Evangelizing in the media age: American and Swedish perspectives on how to spread your message

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Abstract Political decision making is influenced by a complex interaction between politicians, their constituents, lobbying groups and the media. Water professionals, scientists and campaigners, who wish to evangelise, to bring the critical issues of the water environment to the centre of public attention and achieve changes in society must understand the evolving symbiosis between politicians and the media.

Keywords Campaigning; media; political decision making

Introduction
During the past ten years since the first Stockholm Water Symposium was held, over 800 scientists, experts and decision-makers from over 100 countries have every year come to Stockholm. The second Symposium in 1992 focused on how to make scientists and politicians communicate and speak the same language.

For both scientists and organizers the main issue is one that has always been there: we know what needs to be done, and yet still, so little happens – and so slowly.

Paradoxically, perhaps many politicians are already convinced of the same needs, but they face another dilemma: “How will I be able to make my party – my constituents – understand what needs to be done?” The natural reaction is that politicians should tell their constituents what needs to be done; politicians should be opinion leaders. But politicians know that in the information-glutted, new media society, only two or three issues come to the fore. The reigning agenda is seldom determined by a single party or politician, more often by the media.

This interplay between the media and how political decisions are made is the subject of this paper.

The relationship between politicians and the media
Politicians are – if I am to simplify things considerably – in the re-election business. Most politicians want to make a difference, push an ideology, leave a strong legacy of legislation. But the only way to accomplish this is to get re-elected.

The person who, outside of politics, pushes a political issue – for example, the importance of clean water for our future – runs into the breach between well meaning acknowledgment by politicians and a complete lack of action. This is what most often is called “political possibility”. Often politicians could do more – but the real or imagined knowledge of their constituency becomes a barrier. Politicians aiming for re-election must follow the pace of their party and their constituency.

There is an entire profession whose job it is to affect politicians: PR firms and lobbyists. They work in entirely different ways in Europe and in the US. In Europe, lobbying is a new area of activity and seen with great skepticism. For an American congressman, it is natural to listen to lobbyists – even if they are employed by PR or law firms. Lobbyists may have important concrete arguments to present and may aid a politician in connecting with important segments of the population. A European politician would be far more careful. Even if a change is brewing here, lobbying is still seen as a fairly shady enterprise.
This doesn’t mean that lobbying isn’t or hasn’t been part of the political scene in Europe. It does exist – just in different guises. Non-profit organizations, unions, and professional organizations have always had access to governments and to individual politicians.

Personally, I believe that trying to directly influence politicians is not an effective form of political action. Of course, it’s great to work with enthusiasts. A single intensely engaged person is far better than an entire battalion of lukewarm do-nothings. This applies certainly to journalists as well; it’s better to cultivate contacts with those with strong convictions than to be surrounded by a crowd with shifting loyalties.

No, rather than trying to influence politicians, it’s more effective to bring an issue to the fore in the political agenda, and thus have journalists pose the questions to decision-makers. In most European countries, the media is far less segregated than in the US. There is less of a polarization in Europe between an engaged elite and an indifferent general public. While voter participation in the US has been around 50%, in Europe participation is steady around 70% and in Sweden, close to 90%. This means that that politicians in these countries must work according to what comes first on the media’s agenda. The media speaks directly to the people.

And the media of course does not allow itself to be easily manipulated or controlled. Nor is it particularly effective to use the media in mounting big advertising campaigns. There are plenty of examples of issues that have been so slathered with money that the public has become turned off. This too is more the case in Europe than in the US – even if funding is beginning to play a larger role in politics and the influencing of public opinion also in Europe.

Neither politicians nor the media exist in a vacuum. Political issues seldom just appear without notice. Politicians are influenced by what they hear from their constituency and from their party. Here too there is a difference between Sweden and the US. In the US, political conventions and the local party organization provide more of an emotional and psychological support, where in Sweden, these play a more concrete role as decision-makers and agenda planners. Grass roots politicians can for this reason be more effective at convincing centrally placed decision makers than campaigns and material aimed at decision makers. The local media can be a more effective tool than the national media.

This is how The Moral Majority in the US has worked. This organization has been successful in influencing political decision-makers from below, through their constituency and through local political organizations. Those who wanted to make American businesses divest their investments in South Africa during apartheid contacted clergy in regions where these businesses were based and contacted the churches that business leaders attended to get the message of divestment preached from the pulpit. That was quite successful.

Another parallel is the Gay movement. From having been an underground movement twenty-five years ago, it is now a given that leading politicians in San Francisco, NY or Stockholm have to march in the Gay Pride parade. The Gay movement has been successful in communicating that its issues are not isolated to a minority, but are principles involving human rights at large. A key to the success of this movement has been its ability to garner widespread media attention.

In the old organizational structure, political decision-makers got much of their information and their sense of popular trends from popular movements and unions. Today, fewer and fewer go to public meetings and are involved in organizations. With increased mobility and a more open job market, local alliances are less powerful influences than they once were.

