.

An explanation for the standardisation of the procedural organisation is primarily rooted in the division of responsibilities within the strongly hierarchical structure of ministries and the relatively low rank of public communication officers therein. The ultimate authority in the design process resides with the policy department paying for the campaign. Phasing is also stimulated by the compulsory procedure for registering intended campaigns with the *Voorlichtingsraad* (Public Communication Council). This procedure consists of a preliminary registration (whereby a campaign outline is submitted) and a definitive registration (whereby a detailed campaign plan must be produced).

For the functional organisation, the public communication designer cannot fall back on established procedures or a developed professional standard method. Design processes are never individual affairs but a cooperation between many people and organisations, with a special project organisation being created for each process. These organisations can differ considerably in size and complexity and in the way tasks and power are divided. Its core, however, is always formed by a workgroup in which public communication officers and policy makers participate, as well as (in most cases) intermediary organisations and subcontractors. The fewer the number of participants the more smoothly the design process develops.

In the design process of public communication campaigns, most executive tasks are contracted out. The obligation to organise European tenders for large campaigns

has severe implications for the design process. On the basis of a usually concise briefing, communication agencies are expected to present detailed campaign concepts, even though a proper problem analysis of the collaboration between the agency and the ministry can only be carried out after the agency has been commissioned. The logical order of steps in the design models, where problem analysis precedes the design of concepts, is thus reversed.

The public information officer has little control over which intermediary organisations are brought into the design process. Intermediary organisations involved in designing or executing the policies or legislation concerned expect to have at least some influence on the relevant communication. Consequently, these organisations often participate in the campaign design workgroup.

### *Embedded design processes*

In the literature, campaign design is described as a multiple level embedded process. At the first level, campaign design is embedded in policy design. At the second level, the design of communication means is embedded in campaign design. These two levels are clearly recognizable in design practice. The first level is marked when a policy department commissions a campaign; the second level by the completion of the detailed campaign plan and the subsequent start of the design of communication means.

In practice, the relation between policy and communication level is still problematic. The desire of public communication officers to become more involved in the policy design process has still not been realised. Public communication is the only policy instrument that is not a direct responsibility of policy departments. The design of policy instruments such as legislation, subsidies and the creation of facilities is regarded by policy makers as the core of policy making. Communication is always a derivation from this. Policy departments lack insight into the possibilities and limitations of public communication. Generally this leads to the attribution of overly ambitious goals to public communication campaigns.

Furthermore, public communication is often used by policy makers to promote a certain policy department, a policy domain or the ministry as a whole. Sometimes the general public is the target group for this, but more often the promotion is targeted at Parliament, intermediary organisations or even other departments within the ministry. The public communication officer then has to deal with secondary goals and target groups which must be incorporated in a campaign that – officially - is only aimed at the general public and solely meant to convey information about the policy contents.

Sometimes, long-term campaigns are commissioned to external organisations. In these cases, campaigns are still embedded in the policy level, albeit with a little more distance. Commissioned campaigns are (partly) financed by a ministry, and they usually receive a budget for a period of several years. In such cases, the commissioned organisations have a relatively free hand in allocating this budget. The ministry can nevertheless exert great influence on the design process. In practice, however, this influence is usually exerted by the ministry's communication department and less so by the policy departments. Since these campaigns are already outsourced, they seem to generate less interest from policy makers.

The design of communication means involves working out the means that were stipulated in the campaign plan. In practice, this phase of the design process is

almost always contracted out to advertising and communication agencies. The translation of campaign plans into means poses more problems than prescriptive models presuppose. Sometimes this is caused by the complexity of the legislation to be communicated. In such a case, a well-considered balance is required between legal correctness and legibility. Predictably, policy makers generally tend to place more emphasis on the former and public communication officers on the latter. More often, however, problems arise when a campaign theme is politically sensitive. The design process is often hampered because designers need to achieve a compromise between clear, intelligible communication for the target groups and the existing ministerial interests. This is especially so when third parties, for instance intermediary organisations, become involved in the design process. In such a case these parties' interests need to be considered as well.

#### *Design of the campaign plan*

The campaign plan is a document in which a planned campaign is outlined. Typical elements of such a plan are: the communication goal, the communication target groups, the means of communication, and the campaign messages and themes. In practice, the given policy goals form an inadequate starting point for determining the exact function and position of the intended communication campaign. Policy goals tend to be broad and focused on the long term, whereas public communication campaigns usually have a very limited timespan and budget. Compared to the policy goals, the communication goal is therefore often narrowed down significantly. Changes and developments in communication goals during the design process are undocumented.

A second problem is the mandatory quantification of communication goals. Only sporadically does the campaign designer have enough data at his disposal to make well-founded quantifications.

The selection of target groups for the campaign depends largely on the policy target groups. When a policy has very specific target groups, these can be taken as a starting point for determining the communication target groups. When a policy has either a very large or a general target group, the communication designer is forced to define and segment groups himself. This, however, is often problematic given the lack of (research) data on the target groups.

