

Legitimacy for Sale
Constructing a Market for PR Consultancy

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Chapter 1, “*A Market Category Emerging*”

and

parts of Chapter 7 “*Almedalen – Lobbying for Biofuel*”

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Abstract

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Categories are semantic objects that create order in markets. By categorization, market actors and products become comparable and understandable to various audiences. This thesis examines the construction of the product category of public relations (PR) consultancy in Sweden; a market that has arisen, become economically successful and gained recognition over the past thirty years, but which still lacks the legitimacy and clarity normally thought of as basic criteria of market categories.

Using a semiotic framework and a mixed-method approach, I explore category construction 1) over time, and 2) in practice. In generalized terms, my findings suggest that market categorization processes cannot be understood without taking into account the characteristics of the product being categorized. Whereas ambiguity surrounding labels, denotations and connotations is normally regarded as incompatible with categorization, such fuzziness should be expected to be intrinsic in markets for professional service products like PR consultancy, where the product itself often thrives on, and continuously creates, ambiguity. For instance, the lack of clarity and lack of legitimacy in the Swedish PR consultancy market are found to be both logical outcomes, and enablers, of *visibilization* and *amalgamation*, referring to PR consultants' conscientious management of visibility, and tendency to span boundaries in constructing their services, respectively. Categorization in the traditional sense is further hampered by the dominant label of "PR consultancy" being stigmatized, i.e. suffering from "sticky" negative connotations.

In the cultural context of Sweden, the emergence of a PR consultancy market has also meant commodification, i.e. the introduction of something hitherto not sold into a sphere of exchangeable things. In this process, PR consultancy seems to have gotten "stuck" between the sphere of salable and unsalable things, as the product is widely sold but continues to be contested across various audiences. Again, my analysis puts this difficulty of PR consultancy finding legitimacy in relation to the product category's actual content, i.e. rendering legitimacy to others. Finally, I argue that the emergence of PR consultancy, by providing a market place for corporate legitimacy, might be understood as a case of a *cognitive-cultural market logic* on the rise, characterized by struggles for organizational visibility and semiotic sophistication.

Keywords: PR consultancy, Legitimization, Legitimation, Social Construction of Markets, Public Opinion, Organization Theory, Market Categorization

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*STREPSIADES: All right then.
Look over there—you see that little door,
there on that little house?*

*PHEIDIPPIDES: Yes, I see it.
What are you really on about, father?*

*STREPSIADES: That's the Thinkery—for
clever minds.
In there live men who argue and persuade.
They say that heaven's an oven damper—
it's all around us—we're the charcoal.
If someone gives them cash, they'll teach him
how to win an argument on any cause,
just or unjust.*

PHEIDIPPIDES: Who are these men?

*STREPSIADES: I'm not sure
just what they call themselves, but they're good
men,
fine, deep-thinking intellectual types.*

*PHEIDIPPIDES: Nonsense! They're a worth-
less bunch. I know them—
you're talking about pale-faced charlatans,
who haven't any shoes, like those rascals
Socrates and Chaerephon.*

*STREPSIADES: Shush, be quiet.
Don't prattle on such childish rubbish.
If you care about your father's daily food,
give up racing horses and, for my sake,
join their company.*

Aristophanes, *The Clouds*, 423 BC

Chapter 1. A Market Category Emerging

The former Embassy of Czechoslovakia in Sweden is tucked away in a lush, quiet street of Östermalm, the poshest neighborhood of Stockholm. It makes a stark contrast to the older imperial apartment buildings with ornamented exteriors surrounding it. When built in 1972, it was a state of the art Soviet representation structure. Designed by the renowned architect Jan Bočan, and characterized by concrete walls, extensive window sections and bold angles, the ten-story building is an archetypal example of a style commonly referred to as “East State Modernism.” The interior designs – jacaranda walls, floors in schist and limestone – were carefully crafted by the former Czechoslovakia’s most famous artists and craftsmen, and the house contained staff housing, an open-atrium cantina, garage and laundry. But apart from being a place for diplomatic representation and administration, and perhaps more importantly, the embassy was also a central part of the Soviet Union’s information-gathering web in the West. A massive wall in the lobby hid the wire-tapping equipment. In the large cinema in the basement, Western movies were screened for censorship before being shown in the East. All conference rooms were bobby-wired and had built in surveillance cameras in the ceilings.

More than 40 years after its construction, the house is one of many buildings reminiscent of the Soviet architectural aesthetic in Europe. But in contrast to many of these, the building is not dilapidated, or blown out for reconstruction. Bočan’s details are perfectly restored to their original condition. The jacaranda interiors in the hallway have been meticulously renovated. On the roof, the old antenna once connecting the embassy to the Kremlin – the size of a Christmas tree – is still there, as a reminder of old times.

But some things have changed. Anyone who enters the house today through its brown metal doors is met by an art installation in the form of an immense clay sculpture portraying a life-size cow. The old cantina is transformed into a small restaurant with a renowned chef serving the one hundred or so employees. The ceiling cameras in the conference rooms have been replaced by modern slideshow projectors, and the movie theatre is now used for corporate meetings. Opposite a large LCD screen broadcasting the BBC, a wall is covered with award certificates, most of them reading “Best Agency of the Year.” Just like the former

tenants, the new inhabitants of this building are handling, sorting and choosing information, although within a more capitalist framework. It is the headquarters of one of Sweden's largest PR consultancies.

The tenant firm is approximately as old as the building in which it resides. Although larger and more established than many of its competitors, this particular firm is in a sense proto-typical of the collective of firms of which it forms an important part. With roots in a political youth movement, it developed in close cooperation with industry organizations. The firm is providing organizational clients with advisory services in corporate branding, financial communications, public affairs and lobbying – a bundle of professional services, which together with product promotion, has become known as public relations (PR) consultancy.

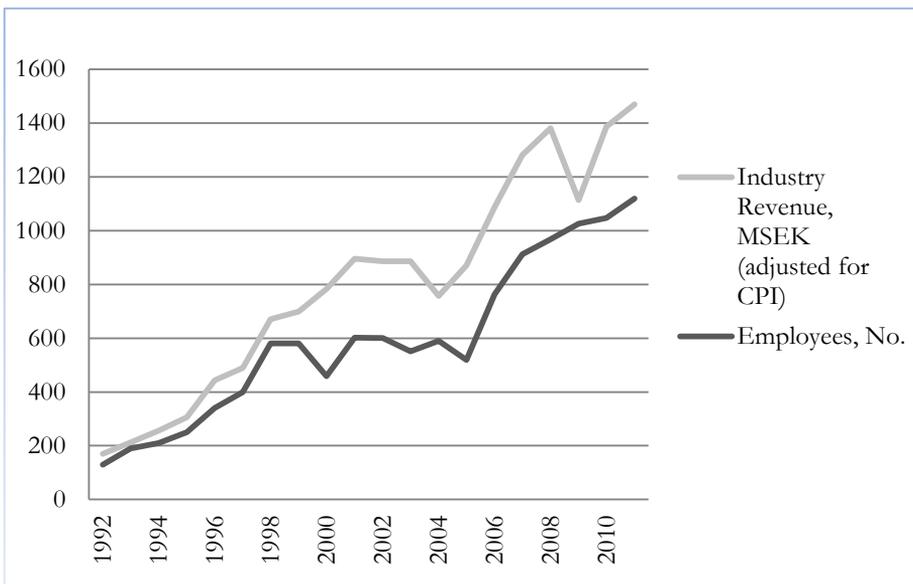


Figure 1.1 Revenues and Employees in the PR consultancy market 1992-2011.¹

Around this bundle of services, a small but thriving market has come into being. From encompassing only a few companies in the early 1970s, the market today is characterized by a few hundred companies, most of them based in Stockholm. Together, the largest 70 companies employ approximately 1,500 consultants, and earn a total net revenue of EUR 150 million annually. With the exception of two shorter recessions, growth curves have been steep; since market statistics became available in 1992, annual revenue increase has averaged 13% annually, with some

¹ These figures only account for industry organization PRECIS's members (approximately 10% to be added for smaller firms to total revenues).

years witnessing a growth as high as 40%. Two business associations have been established, as well as self-regulation in form of an ethical code. Clients are mainly found in the private sector, private organizations representing 70% of clients, and industry organizations another 10%.

Lingering Problems: Lack of Legitimacy and Lack of Clarity

The rise of this new market has not occurred unnoticed. The number of articles merely in the business media mentioning “PR consultancy” or “PR agency” in 2012 was more than tenfold the equivalent number in 1981. The market has become high profile after recruiting on a regular basis high-profile professionals from other fields such as media, finance and politics. The number of prizes and rankings is proliferating, and industry news is regularly covered in the national business press. But despite widespread use of PR services, attention is not evenly distributed across audiences, and far from all attention is positive. Individuals becoming consultants, notably from political and media fields, have been criticized and accused of being “sell-outs.” Antagonists are often found among journalists and politicians, but surveys have shown that even the general public’s trust in the industry remains low; in general surveys, more than half of respondents express poor or little trust in PR consultants (Larsson, 2007). Politicians have also reacted, and 21 motions appealing for different types of formal regulation have been submitted to the government since 1990. The following parliamentary interpellation, authored by an MP from the largest opposition party in the spring of 2012, is quite representative in its demands for legislation enforcing full disclosure of PR consultancies’ clients. She describes the situation as follows:

...We have a problem in Sweden. PR consultancies have a highly notable influence on the public debate and politics. In this way they become a political power, albeit a secret one. Behind the scenes, their clients are pulling the strings, trying via PR consultancies to turn the debate in a direction that favors their interests. PR firms often make efforts to employ consultants with diverse backgrounds, so that different consultants can take on different types of projects, depending on what image and contacts are likely to give maximum impact in any particular case. These consultants then “pick up” opinion leaders – such as politicians and celebrities – who help out in driving issues, with or without receiving compensation. A lot of the time these opinion builders do not even know who the original beneficiary is, that is, who is paying the PR consultancy. Since PR consultancies influence the content of media and in other ways

play a powerful role in the public debate, it is important for us to know who their clients are.

(Swedish Parliament, Interpellation 2011/12:303)

The interpellation government summarizes the classic criticisms against PR consultants; these are “shady people,” using a grey zone between market and politics to their own advantage, selling contacts and political know-how to moneyed client organizations. Their methods are accused of being too unbounded, too clandestine and amoral.

The response came from the Minister of Justice in a plenary debate a few weeks later. In her reply, she summarizes the main arguments commonly used by defenders of the market: that the government should not interfere with private businesses, that working methods are free for all organizations to use, and that the burden falls on politicians and others to critically evaluate all advocacy proposals presented to them:

As for PR consultancies, I can only conclude that they are private businesses. Imposing an obligation on private businesses to disclose their client database is out of the question. [...] What is very cumbersome if one would go in for regulation of this area is the following: What is a PR consultancy? What is advocacy? Where do you draw line, when writing e.g. a letter to an editor, between being influenced by a PR consultancy, and simply voluntarily engaging in an issue? Discussing these kinds of measures, we inevitably end up touching upon our constitutional rights; freedom of speech and freedom of the press. In my opinion we cannot start to poke around with constitutional rights without raising the question “What would be the next step?” These demarcation problems are of such magnitudes, in my opinion, that it is impossible to restrict or prohibit [specific PR practices]. I have no opinion of PR consultancies’ practices, nor do I possess any in-depth knowledge about them. I rather think that it is about ensuring that public authorities and others, both when using advertising agencies and when receiving information, remain unbiased, practice critical examination, and use more than one source of information.