And so the media has come in to fill the gap. Politicians need the media to find out what’s going on in the public at large. And politicians need the media to reach out to their voters.

In this situation something is created that the Swedish political scientist Kent Asp has
called “a transaction” between politicians and the media, a mutual dependency – even a symbiosis. Asp observed some years ago that issues raised in Parliament, previously derived from the representative’s own experience, currently derive more from what the representative has read in the newspaper or seen on TV.

**A case study in changing public opinion**

Before I devote myself entirely to the media, I thought that I would tell a 25 year old success story. I have plenty of failure stories too of course, but I think I’ll save those for another time.

In 1976 I was given the assignment by a number of Swedish stock trading agencies to increase the popularity of private, individual stock ownership. In contrast to the US, stock ownership in Sweden was not very widespread. From a population of 8 million, only 600,000 Swedes owned stock or company shares. There was a commonly held prejudice against stock investment as a form of saving and Swedish tax legislation discriminated against risk savings in relation to other forms of saving.

The campaign I was to run had to be about trying to sell an idea. For the businesses trying to finance a venture, their goal was ultimately to gain a broader financial base. But for me, I was looking to bring about a change in attitudes, broaden minds and provide incentives for a larger portion of the society to learn about the economy and to follow the financial development of businesses.

After five years, the number of stock investors had more than doubled. Today Sweden has one of the highest percentages of stock or shareholders in the world.

The task had two parts: to spread knowledge and to affect taxes and rules.

We began by starting local stock investment clubs, by holding meetings in small towns, by getting banks to put out brochures and getting local newspapers to publish investment tutorials and begin writing about the stock market.

We didn’t get much help from big business. I remember when I presented an advertising campaign to an investment firm – the firm scoffed at me, saying that you can’t sell stock like you sell soap. A lot has happened since then and during the most recent market madness, the selling arguments for stock investment and soap were pretty similar. Stock investment has been kicked out of the parlor and into the playroom.

And from politicians there wasn’t much help to be had either. They were not met by voters with an interest in stock investment, nor did they feel as though they’d get re-elected by encouraging more judicious tax legislation.

But what happened then was that the things we were doing locally to spread knowledge started to have an effect. In the unions and among those active in the local party chapters, people began to read the local newspaper’s investment tutorial or go to their local bank’s investors’ meeting. And then politicians were suddenly met by constituents who often knew more than they did about the stock market, and were asking questions about tax legislation.

With that the whole climate changed, and the Swedish parliament eventually made the decision to change current tax legislation. A whole chain reaction followed with more investors and greater interest.

The moral of the story has really nothing to do with either stocks or investment and savings. It is rather that decisions that affect the general public can often not be made unless the general public is informed and involved. You can only reach decision-makers by first bringing about a change in public opinion.

**Developments in the media**

The public space that once was filled by the church, and by popular and political movements has been filled by the media. It’s popular to refer to “the new media landscape”. This
image is seductive and misleading. We associate to beautiful landscapes, amber waves of grain, a sun shining on green meadows. In reality, the new media landscape is more like a report from a satellite rounding Jupiter. Gases and sulphurous precipitation. Persistent storms.

The international TV networks transform the intellectual basis for the business of politics. They’ve brought about a whole series of other changes as well. When tanks surrounded Moscow’s “White House” in August 1991, those inside could still send faxes. Mikhail Gorbatjev was in house arrest at his vacation home and could monitor the attempted coup on BBC World news. In 1989, CNN broadcast directly from Tiananmen Square. That information can pass unhindered across borders promotes the cause of freedom and justice. The person who says “I didn’t know” is only trying to escape blame. “A tiny country far away that we know little about,” was Neville Chamberlain’s classic line, when he wanted to defend his country’s betrayal of Czechoslovakia in 1938. Now when a global information network connects us all such a statement would be impossible.

Two things have radically changed the conditions for the media. We now have on the one hand, optical cables and satellites, and on the other, the Internet. We can access an almost unlimited supply of information. Anyone can get published – without leaving home. The initial cost to publicize is practically nil. To reach an audience of a million – the cost is huge.

Characteristic of the new media society are at least three factors:
• Convergence
• Commercialization
• Individualization.

By convergence I mean that the media is no longer bound to its form. How information is transferred is no longer important. The latest news can come via newspapers, radio, TV, computers or cell phones. Content is no longer bound to a form. We can by virtue of a media card watch TV on our home computers. More and more newspapers include video bursts on their websites. The new mobile phone networks means that we can even watch brief video segments on our cell phones. This means finally that most people in the affluent societies of the world will be reachable immediately and everywhere.

This probably doesn’t mean that we will begin to devote more and more time per day to media consumption. Our ability to devote time to newspapers, radio and TV is dependent on our social situation. It is primarily the time between work and sleep that we have available to us – and that time is hardly increasing.