With regard to the selection of means, the results show that in practice the bulk of the campaign budget is spent on mass media: TV and radio commercials; leaflets, sometimes combined with billboards; advertisements; a website etcetera. As a consequence, little room is left over for specifically targeted small-scale activities. Moreover, communication designers are pressured by policy makers to produce 'visible' campaigns with measurable effects. Hence the obvious choice for mass media.

The realisation of campaign messages and themes is a fairly intangible process. At this level the design process is professionally creative rather than rational or analytical. In the end, however, concept designs have to be rationally justifiable.

Often campaign designers cannot draw on past experience as many subjects and themes are new and unique. Besides, proper target group data are seriously lacking.

#### *The role of intermediary organisations in the design process*

The case studies and the in-depth interviews show that almost all campaigns make use of intermediary organisations in one way or another. From the perspective of a

ministry, intermediary organisations can help bridge the physical and psychological distance to the ministry's target groups. This distance is substantial, as is demonstrated by the fact that the intermediary organisations invited by ministries to participate in campaign design processes are often federations or representative organisations.

In practice, intermediaries are not only used for distribution tasks but are also increasingly involved in the campaign design process, for instance by participating in the campaign workgroup.

The role that an organisation has played in the policy design process roughly determines the role it can play in the communication design process. Generally speaking, involvement in the policy design process also leads to involvement in the campaign design workgroup. For executive organisations this is a logical choice as for them public communication is a recurrent task. For many other organisations the choice is less logical. Organisations that were involved in the policy design process are not necessarily capable of making substantial contributions to the communication design. They may, for example, have no direct contact with the target groups. However, when such organisations do end up in the campaign workgroup (as is often the case), they tend to focus on guarding their own interests and profile in the campaign. It is also via these organisations that discussions about the contents of the policy concerned often find their way into the campaign design process. As campaign designers cannot alter policy decisions, these discussions are futile and disturbing.

#### *The use of research in the design process*

Whereas much emphasis is placed in the literature on the importance of a solid problem analysis and target group research, in practice it is the effect evaluation that gets most of the attention, followed by pre-tests of major campaign means.

In campaign design practice the lack of preliminary research in the design process is a serious problem. Even though campaign designers always make a problem analysis at the start of a new project, a budget for conducting dedicated applied research is rare. Designers therefore have to rely on data collected for the policy design and on the initial survey for the campaign effect study. These data are too general to provide sufficient input and guidance for the campaign design.

Pre-tests and so called concept tests among the target groups are seen as highly useful by public communication officers. Almost every pre-test leads to improvements in the design, although these are generally limited to details. As pre-tests are usually executed relatively late in the process, there is no time for radical changes in the design .

Besides a design supporting function, pre-tests also function as accountability documents. Favourable pre-test results strengthen the position of public communication officers towards critics (e.g. Parliament or the policy department concerned).

The effect study is a widely discussed form of research in design practice. In 1998 the existing guidelines for effect studies (under the name 'Silver Standard') were replaced by the obligatory and standardised *tracking studies*. The comparability of all campaign effect studies is thus guaranteed. However, the introduction of tracking

also means that it is no longer possible to prove causal relationships between campaigns and campaign effects.

Effect studies in both the old and the new form only cover the mass media utilised in a campaign. Other smaller scale activities are not evaluated. The studies are neither specific nor detailed enough to provide designers with useful information for future campaign designs. Effects and results cannot be attributed to one or more choices in the design process. Instead, the studies emphasize reach and appreciation figures.

Usually, campaign effect studies do not take into account the influence of the policy itself or other policy instruments. It seems more logical to evaluate public communication activities against this background. Also when goals change during the design process, or when promotional goals play an important role, this is rarely reflected in the way the effect studies are set up.

## **Conclusions**

The task of a public communication designer is to simultaneously execute, coordinate and monitor three parallel and partial design processes: the *negotiation process*, the *planning process* and the *attuning process*

### *Design practice as a negotiation process*

The design process of public information campaigns can be described as a negotiation process in which multiple parties try to safeguard their own (varying) interests in the end product: the campaign.

First, the communication officer has to negotiate with his superiors (usually the policy department that has commissioned the campaign). Policy makers often have quite clear-cut ideas and expectations about a campaign that is not necessarily in alignment with the professional opinions of the communication officer. The lack of a guiding (strategic) communication policy plan is a definite handicap.

Second, the communication officer has to negotiate with intermediary organisations involved in the design process. Intermediaries judge a design not only from a receivers' perspective, but they also base their judgment strongly on their own interests, even if these bear no relevance to either the campaign or the target group.

### *Design practice as a planning process.*

The design process of public information campaigns can also be described as a planning process. This (partial) process involves the planning of the consecutive design steps and the setting up of a functional organisational structure.

To a large degree, the planning of design steps follows a standard that has developed in practice over time. This standard is partially formalized in governmental guidelines and mandatory procedures, a large part of them concerning the application of evaluative research in the design process.