(Swedish Parliament, Protocol 2011/12:96)

This debate adds complexity to the neat story of market success in form of offices with jacaranda walls and the steep growth curves in Figure 1.1. “PR consultancy” is here described as a commercial product, but it is not always *talked about* as a product; PR agencies are referred to as a political power, with other potential objectives than production efficiency or maximization of profits. The term seems laden with controversy, activating associations that lie far beyond the normal scope of a business; the

market raises questions of constitutional rights, of freedom of speech, invoking calls for elucidation of public authority mandate. Moreover, the product and its boundaries appear difficult to determine. In her statement the Minister sees herself obliged to ask for a definition (“*What is a PR consultancy?*”), and she claims to have little knowledge of PR consultancy methods. In her last sentence, she substitutes the term for “advertising agency.”

These two pictures, of a successful new market with steep growth curves and representative headquarters, on the one hand, and accusations of political deceit and infringement of constitutional rights, on the other, present a seeming contradiction. Literature on emerging markets shows virtual consensus around the hypothesis that clarity and legitimacy are necessary preconditions for market growth (Zuckerman, 1999, Kocak et al., 2009, Khaire and Wadhvani, 2010, Navis and Glynn, 2010). Initial confusion surrounding the names and contents of products and roles of actors could be signs of a creative start-up phase, but, over time, such market elements should reasonably be stabilized and socially accepted, or else be punished in the form of lower prices or lower critical esteem (Hannan et al., 2007, Hsu, 2006). So how can the PR consultancy market have grown so fast, and continue to grow, but still suffer from lack of clarity and legitimacy?

This book will revolve around this tension and this question, albeit in more theorized and operationalized forms. It will address the emergence of this rapidly growing market, but also the actors and the products that have come to shape that space.

Why Markets Emerge

A market is a market is a market. The idea of what a market is and what it can do is one of the most central images in modern Western societies, and hardly ever requires any explanation in everyday discourse. To most people, it means a place, virtual or real, where people come together and exchange goods and services. According to the International Encyclopedia of Economic Sociology a market is a “social structure for exchange of rights, which enables people, firms and products to be evaluated and priced” (Beckert and Zafirovski, 2006, p.423). Such a minimalist definition of markets is quite compatible with that of the father of classical economics, Adam Smith. In his theory, markets are basically a price mechanism; in an ideal market, products are interchangeable, and information flows freely between sellers and buyers, who pursue their own interests independently of each other, guided by the famous “invisible hand.” Under such conditions, a product’s price will inevitably approach its “natural” price level (Smith, 1937 [1776]). In this view, the ideal-type

of a market is a self-regulating, spontaneous order that rises and falls with demand, separated from the ideal-type of politics (Polanyi, 1957).

However, for the past three decades sociological research has come to question this notion of spontaneity (Aspers, 2009). By considering a multitude of actors, researchers have been expanding the notion of a market beyond the seller-buyer dyad by showing how markets are embedded in social interactions. White (1981), for example, challenged a central assumption of neoclassical economics when he asserted that producers do not operate independently. It is not information on consumers' demand that ultimately drives supply, but rather information on what other firms in that particular market do. In modern markets, White argues, sellers tend to be relatively few, and they seek market information with each other rather than with consumers. "Each producer is guided in choice of volume by the tangible outcomes of others producers – not by speculation on hypothetical buyers to its actions" (White, 1981, p.517). As such, markets are confined and defined by the networks in which they are nested (Granovetter, 1985, Powell, 1991, Padgett and Powell, 2013). Another strand of research has stressed how markets are embedded in legal and regulatory infrastructure (Fligstein, 1996, Fligstein and Dauter, 2007). This line of theory stresses the role of governments in markets, and stipulates that the need for predictable and stable legal contexts for competition and public infrastructure will "eventually send firms to governments" (Fligstein, 1996, p.229). Yet another body of literature stresses the cultural dimension of market embeddedness: as much as they are physical manifestations of exchange, markets are also *cultural myths*, embedded in the shared cognition of a society (Meyer and Rowan, 1977, Meyer, 1994). The importance of 'the Market' hence goes beyond the material reality of economic exchange; the idea of the market as a rational way of organizing is ascribed a considerable amount of symbolic power in modern Western society (Scott, 2008, Friedland and Alford, 1991).

The particular conceptualization of what a market is influences how researchers address market emergence. While classical and neo-classical economic models are more occupied with market equilibrium than with market emergence, dominant later economic works, following Schumpeter (1934), have come to stress technological and entrepreneurial innovations as a driving force in market emergence. The more constructionist approaches variegate this view; markets could certainly arise out of technical innovation, but also out of regulation. One such is the global market for CO2 emission rights, which is the result of a decided order, constructed by nation-states and transnational agencies (Engels, 2009, Buhr, 2012). In such cases, markets even take shape from an idea of how markets should operate, and they are organized to imitate the ideal-type of markets that economic theory stipulates (MacKenzie and Millo, 2003, Callon, 1998). Yet another example of markets are transformations of

previously non-market activities, an ideological drive to make products out of things or activities that were formerly handled in a different social system of exchange. Obvious examples are privatization of state-owned enterprises (Johnson et al., 2000), or the commercialization of academic research (Baldini et al., 2006, Colyvas et al., 2002).

Why a Swedish Market for PR Consultancy?

In the case of the Swedish PR consultancy market, the earlier literature has offered three main explanations for its rapid growth: a broad societal re-orientation towards market-based modes of organizing, the withering Swedish corporatist system of policy-making, and lastly, the mass media's more prominent role in society (Melin, 2004, Larsson, 2005a-b). On a theoretical level, these three explanations could be represented by three so-called societal meta-processes (Krotz, 2007); the *marketization* and the *de-corporatization* of Swedish society, and the *mediatization* of Western organizational life. Below, I will briefly summarize these processes, and finally explain why they will serve as starting points, rather than as explanations, for my study.

Marketization. During the past two decades Sweden, like many Western welfare societies, has witnessed substantial reform inspired by classic market models (Djelic, 2006b, Brunsson, 1994). Displaying obvious kinship to the culturalist view of markets outlined above, scholars use the concept of *marketization* to describe how the idea of the market and market competition is gaining ground and driving institutional change in several realms of society. Its diffusion, the argument goes, has been facilitated by globalization, causing templates to spread faster across geographical distances:

Market logics have moved in about a century from reflecting marginal ideas in a few liberal intellectual centres to becoming a structuring force of the trans-nationalizing world. Today we find that marketization permeates and structures policies, reforms, discourses and ideologies in many places in the world.

(Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson, 2006, p.25)

Marketization hence goes deeper than adopting superficial elements of market models, as it is manifested in many realms of organizational life: in the increasing amount of market organizations, in the re-structuring of firms to create internal markets, and introducing market-based methods such as e.g. cost-benefit analyses. Increases in antitrust regulation and corporate law, as well as in the introduction of market-inspired structures

and vocabularies to formerly non-market spheres of activity, such as public sector and civil society organizations, are equally “symptoms” of marketization” (Djelic, 2006a, Brunsson and Hägg, 1992, Brunsson, 1994, Friedland and Alford, 1991).

A particularly popular idea central to marketization is that of outsourcing – the notion that companies should concentrate on core activities and buy support functions from external suppliers. This idea has been paralleled by new professional groups and practices. Adhering to general patterns in the Western world in the wake of marketization, Swedish society has witnessed the birth of many new types of advisory collectives, so called ‘Others’ who instruct and form organizations’ behavior but seldom bear any direct responsibility for actions produced (Meyer 1994; cf. Brint 1994) and temporary knowledge workers (Barley and Kunda, 2004). In late modernity, buying various types of consultancy services – IT consultancy, Human Resources consultancy, management consultancy etc. – has become a part of being seen a legitimate organization in the eyes of others (Reed, 1996, Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002a, Furusten and Werr, 2005, McKenna, 2006). The new professional collectives of experts have in common that they are structured around commercial conditions rather than professional-ethical ones; the market is the very precondition for their existence (Furusten and Garsten, 2005, Brint, 1994, Alvesson, 1993). From a marketization perspective, PR consultancy hence fits in well with other new types of consultancy as yet another activity outsourced.

De-corporatization. Even though marketization is transnational in its character, it has local adaptations. In international discourse, Sweden is commonly described as one of the most corporatist nations in Europe, with a culture promoting “consensus and cooperation among relatively homogeneous interests” (Hillman, 2003, p. 461). Indeed, Sweden has a long history of political corporatism, i.e. a system where the access to policy processes of organized interests – trade unions, business associations, civil society organizations etc. – is controlled by the political system, theoretically in order to avoid power imbalances between interests (Naurin, 2001). Concerning relations between business corporations and politics, the corporatist model offers a given set of fora of direct interaction; labor negotiations between trade unions and business associations, corporate representation on government boards, government hearings with civil society organizations, etc. In fact, in Sweden, this policy of balancing interests of various organized groups, mixing regulated and free-market systems came to deserve its own international label: “the Swedish Model,” alternatively “the Scandinavian Model” (Thullberg and Östberg, 1994, Premfors, 1991, Abrahamson, 1999).

As a marketization wave has swept over Western societies, this strand of literature argues, it has been matched and underpinned by changes in policy, both when it comes to 'hard' and 'soft' regulations (Jacobsson, 2004). The Swedish political system, and with it the Swedish model, has undergone a significant de-corporatization since the beginning of the 1990s, in which corporatist institutions have lost their influence. Instead, a more pluralistic model has started to take shape (Lewin, 2006, Hermansson et al., 1999). In a pluralistic system, of which the US system is an archetypal example, the political sphere is seen more as an open, market-like arena where ideas and opinions compete with each other, and the best ideas are those that will catch the attention of the political decision-makers (Naurin, 2001a, 2007). Theoretically, in a pluralist model, the sender of the message should not be the main concern, but the content.

As early as in the Swedish State Commission on Power, Carlberg (1989) saw signs of such a transformation: in the previous, corporatist setting, a Swedish corporate manager who wished to affect a political decision relevant to his or her company typically faced two options: either to engage personally in politics or, more commonly, to get their business association to represent them in direct contacts with government officials. In a post-corporatist context, the same manager would most probably choose advocacy, i.e. build public opinion around the issue by the use of mass media (Carlberg, 1989, Naurin, 2001a, Melin, 2004). Also, recent reports drafted by researchers in political communication confirm that direct lobbying of MPs is becoming more important (Möller, 2009a, Svensson, 2012).

This tendency of corporations to use advocacy instead of other routes of influence has been observed in other countries, such as in Norway (Allern, 1997) and Great Britain (L'Etang, 2004, Miller and Dinan, 2008). Moreover, PR consultancies are only one form of organization devoted to new types of corporate-political relations. Think tanks have quadrupled in number in the US since the 1970s (Rich, 2004, Ricci, 1994), and, in Europe, there has been an explosion in think tanks, the majority of which are sponsored by industry organizations or companies directly, and often with neo-liberal agendas (Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009). Fries (2011) shows how Swedish business organizations have re-evaluated their core activities, going from labor market negotiations to pro-corporation advocates. Even in the US, where a pluralist system has long been in place, corporate advocacy has intensified. Barley (2010) describes a veritable institutional field of organizations devoted to political influence having emerged in the US since the early 1970s, among them indus-

try organizations, lobbying firms, think tanks, lobbying firms² and PR consultancies. From this perspective, the emergent PR consultancy market is but one sign of a transforming organizational field devoted to corporate-political interaction.

A fact that is often mentioned in conjunction with this type of explanation is the close ties between the new market and the political system. Five out of the seven largest Swedish PR firms were founded by ex-politicians, and approximately one fifth of consultants employed in Swedish PR consultancies have a background in one of the eight parliamentary political parties (Melin 2004; Larsson 2005b). With time, a significant flow of professionals both to and from politics has become established practice; there seems to be an inverse correlation between political majority and PR recruitment. In other words, when political mandates in parliament and larger municipalities change, the PR consultancy market is drained of consultants with known prior sympathies for the parties in power, and replaced by an influx of recruits from the losing parties (Tyllström 2009). Exactly how this flow of people is linked to growing de-corporatization is seldom theorized, but it is worth mentioning as it does have some bearing on the effects of the construction of the market, as we shall see in Chapter 4.