Commercialization is obvious. No media survives that isn’t profitable. The smaller the market, the harder it is for the quality media to get large enough circulation. Commercialization also applies to the press. The American media researcher Thomas E. Paterson has said, “The press is not a political institution. Its business is news and news does not evaluate the content of politics.” The tendency is – in Europe as in the US – that media consumers are less and less interested in ordinary everyday political reporting – not counting the current slew of racier political scandals. Politics generally doesn’t sell. This is well known by those who edit headlines and front-pages. Thus political journalists are tempted to describe all political events as conflicts and power struggles or scandals. This will increase the likelihood of the story gaining a more prominent placement.

For those whose job it is to influence public opinion, there is really no reason to moralize about this. Instead, you have to help journalists sell their story. In other words, you have to think like the editor who determines what’s going to make the front page.

Journalists need help with images and examples. An opinion or a standpoint is often not interesting in and of itself – it generally needs an illustration – preferably with some drama to it.
Opinions are seldom news, events are. That is why in every context it is important to find the event. At the Consulate General of Sweden in NY, we have been successful in publicizing the image of Sweden as the world’s most developed IT nation as well as being a leader in the area of design. And we haven’t just said that it’s so.

We have worked hard at pushing the IT piece by presenting studies, creating a network of IT professionals, and by organizing seminars. In this way, we’ve seen to it that journalists get detailed information, are treated to fun peripherals, and find good people to interview for their stories.

My wife, Inger Claesson Wästberg, has organized exhibits of Swedish designers at the Swedish residence. This has provided an attractive environment and a context that is interesting to both photograph and write about. For this we’ve received an extraordinary amount of publicity.

Journalism is all about the personal. An issue has to be connected to an interesting person, preferably someone who people know and recognize.

In general, a news piece has to be recognized as news for it to be covered. It has to have some sort of legitimacy so that editors and decision-makers in the media know what they can do with it. That’s why it’s good to have a face to go with an issue, or to associate a new issue – for example, water – to an older, better known issue, for example, the impact on employment.

Because we have so many more media, and so many more channels to distribute them through, we can now tailor our media intake to fit our needs. Narrowcasting has replaced broadcasting. This can be described as Individualization. You could also describe it as a splintering or fragmentation. There is no longer a common media space or program that everyone monitors. Not one of the American new programs on cable has more than one million viewers. An important and influential cable program like Larry King Live has only 830,000 viewers.

Many take advantage of the new multitude of options to reject rather than select. There are now large portions of the population that never watch a program offering social commentary and seldom watch news programming.

At the same time as this is happening, email seems to be developing into a media form of its own. Every year over 600 billion email messages are sent out into the world, and this number is rapidly increasing. Around 120 million Americans have an email address, which means that almost everyone who votes in the US elections also has email. In Sweden, around 70 percent of the population are on email.

More and more, politicians use email to influence their voters. The breakthrough was in last year’s presidential election when during the last days before election the “Get out the vote” drive was mostly conducted by email. Many react negatively to email that they haven’t requested, so called “spam”. But if your senator or representative writes and ask you for your opinion on an issue, or asks for your help, most seem to like this kind of attention.

In 1997, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines was, together with the American activist, Jody Williams, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their work in this area. The campaign was to a great extent promoted online and using email. These two media are still underused means to influence public opinion and set agendas for action.

How to spread your message

The dominance of TV, both as a medium for advertising and in political reporting has had the effect that the image of politics overwhelms politics itself. The American journalist Martin Schramm told the story some years back of a White House reporter who had decided to do a really negative piece about Ronald Reagan. She was going to show Reagan’s
hypocrisy – that he opened the Olympics for Disabled while he at the same time withdrew federal support to persons with disabilities. He visited retirement homes while at the same time withdrawing funds to the aging poor.

The segment was illustrated by TV clips from these and other Reagan appearances. It was shown on prime time TV. Directly after, one of Reagan’s press-relations staff called and thanked the network:

– That was terrific, we really liked it! he said
– But, the reporter protested, it was so critical!
– Aw, who cares about that. The pictures were great, really great!

A few years ago, the Czech president Vaclav Havel held a speech before the US Congress in Washington. Havel, the freedom fighter, had just been elected president by a huge majority. He was much praised and received resounding applause from the Congress.

Afterwards, a senator was asked how Havel would have managed an election in the US. His answer was, “How much money does he have? Which consultants does he have? Is he going to get rid of that mustache?” That’s how it is. Facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, clothes mean a lot in politics. Arguments and analysis mean less. Symbol has replaced dialogue.

For the person who wants to evangelize – spread the good new about an idea, let’s say water security – it’s important to find the right person and symbol, the legitimate messenger and the appropriate form. To reach political decision-makers, you have to reach them through their constituents.

And finally, the person who has good news shouldn’t be afraid to repeat it and repeat it once more. It’s when your mouth is dry from speaking, and the first 10% of those you want to reach actually recognize you – then, and only then, are you on your way.