Standardisation is predominantly lacking when it comes to setting up an organisational structure for the design process. A unique organisation is created for each campaign. The public communication officer, however, does not have a free hand here. The task division within the communication department is fixed. The selection of external subcontractors is organised via European Tender procedures in

which the communication officer usually only has a limited say. And rarely is the selection of intermediary organisations a decision for the communication officer.

In general, the principle applies that the greater the number of participants the longer the design process will take. Hence the preference of public communication officers for small project groups. However, this can only be realised when time pressure is great and when there is substantial political support from within the ministry.

#### *The design process as an attuning process*

The design process of public information campaigns can, finally, be described as a process in which an attempt is made to optimally attune the campaign to the relevant target groups and communication goals. When attuning to the target groups, the communication officer encounters three problems:

- 1 *Lack of information in the design process.* In practice, designers have to work without sufficient information. The possibilities for performing the necessary research into, for instance, target audiences, are usually limited.
- 2 *Conflicts of interest between participants.* The need to align different views and interests of participants regularly leads to compromises at the expense of the communicative strength and clarity of the resulting campaign.
- 3 *Inflexibility of the design situation.* In practice, the design process is relatively inflexible and offers little room for recursiveness. During the process, agreements are reached and laid down in campaign strategies and plans. As such documents are usually authorised by all parties concerned, it thus becomes increasingly difficult to make significant changes later on in the process.

#### *The relation between design practice and design models*

In brief, the difference between theory and practice implies that the attuning process as described in the models in practice is complicated and sometimes frustrated by planning and negotiation processes that determine and limit the scope of designers. In the models, planning and negotiating activities are almost always unaccounted for. Design models are formulated on the basis of a limited and idealised view of the design context. When using these models in an educational setting they may provide necessary insight and clarity. When, however, models are presented as tools for improving design *practice*, the aforementioned limitations come to light.

Design practice needs to change if the relevance of models for design practice is to be improved. However, it is unrealistic to expect design practice to ever become the ideal context the models presume it to be. The design models must therefore also be adapted in a way that ensures that they are a better reflection of the circumstances with which designers in practice are confronted. In the following section, a number of recommendations are given regarding the improvement of both design practice and design models.

### **Recommendations**

The first five recommendations are directed at improving design practice:

### *1: Priority for the attuning process*

The attuning criterion should be recognized as the primary guiding principle for the campaign design process. The needs and interests of the target audience should be the centre of attention.

### *2: Authority and budgets*

In order to enable the design of good public communication, budgets must be centralised and the responsibility for these budgets be delegated to the public communication department. In the current structure, public communication officers have insufficient scope to fully employ their professional expertise. The influence of policy departments is too great.

### *3: Communication policy*

Centralising the public communication budgets enables the improvement of the coordination of public communication at the ministerial level. The target audiences must be taken as point of reference. In a communication policy plan the priorities for ministerial communication can be stipulated as well as the desired ways of approaching different target groups.

### *4: The use of target group research*

Taking the attuning process as the primary guiding principle for the design process must also entail an increase of target group research in the first design phases. At present, public communication officers often lack sufficient information to enable them to attune the communication to specific target groups.

### *5: The use of summative evaluation*

Summative evaluation should be directed at generating insights and knowledge that can be applied in future design processes. Evaluating communication activities separately from other policy instruments does not do justice to the complexity of campaign implementation practice. It is more logical and informative to evaluate the policy in its entirety, including public communication.

The following four recommendations are targeted at improving design models.

### *6: Relation between policy and public communication*

The assumed role of public communication officers in the policy design process has become disproportionally large. Practice shows that this is unrealistic and that it leads to confusion about the tasks and roles of public communication officers within the ministry. It is more advisable to take the policy as a starting point for public communication. The communication design process does not start with an analysis of the policy problem but rather with an analysis of the desirability and feasibility of public communication depending on the policy.

### *7: Use of intermediary organisations*

It is desirable to integrate collaboration with intermediary organisations in the design models. The results suggest crucial elements that need to be accounted for. For example, there has to be a clear and mutual agreement between all parties on the goals of the design process, on the exact contributions intermediaries are expected to make and on the division of discretionary powers regarding the design. Negotiating with intermediary organisations can be necessary but it is preferable to conclude these negotiations before the actual design process starts.

*8: The use of formative evaluation*

Given the focus on the attuning process, it is logical to use formative evaluation more actively. Not only concepts should be tested among members of the target audience, but also the campaign plans and the overall strategy etcetera. By regularly consulting members of the target audience during the course of the design process, the campaign can be fine-tuned to their needs and interests. Errors and deficiencies can thus be detected and corrected.

*9: Procedures for tenders*

Selecting external subcontractors (primarily communication and advertising agencies) is an essential step in the design process. This is even more so since European tenders have become obligatory. It is therefore necessary to incorporate the selection of and collaboration with these subcontractors in the models.