In a de-corporatization perspective PR consultancy does seem, at least in part, to encompass both transformations of old activities and elements that are genuinely new. Corporate activities aimed at influencing policy are not a new phenomenon in the Swedish context. However, using public opinion and the mass media as a channel to do so is fairly new in this particular cultural context. This leads me to the third meta-process explaining the emergence of the PR consultancy market, concerning mass media.

Mediatization. Public relations is normally defined as a marketing method with the main objective of getting corporate messages placed in unpaid mass media channels. In much of the communications literature, a growing importance of mass media is portrayed as a dominant factor behind the rapid growth of PR consultancy market. As early as the early 19th century, sociologists were occupied with the rise of the mass media and the new public opinion mechanisms it offered. Gabriel Tarde in his 1901 work *Opinion and the Crowd* theorized how new technologies such as the printing press, railroad, and the telegraph had changed the very premises of communications between individuals and groups, allowing messages to travel across distances (Tarde, 1969 [1901]). “How often

²In the Swedish context, PR consultancy encompasses lobbying services. There are hence no separate lobbying firms as in e.g. the US See Chapter 3 for a more detailed description of what PR consultancy entails.

one sees publicists create their own public!” Tarde exclaimed (Tardep. 282). This separation of physical worlds and belief systems involved a series of mechanisms. A general public replaced the crowd as the largest social mass, for the first time allowing collective identities to emerge without physical encounters. The distribution of Bibles had separated Church from faith, as priests were no longer the sole professors of the gospel. Physical-cognitive separation furthermore allowed for internationalization; Tarde mentions how socialists in France had more in common with socialists in Germany than with their fellow Frenchmen. And perhaps more fundamentally, the preconditions for diffusing, maintaining and disrupting institutions had radically changed, allowing for vast imitation and mimicry but also requiring new modes and means of managing publics and their opinions.

Tarde’s contemporary Max Weber framed public opinion building as a cultural problem and actually outlined a research manifest for a sociology of media organizations in 1910 – a project he never got sufficient support to finish since journalists refused to be surveyed (Weber, 1976 [1910], 1998 [1910]). In the seminal book *Public Opinion* from 1922 Walter Lippmann described at the very micro-level how opinion is fabricated by using symbols. Since then, the role of the mass media in modern societies has been thoroughly explored in contemporary social theory. Marshall McLuhan’s works (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967, McLuhan, 1964/1994) pursue an idea similar to Tarde’s, namely that of technological change functioning as a driver in the creation of a global village. Prominent thinkers have theorized how entities in modern society to an increasing extent tend to see themselves, and define themselves, from the outside rather than from inside operations. This research has often taken on a critical perspective, claiming that the influence of the post-modern mass media risks diluting democratic systems (Habermas and McCarthy, 1985, Bourdieu and Ferguson, 1998, Baudrillard, 1988, Habermas, 2006).

In the borderland between organization theory and modern communications theory, considerable research has been devoted to exploring how organizations have become increasingly dependent on external appreciation. Western societies have been subject to a mediatization, here defined as “the process whereby society to an increasing degree is submitted to, or becomes dependent on, the media and their logic” (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 114). Like marketization, mediatization is claimed to alter the conditions for organizational life on a profound level: communicating messages and activities through the mass media in order to ensure survival and secure legitimacy (Pollock and Rindova, 2003, Deephouse, 2000, Thompson, 1995, Wry et al., 2006). This affects budgets, recruitment and marketing strategies, and this has been found true not only for political organizations (Strömbäck, 2004) but also for businesses (Sahlin-

Andersson and Engwall, 2002a, Schulz, 2004, Pallas, 2007). According to Power et al. (2009) corporations' being increasingly apprehensive of their reputation is "both a symptom of late modern intensification of organizational and individual concern with appearances, and also plays a performative role in shaping managerial behavior" (p. 302).

For managers as well as political leaders, basic public relations know-how is today seen as a necessity (Petrelus Karlberg, 2007, Möller, 2009b), and the growth of the field of business journalism has also intensified the mass media's reporting on corporate actions and events (cf. Grafström, 2006, Kjaer, 2007). As apparent in the empirical chapters of this book, PR consultancies vary in content and kind but most of them bear the common trait of using unpaid media channels to promote their organizations' own interests, products and brands. In this perspective, the PR consultancy market is just one symptom of an overall intensification of the field of corporate communications.

How Markets Emerge

Marketization, de-corporatization and mediatization are hence three explanations commonly given to the emergence of a Swedish market for PR consultancy (Larsson, 2005a-b), but also to the emergence of PR consultancy markets in other national settings. One well-studied example is the British market for PR consultancy that developed during the 1980s and 1990s (L'Etang, 2004, Davis, 2002). Miller and Dinan (2000) found strong correlations between the British government's privatization of large state-owned corporations (British Airways, British Telecom, British Rail etc.) and the rise of the British market for PR consultancy. However, the authors warn that this correlation – measured as PR agency billings in relation to the magnitude of stock market launches – should not be mistaken for direct causality. For not only did privatization initiatives in the UK provide a burgeoning PR industry with clients, but the PR consultancies actually *boosted* privatization as well by taking an active part in the political processes and promoting the use of PR consultancy services.

One example of this dual relationship was how consultants representing large PR firms sat on the government-appointed marketing committees of every public flotation project, together with civil servants and relevant bankers and brokers. "The PR company often carried out the PR part of the strategy, but it could be contracted to another PR consultancy. [...] In addition, the PR agency appointed for the flotation directed the entire marketing effort, including directing and approving advertising work" (Miller and Dinan, 2000, p.15). Concurring with the marketization paradigm, the authors admit that the "the PR consultancy sector has an elective affinity with market ideology" (Miller and Dinan, 2000, p.27), but

the conditions of their market were initially set by other factors than mere ‘demand’:

The rise of the PR consultancy sector did not occur because of the emergence of new technology or because of a learning process inside business organizations, or because PR professionalism and expertise increased or because the PR industry became effective in marketing itself, although all these things arguably have happened. Instead, PR grew as a result of a decisive political and economic change of direction in government, in the context of the rise of the global power of TNCs.³

(Miller and Dinan, 2000, p. 29)

The point here is as thought-provoking as it is crucial: if one truly adheres to a constructivist approach to market emergence, meta-processes such as “marketization”, “de-corporatization” and “mediatization” do not qualify as satisfactory explanations for the emergence of the PR consultancy market. These meta-processes are not “waves” that “sweep” over societies. Instead, they are truly *meta* in the sense that they are made up of other meso- and micro-level processes. These, in turn, make up the larger transformation patterns that in turn guide micro-level interactions.

As I continue to explore the origins and practices of the Swedish PR consultancy market, the three meta-processes of marketization, de-corporatization, and mediatization will not be neglected. On the contrary, knowledge about them is an indispensable backdrop to studying and analyzing market emergence. Paraphrasing Miller and Dinan’s reasoning, I will not dispute their existence; marketization, de-corporatization, and mediatization have arguably happened, as ample empirical research has pointed to this fact. What is more, the emergence of a new market for PR consultancy, selling advisory services to corporations, often targeting a third party by using the mass media, should reasonably be expected to relate to these three processes in some way. Still, such claims tell us very little about *how* this has happened, by what processes those relations came into being, and by what mechanisms the processes were, and are, geared.

This is a fundamental stance in regard to the understanding of the remainder of this book; social reality is here seen as constructed in the interplay between dominant institutional norms that govern social actions *and* individuals and organization performing actions that either reproduce, create or alter these norms (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006, Friedland and Alford, 1991, Barley and Tolbert, 1997). This position acknowledges the ability of reality to appear stable and taken-for-granted

³ TNC= transnational company.

to the extent that it takes on a rule-like status of independent logic, all while recognizing the fact that actors might work to alter the social relations that define their reality. As they do so, they “produce new truths, new models by which to understand themselves and their societies, as well as forms of behavior and material practices” (Friedland and Alford, 1991, p. 254). The social structures called markets, consequently, must be studied at multiple levels of inquiry in order to be fully understood.

Legitimization of Market Categories

One of the most salient processes in nascent markets is that of the construction of market categories. Market categories constitute a specific type of social entity “that segregate things into groups and impose coherence” (Lounsbury and Rao, 2004) in order to “facilitate market exchange by providing bases for comparison and valuation” (Khaire and Wadhvani, 2010, p. 1281). Without common cues to guide market behavior in the form of categorization, producers and consumers will not be able to proceed to exchange; they risk confusion over what they are exchanging, where and with whom, and with what they are to compare it. To exhibit such clarity, categories should enjoy legitimacy.

Legitimacy is broadly defined as the “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions.” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). As such, “legitimacy is not a commodity to be possessed or exchanged but in a condition of reflecting cultural alignment, normative support, or consonance with relevant rules or laws” (Scott, 1995, p. 45). In this book, I will use Aldrich and Fiol’s (1994) division of legitimacy into two sub-types; *cognitive legitimacy* and *socio-political legitimacy*. *Cognitive legitimization* is the process whereby a new category acquires cognitive recognition and becomes taken for granted by people who care about the market, while *socio-political legitimization* is the process in which a category becomes regarded as valuable and right by the same audiences. In practice, category legitimization is the process by which categories become bounded, infused with meaning and gain general acceptance in their environments.

Categories are semantic objects (Negro et al., 2010b), and as such they are constructed in and by language. While many studies have stressed the role of entrepreneurial strategies of meaning construction and category legitimization (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994, Kennedy, 2008, Santos and Eisenhardt, 2009, Wry et al., 2011), research has also shown that new market categories are often dependent on some sort of intermediary – critics, mass media, ranking institutes – to evaluate organizational and product categories in order to receive meaning and legitimacy. Especially when new category meanings are contested, or radical in relation to existing

meanings, category legitimization has proved cumbersome, requiring extensive semantic framing across the audiences (Weber et al., 2008, Rao et al., 2003, Zelizer, 1983).

There are several types of market categories. As markets contain several elements, such as *the market place* – virtual or real, *roles of actors* – sellers, buyers and others involved in the exchange, and 3) *the product* itself, all elements should undergo categorization. Studying the construction of auction markets, e.g., the category of a market space becomes of primary importance; the process of making it a proper auction market category becomes a key object of analysis (Garcia-Parpet, 2007). Studying the construction of labor markets, forming of new professional roles could be an interesting vantage point (Barley and Kunda, 2004). The categorization of organizational forms is another highly interesting avenue of research (cf. Ruef, 2000). Most often when the word “market” is used, however, what is alluded to is product markets, i.e. markets that are defined in relation to a common product (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). People commonly speak of “the wine market,” “the mini-van market” or “the PR consultancy market.” In the case of markets for professional services, such as PR consultancy, product categories are in fact often used as interchangeable with their organizational categories. The product category “management consultancy,” for example, contains information about what is sold, but also who delivers it (management consultant).

I will delimit my study to following the development of PR consultancy as a *product category*. My reasons are three. Firstly, the category concept provides a vertical connection between micro-level construction processes and macro-level reality; a product category is per se an institution underpinned by categorization processes. Secondly, using product categorization as a proxy for market construction allows me to study how markets come about in language *both* through time and in practice; it adds horizontal plasticity to my study. Finally, as indicated above, in professional service markets, the product category tends not only to define the market, but also to encapsulate and reveal information about other market elements such as market space and actor roles.

Aim and Research Question

In this introductory chapter, I have described an empirical puzzle; that of a new market for PR consultancy exhibiting several signs of success, but which more than four decades since the first PR consultancies were founded still suffers from a lack of clarity and legitimacy surrounding its products and actors. I have formulated important basic assumptions: that markets are structures of exchange which are socially constructed, and that stable market categories, especially product categories, are im-

portant building blocks in these structures. I have identified marketization, de-corporation, and mediatization as three important concepts that relate to the construction of the market, but it is not yet known exactly *how*. My research question is hence the following:

Why and how has “PR consultancy” been constructed as a product category?

The aim in this book is twofold. Firstly, I wish to describe the development of the product category of PR consultancy, and put it into a broader context of cultural meta-processes. Previous studies of PR consultancy have most often been conducted within a framework of either political science or media and communication studies. But understanding why organizations buy this type of services to an increasing extent, and what they consist of, is important also for scholars of management and organization. Available data suggest that a major transformation of organizational life has occurred, with a focus on visibility, and this transformation cuts into and affects relationships between organizations and their audiences, policy makers, the mass media and the general public.

Secondly, I wish to deepen the theoretical understanding of how markets are constituted in and by language. This aim goes beyond the specificity of the market at hand, hoping to provide theoretical insights into how market elements are constructed in the interaction and contestation between different actors. By using a semiotic approach, I will focus the linguistic dynamics of product categorization, i.e. the process by which the category “PR consultancy” is (or is not) established as a taken-for-granted and legitimate concept to describe a set of services with clear meaning and boundaries. By studying how various audiences use language and practice to construct the market category, to provide it with boundaries and to fill it with meaning – but also to avoid doing so – insights are created on the semantic mechanisms of market construction.

Outline of the Thesis

In Chapter 2, I stake out my theoretical framework. I explain how I view market and product construction as cultural processes, and I review contemporary theory on market categorization more closely – its advantages and its shortcomings. By the end of the chapter, I combine these insights with a semiotic approach to build a *semiotic model of categorization* that will guide my empirical explorations. Finally the broad research question above is theorized in the light of the framework chosen, and reformulated accordingly. In Chapter 3, I define the category of “PR consultancy” in greater detail, and elaborate on the research design. I present

the types of data collected, how I collected it, and what methods I used to analyze it.

The empirical findings are presented in two separate, but interlinked parts. The first part, *Category Construction over Time*, consists of Chapters 4 and 5. In Chapter 4, I rely on interview data and literature studies to reconstruct a chronological narrative of the roots of PR consultancy in Sweden, complemented by and compared with business media archival data. How services have been labeled, what the labels have been claimed to contain, and what associations and boundary struggles they have evoked, at different points in time, are examples of guiding points in this chapter. In Chapter 5, I analyze the longitudinal developments in Chapter 4 and discuss them in relation to extant categorization theory. The analysis gives some preliminary answers pertaining to the lack of legitimacy and lack of clarity, but it also raises new questions motivating a deeper engagement with PR consultancy practice in Part II.

The second empirical part, *Category Construction in Practice*, focuses on how PR consultancy services are constructed in everyday interactions. In Chapter 6, I show how PR consultants themselves strategically use language to frame what they do as commodities, i.e. products of commercial value. To this end, I perform a discourse analysis of industry-produced texts: newsletters written by consultants. By analyzing textual outputs of PR consultants, the reader will hopefully get a fuller understanding of the “logic” of PR consultancy work. In Chapter 7, the final empirical chapter, I pursue this nearness to PR consultancy practice. In an ethnographic study of how meaning and boundaries of services are constituted in practice, I lend my eyes – the eyes of a cultural outsider – to the reader as I enter the field of PR consultancy myself as a participant observer. Each of these two chapters contains summarizing discussions, serving to identify central themes of the product, and hence of the market as a whole, which helps me further to achieve my aim and answer my research questions.

In Chapter 8, I summarize my findings. I discuss what they might imply in terms of furthering a theoretical understanding of the empirical phenomenon, and how this contributes to theory of market categorization. After this, I go on to discuss the effects of my results in a broader perspective of social theory, and more particularly in relation to marketization, de-corporatization and mediatization literatures introduced in this chapter. The relevance of my findings to contemporary organization theory is at the center of the discussion. I find that the emergence of a PR consultancy market can be seen as a case of all these meta-processes, but also of something new; a new type of cultural-cognitive market logic guiding organizational behavior towards an emphasis on external appearance but also large-scale semiotic manipulation.

[Chapters 2-6]

Chapter 7. In the Field of PR Consultancy

In this chapter, I enter the practice of PR consultants, taking part in their everyday activities, and asking questions about them. This exercise substantiates the themes emerging from Chapter 6, by giving them more flesh, but also contrasts them; studying practice crystallizes partially other dimensions of the product than text analysis does. The chapter consists of two cases, one from the field of Product PR, and one from Almedalen, a political fair.

[Case 1: “The Independent Denim Expert”]

Case 2: Almedalen – Lobbying for Bio Fuel

People

Magnus, *senior consultant and co-founder*, Strat PR, *former CEO of Agency X*

Erik, *senior consultant and co-founder*, Strat PR

Isabelle, *consultant*, Strat PR

My second observation is the Politicians' Week in Almedalen. Taking place every year for seven days in the beginning of July, it constitutes Sweden's single largest political event. The week was originally instigated by former Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1968, who did not want to leave his summer residence on the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea to deliver his yearly summer speech. From this single speech, the week has developed into a political fair, centered on the political parties; each parliamentary party has one day where the party leader holds a speech in the Almedalen Park in Visby, Gotland's medieval capital. From the park, the week has taken its popular name of just "Almedalen."

But the Almedalen week is no longer for politicians only. From a purely political event, the week has grown to be a hub of Swedish opinion building. In 2001, there were 52 pre-arranged events with fewer than 5,000 visitors. In 2012, 1,800 events attracted 17,000 visitors. Besides the national political parties, an abundance of actors participate; practically all industry organizations, public authorities, advocacy organizations, mass media outlets, and to an increasing extent also industry leaders, as well as the general public, of course. In Almedalen, they meet, discuss, mingle and party together, under informal circumstances. Most of the activities stick to the main format of a "seminar," a panel debate on a specific issue, normally with a few politicians and industry organizations on the panel, normally with a Q&A session towards the end.

The week has often been called a "politicians' office party," and there might be some truth in that. For many politicians, the week is combined with a private vacation; you can see the Minister of Integration walking by with kids and husband, or the secretary general of the Secret Service line up to buy burgers on the corner of the harbor. This direct access to the political elite is not specific to Almedalen but to Sweden in general. However, foreigners are often surprised, explains one informant that works regularly in Almedalen:

When you say this, that everybody who is somebody in Swedish public life spends one week together in the same location... International clients are shocked. When they come here, they're like "How do we *do* this?!" I say, I book a hotel room and then it's just a matter of waiting for an appointment. "But what should we do, should I take something with me?" And I say it's just to come, but perhaps the meeting will be over a wonky café table, and the politician might come in shorts, maybe they will bring their children.

(Interview, Swedish Public Affairs Consultant)

Not surprisingly, Almedalen is also a central event for Swedish PR consultancies. Even here, the increased legitimization of "PR consultancy" is visible (cf. Chapter 4). Whereas in the industry's early years some consultants would come to Almedalen as lobbyists and work discreetly to set up appointments between their clients and politicians, the largest PR agencies today have a very visible presence; the secretive lobbying pitches to politicians are complemented by agencies putting up their own tents with large logos, where they have debates and "mingles," i.e. semi-informal gatherings serving snacks and free drinks. In fact, to many PR agencies, the Almedalen week constitutes a commercial offering in its own right, represented by separate tabs on their homepages advertising "Almedalen packages" sold to companies who wish to influence policy.

To me, the Almedalen week hence constitutes a unique opportunity to study consultant-client interaction, especially within Public Affairs. The first time I went to Almedalen was the summer of 2009. As a new PhD student I was invited to present a research report on the flow of professionals between the political sphere and the PR sphere. The seminar was organized by a local art center, and I co-presented with Erik, a young PR consultancy founder working with Public Affairs, i.e. lobbying and corporate advocacy. After the presentation, I was invited to a party that his company threw together with a political journal. This contact turned out to be essential. The following two years I would come back to serve as an unpaid intern with his PR agency, taking an active part of the consultancy work.

My arrangements

The PR agency that I observed is founded by Erik and his colleague, Magnus. Neither of them has ever worked within their field of education: Erik is in his mid-30s, and a former law student who never worked as a lawyer but went straight into PR. Magnus is Erik's senior by almost 20 years, and took a degree in chemical engineering but then had a long career as a trade journalist within the high-technology sector before he joined a PR agency a decade ago. The two had met when they worked

together in the top management of a foreign PR agency's Stockholm office. In 2006 they left that company to start their own. When I started observing them, they had 12 employees and worked with most types of PR, except financial PR. The client base was evenly distributed between the private sector, industry organizations, and public authorities. Like most Swedish PR agencies, the agency (in this text is called *Strat PR*) was run as a partnership where Erik and Magnus owned a majority of shares.

During the spring of 2010, I had also interviewed Erik several times for my research, and had been invited to the agency's parties etc. for observation. I had also made attempts to shadow him; i.e. to follow him around in his daily activities. He had been positive about the idea but had not been able to bring me a concrete date, as he had been "crazy busy." As summer approached I e-mailed him and asked if it would be OK if I served as his assistant during the Almedalen week, supposing that the informal setting of the work might open up opportunities for observation. He was very enthusiastic about the idea, and we met for a briefing in mid-June on clients and projects. I also sat in on two preparatory meetings.

However, as Almedalen drew close, Erik disappeared. He answered neither calls nor e-mails. One day before my boat left for Gotland, I started calling his colleagues. I got hold of his co-founder Magnus, whom I only had shaken hands with earlier, at *Strat PR's* office during one of the preparatory meetings. He took me on. During the following week I would work with him on three projects, two main client missions and one large party.

The first client was the State Delegation of Technology, a temporary public authority set up by the government in order to encourage high school graduates to apply for higher education in science. The Delegation was about to be dissolved and now presented its final report to its principals, the government. *Strat PR* and a partnering advertising agency were hired to arrange seminar to present the report and to advertise it in a creative way. The strategy chosen was to have teenagers from the natural science program at the local high school push around a bike wagon up and down the slopes of Visby. The bike wagon was built especially for this task and involved technological gadgets like a portable hydraulic bike pump, recharging stations for cell phones, and free strawberries. The teenagers would park the wagon in busy pedestrian passages, help people passing by to charge their cell phones, pump their bikes, and offer them strawberries. While providing these simple services, they would advertise the seminar; where it would take place, and which education policy experts and politicians would participate in the panel. Throughout the week, Magnus and I trained the youths in presentation technique. We took turns buying strawberries, surveying the teenagers' schedules and approach, so that all details were right.

The second project was a lobbying project for a European munitions manufacturer. Recently, a parliamentary decision had been taken on buying new submarines, robot missiles and combat helicopters worth a total of SEK 4 billion, approximately EUR 470 million. The manufacturer, who didn't have previous close relations to the Swedish Armed Forces, now wanted to ensure that there was a proper public acquisition process, i.e. that special clauses in the defense laws, allowing the government to fast-track preferred manufacturers of war materiel, were not activated. Such a procedure, they thought, would be to their disadvantage. The project was a classic lobbying case as it involved long-term measures to influence a policy process. To this end, Magnus had booked meetings for two client representatives flown in from Central Europe with MPs from three political parties, all specializing in defense issues. I was not able to attend the meetings with the politicians, but I attended a luncheon with the client representatives and a series of seminars on the defense industry in which Magnus looked for clues about the acquisition process.

The third project was to organize a party for 400 guests in an open-air medieval church ruin. The party was co-hosted by the PR agency itself together with a Swedish think tank, an American TV channel and the same political magazine as last year. The goal was explicitly to be the "de facto party" of the Almedalen week; the party everyone talked about and wanted to get into. On a practical level, my tasks involved booking a screen projector, picking up computers and playlists, keeping in touch with people and, most importantly, checking and updating the guest list.

In this first year of participant observation in Almedalen, I was on a steep learning curve. The constant mix of tasks was overwhelming: one minute, I took notes from the Minister of Defense's talk on war materiel purchase; the next minute I would chase around central Visby looking for fresh strawberries, or a rental TV projector so that the former minister of culture could see a World Cup soccer game during the "de facto party" – otherwise he threatened not to come. Over the week, my role had rapidly gone from shadowing Magnus to participant observer to responsible organizer. When Erik, a few days into the week, had to cancel his appointments in Almedalen altogether, I was left alone with the responsibility to co-host the party myself, and coordinating the collaboration with the other host organizations.

My experiences from this first year of participating in the hands-on production of PR consultancy services circled around two main observations. The first was precisely the constant mix of things; it was remarkable how Magnus and his junior consultants moved so easily between types of tasks (from hyper-strategic to hyper-practical), between interacting with different types of people (high school students, politicians and advertising agencies) and organizations (think tanks, magazines, TV

channels and a PR consultancy organizing parties together), and handling different types of clients (state delegation and munitions manufacturer).

The second observation concerned the ad-hoc relation to time; many things just seemed to “happen” out of the blue; meetings were suddenly set up, dinners were arranged, participations were cancelled. Other things, like meetings or attendance lists, for which several consultants had spent hours preparing, could be thrown overboard with just a few minutes’ notice. I was startled about this relation to time. To me this was the ultimate representation of unpredictability, but no one seemed shocked. Together these two observations merged into one impression: chaos.

When I later interview Magnus on the outcome of the week, he says that the ad-hoc planning is a central element to the service he provides. Almedalen is a particular case, but changing plans at short notice is standard procedure, he says: “We are used to it. We must be open to it. Our clients are not always able to plan ahead. And besides, we work with media where things happen suddenly. We must always be prepared to do things suddenly so to speak.” The mix between practical and theoretical is also “central to PR,” a reason to “why it’s fun.” Having analyzed these primary impressions, I do not find them chaotic anymore, but see them rather as logical and recurring patterns of another type of work – PR consultancy work.

Lobbying for Bio-Fuel

As I plan for a second year of observations in Almedalen, I consider myself hence a bit prepared. In May 2011, Magnus still doesn’t know for sure if the agency’s clients want him to go. In mid-June, I receive an e-mail saying Strat PR will be going after all and that he’s fine with me “shadowing” him this year too.

As the Almedalen week approaches, I try to get hold of him. I e-mail, I call, but there’s no response. Just as Erik had disappeared the previous year, Magnus is nowhere to be seen. But this time I don’t panic; I know now that this is how it’s done. I buy my ferry ticket and plan to show up, reckoning I will find either him or someone else from *Strat PR* in Visby. After all, it’s a small town, the center occupying no more than a couple of square kilometers. Three days before going, June 30, I finally get hold of Magnus on his cell. He’s in a car, all busy with two kids in the backseat, driving around Gotland supervising a private summer house construction project, and preparing for the Almedalen week. He says I can follow him during the week on an energy project. We agree to meet the following Monday morning on a seminar about bio fuel.

Day 1: “A Good Person”

It is raining and quite windy, as we meet up a few days later outside a white plastic tent in the harbor. Even though the week has just started, the transformation of the normally quaint, medieval town of Visby the first week of July each year has already taken place: every corner of the town is invaded by organizations trying to get their message across, to someone. Every hotel, bar, office, school building or public facility is rented or occupied, and there is a plastic tent on nearly every lawn. The inhabitants of Visby sublet their gardens and homes, sometimes both, to an invading opinion elite clad in blue shirts and khaki shorts.

We say our hellos, and Magnus briefly summarizes the situation. One of his clients, a Nordic petroleum company, has bought an extensive network of gas stations, previously owned by Shell. Now they have advanced plans of rebuilding all these stations into providing only bio-fuels, re-inventing their company as “the environmentally conscious gas station” in the Swedish market. The most advanced plans are for E85, a fuel that consist of 85% ethanol, an alcohol produced from grains. But the plan also includes biodiesel, i.e. diesel that is not a bi-product of petroleum processing but distilled from various types of organic fats. Initially, there had been tax waivers to buyers of ethanol-driven cars, tax subsidies per liter, and also a discount when buying a new one, along with exemption from car tolls and parking fees for vehicles in many major Swedish cities. However, this system of fiscal advantages had recently started to be dismantled; tax discounts per liter had disappeared for ethanol, and they had been heavily reduced for biodiesel. The aim for Magnus this week, he explains, is to map the regulatory landscape around bio fuel, and to identify opportunities to influence policy to the company’s favor, before the client enters the Swedish market. Pave the way, so to speak. I will assist him in this.

The Swedish Farmers’ Confederation (LRF) is hosting this first seminar of the week. Judging from the audience, agricultural policy seems to be a male-dominated field, as there are quite a few middle-aged men in sailing jackets in the audience. I see the Oscar Jacobson brand in several places – a Swedish, preppy brand for men above 45. The second smaller distinguishable group is young women, probably activists and corporate CSR officers. Magnus and I are hence quite representative of the profile of the group. There are presentations by various people, an engineering student doing his master’s thesis from Lund, presented his masters thesis on the use of bio-fuel. In the panel after the presentations, there are only men, representing business organizations (Swedish Energy, Swedish Forestry etc.) and corporations (Scania, Volvo). I can’t really tell them apart. As they speak Magnus listens attentively while making sparse comments

to the ongoing debate on his notepad. About one farmers' union representative, I can see that he writes "good person."

The following Q &A session is busy. A woman in her late 50s stands up. In a very blunt, but down-to-earth, she starts to speak: "Why is ethanol so degraded in public discourse?" She is referring to recent claims that ethanol, which is predominantly extracted from various crops requiring land and farming resources that could be used for food production. "Why is only ethanol said to compete with food? What about T-shirts, golf courses...?" As she continues it becomes clear that this woman is used to speaking in public, backing up her rhetorical question with commensurable facts; "Reports say that we can increase ethanol production yet another 15% before it starts intruding on food. This really upsets me!"

While the woman is still talking, Magnus takes up his smart phone and starts writing a text message. Over his shoulder I can see the two words: "Well spoken!"⁴ He scrolls in his Contact list until he finds the number, and sends it off. The lady finishes her inflammatory speech, and sits down.

Once the seminar is over, Magnus moves fast towards the exit. It has stopped raining, and while we linger outside the entrance, we see Anitra Steen, CEO of the Swedish alcohol monopoly, and wife of the former Prime Minister Göran Persson pass us. We remain quiet.

When the lady with the ethanol question comes out, Magnus approaches her and gives me a wink to come along. He says:

"Hi! Did you get my text?"

She looks startled, as if she recognizes him but can't remember his name.

"Yes, I just replied, but I didn't know who it was from. Thank you!"

"No but I mean it", Magnus says. "You spoke extremely well. I was just lucky to still have your number.

"Thank you. I just get so angry when I hear ethanol being discredited like this."

Magnus explains his mission for the petroleum company and introduces me, without affiliation;

"This is Anna, working with me this week."

The lady presents herself as Annika, and suddenly I understand who she is; she is Annika Åhnberg, the former social democratic minister of agriculture. She explains to Magnus that she has abandoned politics completely and also her top management position in a large Swedish MNC in the energy technology field. She now serves on the board of the Royal Swedish Academy of Agriculture and Forestry and runs her own consult-

⁴ Swe."Väl talat!"

ing company. Magnus asks, with an air of it being the most natural question in the world:

“Maybe we could work together somehow?”

Annika is positive.

“Yeah sure, just call me. I am very eager to do something about this. I support all initiatives for this cause.”

While we’re walking towards the inner bay of the harbor, Magnus comments on Annika Åhnberg.

“It’s funny, that woman talking...”

”Annika Åhnberg?”

“Yes, you know her?”

“Well, she used to be in the government...”

”Yeah but in what department?...”

I am a bit astounded. Does he really not know this? He just asked her to work with him! Or maybe he’s testing me? I decide to express myself diplomatically.

“Agriculture, I think.”

“Well at first I didn’t recognize her, but then when she presented herself in the seminar, it just rang a bell. We used to work together, ten years ago or so. After leaving politics, she had a room in our [PR] agency. She is so sharp. She has such a good way of expressing herself, factual and clear. You get a feeling that her mind works faster than everybody else’s in the room. A very good person. I hope she’ll join us in this.”

From my earlier interviews, I had had hints that this is how it works, but now I had it confirmed; that the top politicians joining PR consultancies do not actually *work* there. They have a room at the PR agency that they use occasionally, a business card with the PR agency’s logo on it and then they charge the PR agency for hours spent on various projects. A subcontractor, of sorts.

Despite being better prepared than last year, I am already a bit astounded, just one hour into the week. The sophistication and swiftness of Magnus’s play-it-by-ear strategy is striking. There was no possibility Magnus could have known that Annika would attend the seminar, and he hardly recognized her at first. But from hearing her speak just a few sentences, he rapidly singled her out from all the other 100 people in the audience, identified his old connection with her, found her number in his old phone book – where he must save a thousand old phone numbers, sent her a text, waited for her outside, re-established the personal connection, briefly presented his case and tied a potential ally to his cause. The whole series of events took a maximum of 20 minutes, but he drew on his whole professional arsenal to perform it; network contacts, politi-

cal know-how, years of experience, and last but certainly not least, his amiable personality. A beautiful display of PR consultancy in action? We decide to sit down at a nearby restaurant on the Harbor Square. As we wait for our food, Magnus starts elaborating the mission to me in closer detail;

M: “We need to do two things; to create a clear argumentation strategy and to identify which persons are good to have on your team.”

A: “So Annika, she could help you shape the arguments?”

M: “Exactly. As you heard this morning, all actors say the same thing: Policy in this area is too unstable, and developments are going in the wrong direction. And I have still not been able to figure out why ethanol is being dragged through the mud, where all the bad talk comes from. So we need, as you said, to find allies, and also find which politicians have a say.”

A: “But on a concrete level, what does [your client] wish to accomplish? Policy decisions?”

M: “Partly that, like tax reliefs at the station. Then second, to crush this myth about the substitutability⁵ of ethanol. It is simply not true that ethanol is competing with food.”

Magnus sounds like an echo of Annika’s recent speech, and I cannot see where this is coming from, whether this is his own view or a quick adoption of hers to make his argument look more orderly.

M: “Then there are ‘auxiliary taxes’: tax relief for environmentally friendly cars.⁶ For producing them, and buying them but also in the form of exemption from car tolls for green cars. Things indicating that using bio fuel should be encouraged.”

A: “Also car rentals?”

M: “Yes, and company cars.⁷ But what we see now is that people, when they buy a car, they get compensated for the price difference between an ethanol-driven vehicle and a gasoline one. But you don’t get rewarded, you get nothing extra. So, to conclude, we want 1) subsidies at the gas station, reflected in fuel price levels, and 2) subsidies when you as a private person buy and drive a “green” car.

⁵ *Swe.* utbyttbarhet.

⁶ *Swe.* miljöbilar.

⁷ *Swe.* tjänstebilar.

The project started with the client asking for a report from Magnus' PR agency, with an overview of policy, regulation and actors in the bio fuel field. But Magnus felt that more could be done.

“We said to the client ‘you need to go to Almedalen.’ And they said, ‘no, we don’t have time.’ Then we thought at the agency that we would go instead. So we’re doing this mapping now, attending seminars and trying to identify people and angles.”

Magnus shows me the official homepage of the Almedalen Week, where visitors can login and put together their own personal schedule of seminars, in the “My program” application under the “Visitor” tab. He shows me his planned seminars during the week, and gives me his own login so I can see.

“See, I have listed the 7 most relevant events here. Already this afternoon there is one at Green Car Owners⁸ at the same time that I would need to attend to a telephone conference. Do you think you could go in my place?”

I recognize the familiar feeling from last year, a simultaneous feeling of being trusted and feeling lost. Somehow, Magnus must know what he’s doing.

“Ok, sure. What should I look for?”

“Good politicians, whether he or she might be interested in this. No need to take extensive notes. It is really about identifying good people.⁹ Then there are two more seminars this afternoon. Tomorrow afternoon there is also something on ethanol. But I am double-booked, actually triple-booked. Maybe you could attend one of these seminars too?”

“Sure.”

Magnus then continues to describe the three other clients he is working for during the week; he is coaching a PR manager of a cable TV provider who is participating in a radio debate, arguing for more radio frequencies. He is also trying to sell media training education to a public authority based in Visby. And then there’s the yearly party in the church ruin of course.

In addition, Magnus is also pitching for a renewed contract on the State Delegation on Technology project from last year, promoting science education for youths. But since the client has disappeared since then – the Delegation has been dissolved by government decree, he and the partnering advertising agency are trying to find a new sponsor in the Swedish Association of Graduate Engineers, who are not yet onboard. It

⁸ *Swe.* Gröna Bilister.

⁹ *Swe.* ”urskiljning av personer”.

would be a shame just to drop the project now that it's on the road, Magnus reasons.

“We have momentum, and we want to keep it going. But we have to find the right angle and the right organization.”

In the industry organization PRECIS' documents, the role of PR consultancy painted that of a cold-minded expert uniquely serving their clients and protecting their interests, often comparing the professional role to that of lawyers or management consultants. But when Magnus speaks, this image seems inadequate to describe how PR consultancy products come about. Instead, quasi-political initiatives seem to be proactively taken at the firm level or sometimes individual level. Even in the Denim Workshop case I saw proof of such PR firm-driven initiative, and it has arisen in several interviews. I decide to ask Magnus straight out:

“So it is often like this, that you come up with an idea, before you have a client?”

Magnus looks at me, surprised:

“But why, yes. ALL the time. With the State Delegation on Technology it was certainly like that. We were working for two or three years before we found the client. And then I was so persistent, kept nagging, and then finally I got the job.”

It actually seems like Magnus sees this as *his* project; he came up with it, designed it, found a client, ran it for them for a few years. Now, when the client is no longer sponsoring it, he wants to take his project elsewhere.

“But why?”

“Because I felt for this issue! I believe that the lack of scientific knowledge is a crucial deficiency for our country. And that too few people realize this. With digital TV it was the same. For a long time I had a general feeling of “something is going to happen soon.” Then I heard that a decision was taken by the parliament to appoint a state commission to administrate the transformation of broadcasting from analogue to digital. So I called that new commission. If you ask the first director general of that commission, he would describe the course of events like this: he got a room and a desk with a phone on it, and on the first day at work, that phone rang and it was ‘Hi, it's Magnus from PR Agency X. Could I do this for you?’ Then I explained what I had in mind.”

But these four projects – the Nordic petroleum company, the cable TV manager, the public authority media training, the Swedish Association of Graduate Engineers - are not all the projects Magnus will be doing in Almedalen.

“There is actually another thing that Erik and I are working on, concerning the pension fund system. It is a bit secret I guess. The basic idea is this: With the new pension system, there are a tremendous number of brokers¹⁰ earning tremendous amounts of money. People who are just profiting, earning money, without anyone knowing what they’re doing. You just have to calculate how much money in an interest-on-interest economy that we ordinary pension fund savers have lost in the 15 past years, since the new system was introduced. It’s awful! Horrendous! I mean, this is our money! So we’re sketching on a system where you’d have maybe three options, one a little more risky, and one that follows index etcetera. Actually, that would be a bit of a return to the old system.”

“But this sounds like a big project?”

“Yes, it’s huge! The ideal would be if we could find a consortium. We have some contacts with one of the large mutual funds, they might be interested.”

Magnus and I work for a while side by side. I collect myself: I have three more seminars the same afternoon, and then another X the coming days. I need to go off to the second seminar of the day. I stand up. I feel as though I have to set the expectations to the right level.

“ So. I’m leaving. But you get what you get. I mean I am a researcher, not a political analyst.”

Magnus smiles, kindly: “No Anna, you know just what we need.”

I doubt this statement completely. I feel like a rookie. But Magnus is the uncrowned master of moderate flattery, so I make myself believe this. I go off.

On my way out, I visit the washroom. As I enter, a famous Swedish fiction writer whom I have only seen in newspapers and on TV before, comes out of the gentlemen’s. I am a bit star struck. Just as I come out on the street, I see the party secretary of the Moderate Party, Per Schlingmann, passing by accompanied by... yes, the Prime Minister, Fredrik Reinfeldt, with his bodyguards closely behind him. *Welcome to Almedalen*, I think to myself.

I spend my afternoon in various seminars. Most of what is said is a repetition of the morning’s panel discussion. I finally meet up late afternoon with Magnus at a debate with the minister of trade, Ewa Björling. Overall, the talk is not so interesting, very politically correct. The sun is really hot, and after a while I see Magnus in the shade. After the debate is over, Magnus goes off to take a power nap on the lawn in the Almedalen Park, while I have a late takeaway lunch on a nearby bench. After the nap, he

¹⁰ *Swe.* fondförvaltare.

comes back, and I debrief him on the other seminars. He hears me out, then he asks:

“So... Do you think Ewa Björling is a good person?”

“And you ask that question to a PhD Student specializing in Organization Theory? I have no idea!”

Magnus laughs, continues:

“No, but the main question is: Does she have any reason to listen to the ethanol producers?”

“You mean like national-political reasons?”

“Yeah, or others. We could take a Nordic angle on this. After all, this is a Nordic corporation starting up in Sweden, of course they should talk with the minister of trade who also happens to be the minister of Nordic cooperation.

I get nervous, I feel he is expecting too much from me. He must see that I have no clue. On the other hand, he doesn't seem to be bothered by my presence. I can't say if it's just Magnus' chivalrous ways – he is surely a true diplomat who seems to get along with most people – or our personal chemistry, but I don't feel intimidated. Someone calls Magnus, he picks up. I overhear the conversation:

“Which country are you in? Ah. [...] I'm in Almedalen with Anna Tyllström. You know, she's following me this week.”

He talks with the person in the other end about a dinner the same evening with yet another company he wants to get as clients, as I understand it. He hasn't told me about them though. He hangs up. I have no idea who that was. Who could it have been, who is abroad and yet knows my name? He had seemed so openhearted this morning about clients and projects, but there is one that he hasn't told me about. What other clients hasn't he told me about this morning?

I decide to change the subject, and ask him about his methods;

“So this is how you run these lobbying cases, you brainstorm with somebody junior?”

“Yes, I normally brainstorm with younger consultants, to get ideas. Then Erik and I get it together in the end. You know, to get things in order.¹¹”

As we head off for our next event, Magnus continues talking. I feel as I am in the TV series *West Wing*, where young political analysts must walk with the senior staff in order to get time with them. Except that we are

¹¹ *Sve.* ”få ordning på det.”

in a dazzling hot summer vacation paradise on an island in the Baltic Sea, and I am an intern.

“I mean, we have young political scientists [in the agency], trained people. But sometimes I feel that this is not enough, the formal training, they don’t teach you this in the Political Science 101 course.”

We reach the harbor. Magnus goes to the temporary washroom in the harbor area. I don’t want to abandon the topic of good and bad consultancy just yet, so as he comes back, I ask:

“So a good PR consultant is a former journalist?”

“Yes, I use that background a lot. My colleagues are political scientists, and they read. I call. I don’t stop calling until 5 pm. I can call 20 people, and they all describe the same thing but differently, because that’s reality, a bit different to everyone.”

“But with this mission... I haven’t yet succeeded in finding the soft tissue¹². I still haven’t understood why the government is increasingly negative towards ethanol, who’s pushing this in the opposite direction.”

Our new seminar facility is a boat. “Tre Kronor” is a 45-meter-long brig, built as an exact replica of a 19th-century navy cargo ship. She is sailed down from Stockholm to Visby every year to serve as a seminar hall - below deck, there is a small conference room for 50 people - and the ship’s hand-crafted feel and use of windpower has made her an especially popular rental among environmentalist organizations. This afternoon’s host is Green Motorists, a lobbying group for “environmentally friendly motoring.”

In contrast to the previous four seminars, this seminar is spot on; both issues and representatives are highly relevant to Magnus’ cause. The seminar starts with a presentation by two men from Green Motorists. I recognize one of them; he is a former Green Party campaigner and a former PR consultant, and I have previously interviewed him for research purposes. He and his colleague are quite demagogical in their approach - not unlike car salesmen, actually. Still, they provide a lot of useful facts; statistics on sales over time, distributed over different green car classes and types of bio fuels, and an overview of recent policy changes. After this, two representatives from the car industry, Volvo and Nissan, share their views. The car manufacturers are despairing, claiming to have spent big money on developing new, more efficient ethanol engines, and now, in time for the launch of these engines, politicians are

¹² Swe. “mjukdelar”

scrapping the tax benefits for ethanol, resulting in plummeting sales. The share of ethanol-driven vehicles among new cars has decreased dramatically, from 50% to below 5%, in just three years. Also, the requirements for a car to be classified as a “green vehicle,” and hence qualify for purchase discounts, have become considerably stricter. The Volvo representative is desperate when he speaks of the launch.

“This is the engine everybody asked for three years ago, and now nobody wants it!” he exclaims.

Two local politicians, one from Gothenburg municipality and one from up north, both social democrats, now raise their voices. They are there because they have been awarded “Best Green Car Municipality of the year” by Green Motorists. Considering that the competition to attract elected politicians to events in Almedalen is razor sharp, this contest must be regarded as a smart move.

The lady from Gothenburg stands up, and agrees with the car industry representatives about the difficulty of predicting policy being a major obstacle to efficient public environment plans. She says that the major bottleneck is the ministry of finance.

Thereafter, the former PR consultant from Green Motorists ends the session with an appeal urging all actors in the room to come together in drafting a letter to the government. In this letter they would demand a list of concrete policy goals, for which he has already listed bullet points: subsidies, tax rewards, and classification limits in detail.

Magnus has somewhat of a poker face, so I cannot read his reaction. But I reckon this must be a jackpot for him; an extant network of powerful organizations that wish to accomplish the same thing as his client?

Afterwards there is mingling on the deck with sparkling wine and crackers. Annika Åhnberg is there, with her dog. For entertainment, Green Motorists have hired an impersonator, who makes embarrassingly bad impressions of Swedish politicians. Magnus and I sit down a bit farther away by the railing. Magnus is thoughtful, reflecting actively and openly, in a sort of verbal protocol.

M: “Maybe the smartest thing for my client would be to join these people. Maybe that would be the most honest thing. To say: ‘You have to find allies, you can never do this on your own. You need help in this.’ That would be an advanced way of us saying ‘Sorry, we cannot help you.’ That is one way to attack the problem. But then you have to be a consultant, as well.¹³ If I tell the client that the best thing is to join an exist-

¹³ *Sve.* ”man måste vara konsult också”

ent network, then that would be bad – for us of course, since there would be no work. But it would also be, like, as if we left them with nothing.¹⁴ Which is not fair. They come here, expect to get help and then we say that there’s nothing to be done!”

A: “So what is the solution?”

M: “I still have to think about that. Maybe the solution would be an alliance with the social democrats, Volvo, the competitor Preem...”

A: “But there seems to be a network already, as we just saw?”

M: “It might look like that, but I wouldn’t think it is that fixed. And we’ll say to the client, that at the same time, [taking initiatives together with them] will make you more renowned. In certain cases they should approach ministers, in others maybe the social democrats in Stockholm, Nissan or Volvo. And maybe Green Motorists. That would be on a small scale, but a good scale.

Feeling somewhat like a useless intern, I try to assist in the brainstorming.

A: “Well Green Motorists seems to have made a smart move with the prize, awarding politicians like that. Maybe you could establish a prize? A truck manufacturer I interviewed started an international competition, ‘The Best Truck Driver of the Year.’ They seemed really happy with it.”

M: “Ah... a prize, I like that.” Magnus looks interested. “But to whom?”

From where he’s sitting at the railing, Magnus has an overview of the deck. His gaze scans the middle-aged crowd watching the impersonator, whose act seems so be coming along better now. He says:

M: “Who is *not* here right now, Anna? Young people! Maybe a competition for the best young green driver? Maybe look at people taking their driver’s license? Big city youth.

A: “Youth car insurance policies could be another point of identification?”

M: “Yes, you have to get target groups that are not normally targeted... women, youth.”

By now, it is almost 7 pm. We talk a bit more about Magnus’ house construction project, and how he started his own company, something he did mostly to avoid¹⁵; avoid having bosses, and avoid stockholders. We make some preliminary plans for the coming day. After agreeing to call each other the following morning, we part, and I go home.

¹⁴ *Swe.* ”lämnar dem i sticket!”

¹⁵ *Swe.* slippa.

Day 2: Flyers, Fuel and Media Coaching

Around 11 a.m., as I sit and flesh out my notes from Day 1, Magnus calls me on my cell phone. He wants to ask me for a favor for which he “would be so, so grateful”: that I distribute flyers for a seminar that Strat PR is arranging. Time is short; Magnus would join in himself at 2 p.m., but the seminar is at 3 p.m., just a few hours away, and the agency needs somebody on the streets *now*. Apparently something has gone wrong with the staffing, and they’re missing people. He doesn’t tell me who the client is, or where the seminar is, just where to show up. From the lack of detail, I gather that it is not one of Magnus’s own projects; otherwise he would have mentioned it to me yesterday. Or maybe not? Since I have a general “yes” policy, I say yes, and get into my car to drive into Visby. As I arrive on the designated spot in a church ruin, a bit further into the town center, I am met by Isabelle, one of the agency’s younger consultants whom I’d met the previous year. I get a hug, an enthusiastic “thank you!” and a stack of flyers advertising a seminar on the conditions for independent actors in the Swedish film industry. People on the panel are an odd mix: one semi-famous actor, a blogger, the former minister of trade and communications, and a movie director who used to do comedies in the 1980s.

As I stand there in a sloping cobblestone street with a stack of flyers in my hand, I realize I hate this type of job. The symptom of my resistance is physical, a sort of tingling in the arms. I have done this so many times working extra when I was younger (as a telemarketer, coffee shop assistant, etc.) - you have to SELL. Lend your body and personality to whatever the cause may be. Maybe this is why I became an academic, so I would not have to do precisely this? I yearn back to the strategic reasoning of the previous day. At the same time, I know that Magnus himself had been distributing flyers in the morning, and that Isabelle is doing it right now further up the slope; that it’s a part of PR consultancy work. (On repeated occasions, Magnus has told me that the mix between “practical and theoretical” is absolutely central to PR consultancy.) And since PR consultancy work is what I am here to study, I should take part. So I brace myself, and take the plunge.

After a rocky start, I actually find a flow; I am able to detect the easiest target group; older female tourists, and to condense the message to the most crucial point, using the semi-famous celebrities’ names: “Lasse Åberg¹⁶ in half an hour? Lasse Åberg and Alex Schulman¹⁷ in half an hour?”

¹⁶ Movie director.

¹⁷ Blogger.

As more and more people take the flyer, the tingling in the arms subsides and eventually another force takes over, a combination of winner's instinct and problem-solving obsession. For this is the flip side of the selling coin; once you've gotten into it, it gets easier and easier, until it even becomes fun. The act of selling is a spectacle; a role-playing game, circling around one question only; *how can I best persuade the next person I meet to accept what I am offering?* At that point, the offering itself is no longer of importance; I could be selling lavender shampoo, executive education or, for that matter, munitions. When one of the older ladies asks me, flyer in hand, for the venue, I realize that I do not know this. Isabelle hasn't told me and I had forgot to ask. I have to read aloud from the back of the flyer.

By 2.55 p.m. I am all out of flyers, and it's time to leave for the next seminar on energy, taking place at the University College of Gotland. One of Sweden's most dominant industry organizations, Car Sweden, is arranging a panel debate on alternatives to fossil fuels for heavy transports. On my way down to in the harbor area, I pass a small group of people looking more beautiful, taller, and better dressed than the average Almedalen mix of political analyst and tourists. In their midst, I see Erik. This is the film seminar starting.

As I enter the College, the cool air-conditioned hits me like a wall. After a few hours outside in 35 degrees and sunshine, the sudden drop in temperature makes me dizzy. But contrasts do not stop there. The gap couldn't be wider between distributing flyers for the independent actors' trade union, and the crowd in the college auditorium. I am back to politics again, and this time it's the big guys talking. The relative importance of the hosting organization *Car Sweden*, built up over decades by Saab and Volvo and their subcontractors, is reflected in the setting; the main hall is huge, food is free, and the participants are more distinguished; several members of parliament, head experts from the traffic and energy authorities, CEOs and vice CEOs of several oil companies, and Volvo. These are the people with actual power. The audience as well as the panel is mainly made up of middle-aged men in blue shirts and khaki shorts or slacks. Out of perhaps 150 participants, maybe 20 are women, including the event hostesses and myself.

The outcome of the discussion is also illuminating. Volvo repeats its lament from yesterday, but meets resistance straight away from the experts at the Swedish Transport Administration. They are very critical of ethanol, and accuse ethanol of being a "fad" that politicians had been too eager to join too soon. If that trend is subsiding, they seem to be saying, then that's all for the best. The future lies in biogas and electric cars, both state experts seem to think. I will bring this information home

to Magnus; yesterday, the ministry of finance was identified as an enemy of ethanol, and here we have crucial state-employed experts that are against. There is hence resistance occurring in multiple places in governmental administration, simultaneously.

After one hour, I have to sneak out, as I am to follow Magnus in his coaching of the PR guy from the cable TV company, here called T-Com, in the radio discussion. The broadcast is live, from the radio station's tent, right at the back of the university college building. It has now started to rain, and we stand outside the tent, trying to look in through the plastic windows. Magnus feels we should try to get inside. At the entrance, a guy stops us. His mien is not hostile, but curious as he asks us:

"Hi, where are you from?"

"We're from T-com", Magnus responds.

The guy looks utterly surprised;

"Oh, but *I* am from T-com. I don't recognize you!"

Oh-oh. Are we caught in the pretend-to-be-something-else game? Magnus quickly leans over to the man, mumbles in his ear. I guess he explains that he comes from *Strat PR*. But still, it's quite remarkable that a communications staff member at T-com does not recognize Magnus, or know that he would be there. Are the media training services that Magnus is providing the PR manager with a secret? Maybe media training is a personal thing, yet I don't understand the mechanisms at work here. We are let inside. However, the sound is bad, so we immediately go outside again. A huge van, whose side is covered with a picture of a very up-front picture of a fetus, drives slowly past us. It has extremities and a head, and is covered in blood – the remains of a late abortion in size 1:2500. In Sweden such anti-abortion campaigns are quite uncommon, and I can't help staring. Magnus looks at it briefly, says "Euh", then goes back to focusing on the broadcast again.

The PR manager does well, in Magnus's view, and we go on to see if the Car Sweden seminar is still on. It isn't. We then continue to another client, outside the city walls in fact, where Magnus is about to get another media training project. I later find out that he lands the deal.

Day 3: The Mingle

The main attraction of Day 3 is the party, or "The Mingle." The mingle was at least as large as last year, but this time, I haven't participated in the organizing. The partners are the same as last year. Magnus has allowed me to bring four friends. A consultant from *Strat PR*, whom I don't rec-

ognize, meets me at the door. I say my name. She looks excited: “Oh. *You’re* the secret person working with us!”

“Everybody” is there; it is really the *de facto* party of Almedalen. I see famous or semi-famous faces at every bar table. After a while, I meet the husband of an old study mate of mine, who works as edition manager at the political magazine co-hosting the party together with Strat PR. He is very respectful and shows a genuine interest in my research. He is joined by two very tall men who turn out to be an editorial writer at the dominant liberal tabloid, and the chief editor of a business weekly, respectively. When I explain why I’m there, they cannot believe their ears. Their opinion is unanimous:

“I can’t believe that *Strat PR* let’s you in on this. They are very, very brave!”

As my friends and I are about to leave, the CEO of the political magazine whom I had worked with the year before grabs hold of me: “This year you won’t do anything, Anna!” He then treats my friends and me to free wine, telling them and the surrounding crowd, mainly a bunch of political bloggers, that “Anna did such an *amazing* effort last year!” I take this with a large pinch of salt. This was actually one of the largest eureka moments the first year; how little it took to get compliments. Coming from an academic world, you can present what you consider the best piece of research you have ever produced, and still come out of a seminar awash in waves of criticism. In the PR consultancy world it was obviously enough to answer your phone, arrive on time, do what you’re supposed to do (or a little more), all while smiling, in order to get positive remarks. Finding a rental TV screen, transcribing some notes and running them through the spell-check program, or foreseeing a practical need before it actually arose, were all endeavors earning judgments in the vein of “unbelievable,” “fantastic” or “incredible.” I had also noticed how this flattery was used for directive purposes; a gratifying phrase was often followed by yet another question of a practical task to be carried out. Nevertheless, I cannot say that this aspect of the PR work was not attractive, the feeling of being *adequately competent*. The same could be said of the free wine. We stay until they kick us out at midnight, and we continue out in the streets of Visby.

Day 4: The Diesel War

This is the last day Magnus and I work together. When I open the country’s largest newspaper that morning, the headline of the Economic Supplement reads: THE DIESEL WAR. The phrase is directly stolen from a trade magazine covering the media industry, which the previous day had

published a “scoop” on the bio-fuel debate. I google the original article, which Magnus had mentioned just briefly during the party last night. It comes up at once, and the original headline reads “Full Throttle in the Diesel War.” National newspapers are evidently not late to pick up this news on the issue, and spread it to a larger audience. The rather lengthy text describes the conflict in detail, and the focus is not on ethanol directly, but on the tax difference between bio-diesel (called Mk1) and normal diesel (Mk3). Whereas ethanol had lost its tax benefits, the tax benefits on bio-diesel had remained, although rates had been lowered. Now, two camps, represented by the two oil companies Preem and Statoil, continued to fight about the remaining tax:

Those who cherish tax benefits for Mk1-diesel are primarily Preem, producing Mk1-diesel in its refinery on the west coast. They have the support of the Red and Green parties, but also by the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (SSNC). On the other hand, as producers of Mk3 diesel or Europe Diesel, there is primarily Statoil but also other oil companies. They are supported by the right-wing parties, as well as transport companies.

(Resumé, Jul 6, 2011)

The earlier decrease in tax benefits was the result of a long, still on-going campaign headed by the second camp, headed by Statoil.

The article also mentions what PR agencies are working for the two oil companies. Here, things start to appear blurry to me. Statoil had long relations with the PR agency where the very passionate lobbyist from Green Motorists had been employed as a senior energy expert. Had he been active in the campaign for abolishment of tax benefits for ethanol? But why then, would he organize seminars where the car industry was invited to make pro-subsidy claims? When I interviewed him back in 2006, he was active both in Green Motorists and PR consultancy. Did he play out different arguments in different organizational arenas? Or had I simply missed something? Moreover, the refinery mentioned in the text is run by Preem together with a conglomerate of large foresting companies, and had been advertised as producing “the greenest diesel available” on the market during the week’s first seminar, at which Magnus had spotted Annika Åhnberg. When it comes to pine oil, is the whole forestry industry – a substantial part of the Swedish economy, traditionally mightier than the car industry – behind that lobby too?

The further into the text I read, the fuzzier the picture becomes. To an outsider, who is not familiar with energy policy, the whole situation appears confusing. Relationships, networks and activities all melt into

each other, they seem entangled. Initiatives on the individual, organizational and industry level seem to work in tandem, and I am no longer sure of who is a driving behind what issues. The article ends:

On Thursday Preem and Statoil meet face to face in two consecutive seminars in the ‘Environment News’ arena¹⁸. [...] So when the diesel war comes to Almedalen, an already combustible area risks being considerably heated up.”

(Ibid)

Just a few hours later, I find myself in Visby, aiming for the very same seminar that the article mentions. I can’t find Magnus, so I text him, and he replies; “I’m in the back!” I look around; he waves from where he’s sitting, next to someone he obviously knows. The panel discussion is, indeed, lively. Preem and Statoil go into opposition from the first minute. The panel is divided into exactly the two teams painted in the article; the conservative MP and Statoil argue against tax benefits, Preem and the Green party MP are for. The Preem representative is a woman, which is a novelty in itself. The whole seminar ends up with an inflamed debate of how to measure the CO₂ emissions from the two types of diesel; according to Preem’s way of calculating, the difference in emissions between Mk1 and Mk3 is considerable, according to Statoil’s commensuration system, it is negligible. These are the positions as the debate comes to a close.

Afterwards, Magnus and I sit down on a bench outside. Suddenly the image that had been so diffuse the other day is very clear to Magnus. I don’t know if he has adopted the analysis of the *Resumé* article, or if he has gained more information since we last spoke that he has not shared with me. I give him the Economy Supplement from the same morning. He asks if he can keep it. We talk about how the green party MP has shaped up her act considerably over the past few days.

“Yes, she was a bit school-girlish before, wasn’t she? By the way did you see my friend there, the guy I sat beside?”

Indeed, I had seen how Magnus shook hands with a man his age on the seat beside him, while leaving the seminar room. Magnus explains:

“There you can really speak of an ‘Almedalen effect’! He is my old study mate. He’s an administrator at Energy Gas Sweden,¹⁹ since like forever, and now he just said: ‘look Magnus, I really want to discuss something with you, let’s be in touch after the summer.’ So we’ll chat

¹⁸ *Sve. Miljöaktuellt*.

¹⁹ Industry organization for the energy sector.

then. That wouldn't have happened in Stockholm. It's incredible, really, the atmosphere here!"

Magnus is obviously inspired and continues to talk:

"Also, I met former Vice Governor of the Riksbank²⁰ in the harbor the other day. I know him, we have had children in the same school. Since he stopped working there, I know some of what he's been up to, we've been in touch sporadically. Now he's in the management of a large academic foundation. And when I met him the other day, he was like 'Magnus, I need your advice on a few things, couldn't we have a bite as you get back to town?' Then you know, when friends say that, that's an entry to an assignment.²¹ And that happens every day here. So it is hard to systematize the effects [of Almedalen] for sales. I mean you meet people. If the agency organizes some party, people come. Or you bump into people at seminars.

"So what do they want your help with?"

"Often it's about information flows, or an image. Managing their information, outwards or inwards.²² The whole thing with the media-training contract we got the other day started like that, with the boss there. He and I go way back, maybe 2005 or before. The first time we worked together, he called me. He was then head of a large state-owned historical museum. Somebody had told him, "Go to Magnus at Agency X." Then we had a very long meeting, off the record, maybe 3 hours, of just brainstorming. I did a major assignment for him last winter. That was a report²³; I think three or four people from us worked on it. And now there's this new thing."

We talk some more about the coming media-training project.

"By the way, there's something I haven't mentioned... But behind the scenes this week, we've have had another assignment going on, for American Express. This Monday when we had the phone conference, that's what we were discussing. On that project there are two other consultants and me. So that is also going on."

Actually, this is the third client project in Almedalen that just "pops up" during the week, in addition to the five he had mentioned during our

²⁰ Sweden's Central Bank

²¹ *Swe.* "ingång till jobb".

²² *Swe.* "inåt eller utåt"

²³ *Swe.* *utredning*.

first lunch on Day 1 (the others were the high-tech company that I overheard in his phone conversation, then the film seminar). Despite Magnus' seemingly exhaustive information-sharing – sharing his log-ins, time and thoughts with me – it is obvious that he is conscientiously managing the boundaries between what he is telling me and what he is not. It is difficult to tell, since I have followed him alone, and never seen him in interaction with other consultants. I ask:

“Otherwise, that is something that struck me, how you seem to be alone in these lobbying missions?”

“I see what you mean. On the report for the oil company there were actually more people involved, I think four. But yes... On the assignments involving more complicated political games, I tend to take them.” As we are talking, the Communication Manager from Preem comes up to us, together with her assistant. I get the feeling that Magnus and she have met before, at the least briefly. Why is she coming up to us? Maybe he has told her assistant that he wished to speak with her? Magnus says the name of his client, that they're entering the Swedish market, and that they share the same political goal as Preem, namely to lobby to keep tax subsidies for the local Swedish “green diesel” and ethanol. As usual, he pays her compliments on her contributions during the panel, and she had indeed done well. They continue talking about the conflict between them and Statoil, and then they proceed to educational background, stating that they are both chemical engineers but never worked with engineering per se. A professional tie established. As she turns to leave, she says: “I am really happy to hear your client employed someone for lobbying! It was about time.”

After she's gone Magnus says:

“She was so sweet²⁴ that girl! You know, when you meet ambitious women in technical companies, it's not uncommon that they are chemical engineers.”

We decide to go for a free coffee, offered by the client's nemesis, Statoil. Statoil's main argument against tax subsidies is that it unfair, as it thwarts competition and hence trade. To drive home the point, Statoil has rebuilt an electrical car into a coffee-serving wagon, serving free Fair Trade-labeled coffee. Witty. On the side of the wagon, the rationale for serving free coffee to Almedalen visitors is printed in large letters: “Because it gives you energy to modernize the diesel tax.”

²⁴ Swe. “Urgullig tjej!”



The Statoil Coffee Wagon. “#58. *Because it gives you energy to modernize the diesel tax.* Did you know that the diesel tax is being revised? Make sure your party votes for a competition-neutral and fair tax.”²⁵

Magnus and I each have a latte in takeaway mugs. It tastes quite horrendous, but Magnus is impressed by the initiative. In fact, he is so impressed that he even takes a picture of the wagon, to show his clients back at the oil company an example of “how the enemy works.”

We go back to the bench under the shade of the tree. As we are about to conclude the week’s collaboration, and Magnus himself had started the topic of contacts, I decide to ask the question I have been wondering about:

“How common is it that you use personal contacts? You hardly seem to use personal contacts within government for example. Is this a conscious strategy, or do you simply not have them?”

Magnus does not look offended, as he answers.

“I mean, in general, all people are Greek,²⁶ thinking: ‘I know somebody who...’. There’s no doubt about that. We DO have these contacts. We have extremely close relations to the minister of education for example. We know the minister of integration and gender equality very well. Same with the minister of culture’s assistant. But we rarely use them. I mean the clients who come to a PR agency, knowing that we know, say ‘Lars,’ they go wild. ‘Wow these people know Lars!’ they think. So it’s like with everything else, it works only because we believe in it. We allow ourselves to be Greek! See?”

He stops to think.

“But then I think using your contacts is quite inefficient really. I mean our [employed CEO] knows one particular government member ex-

²⁵ <http://statoilmedalen2011.blogspot.com/2011/07/nu-ar-kaffebilen-i-almedalen-kom-och.html>

²⁶ Referring to ongoing political-economical crisis in Greece summer 2011, in the media often explained by intricate systems of nepotism and corruption instead of meritocracy.

tremely well, they go on vacation together. I mean, could you possibly have a closer bond than sitting boozing together 5 weeks in Spain?!? But if our CEO then were to ask this guy, ‘Look, could you push for...?’... NO! I think it works exactly in reverse. I mean they have a private, personal relationship. Imagine then if we would do that all the time! No, no.”

“So it’s a bit like Peter and the Wolf? That contacts lose their value if you call on them too often?”

“Exactly, we have to save these contacts for when we really need help.”

As usual, I cannot tell if Magnus is only “post-rationalizing” because he is asked to answer the question, or if this is really so. I persist:

“But did you ever need it?”

“Look. I also believe in being decent with these things, and no, so far we haven’t needed it. You know, a close family member of mine is working for the ministry of social affairs, and I mean we meet all the time, every day, we’re building a summer house together now. Sometimes I ask her things, what’s going on here and here. And sometimes she says ‘I’m sorry, I can’t answer that’ and then that’s completely OK. And sometimes it’s not so important either which political color a person has, or where in politics you have worked. *All* politicians, regardless of party affiliation, know the political game, on their 5 fingers.”

Magnus is clearly done with talking about this, and moves on to hypothesize about the case at hand.

“Now with this assignment, I wonder... Should we take the Nordic angle? Or the political angle? Or go to the media? One way is to go in and then take the lead in non-profit issues,²⁷ but then we risk becoming a peeve of the Conservative parties, and being received in the wrong way...”

Magnus and I don’t reach any conclusion. We agree that I will e-mail him notes from the earlier seminar that he missed, and then we are through for this year. We thank each other. The atmosphere is cordial now after working together for two consecutive Almedalen years. Then I go off, quite exhausted after the past few days.

²⁷ *Sve.* ”Ideella frågor.”

Identifying Product Mechanisms: Visibilization and Amalgamation

The aim of this chapter was to see if there were new dimensions of understanding PR consultancy to be reaped from watching the product construction in practice. Despite the obvious difference between cases, and the limited nature of the observations, a number of themes emerge from the observations, both confirming and complementing the other analysis of PR consultancy products.

My observations from PR practice share several of the themes from Chapter 5: the importance of *keeping abreast* is one of them. The demand for novelty and analysis of the latest events in the “reality” of audiences seems to be insatiable. By constantly updating and synthesizing information from different sources, PR consultancy services create new versions of reality relevant and understandable to the client. This is what *Sports Inc.* wants from *Prod PR*, and what the Nordic oil company wants from *Strat PR*.

The simultaneous *management of both form and content* that emerged from the discourse analysis is present here as well. Throughout all activities, the utmost importance was assigned to the external appearance of things, locations and people. Both PR consultancies worked with transforming physical space; the atmosphere and dimensions testified to almost scenographic skills. In the denim case, *Prod PR* offices actually functioned almost like a stage; people, clothes and scenery changed rapidly and effortlessly, as in a theater. A similar effect was achieved in the church ruin, as *Strat PR* and its partners transformed an archeological heritage monument without a roof into a beautiful party venue for a day. Without a doubt, it seems to be of part of the product to be good-looking and to deliver good-looking events.

But it is not only the surface that counts; according to both themselves and the clients, both PR agencies are very active in coming up with ideas and messages. Unlike advertising agencies, for example, content is actively managed or formatted to fit a journalistic model, and multiple-channel messages and contents are constructed. This was also apparent in Perspectives texts, but it became even more obvious in my observations how everything and everyone should possess a minimum of stylishness, self-consciousness and beauty. One could imagine a difference between the market PR agency and a more lobbying type of Public Affairs operation, but no differences were observable. Lights, food, party venues, and online event invitations – everything was meticulously designed, and sometimes outright orchestrated, made to appeal to several senses simultaneously. But this was not enough; the *right* politicians should come to the party, the *right* arguments should be put forth in the panel debate, the *right* opinion leaders should be tied to each project.

The bike wagon used in advertising higher education in Almedalen is an emblematic example: the people and the materials were all “type-casted” for the spectacle; the seminar was in a central location attracting the right politicians, the teenagers pushing the wagon came from the right high-school program, they were media-trained by being filmed, and the wagon itself was of a unique design, painted in a harmonized color scale offering content-related services – all while offering a sensory experiences in the form of fresh strawberries.

A nearby theme is the *multiplicity of aims* from the Perspective texts series, as they were written to interest many different audiences and served multiple functions to the agency authoring them. In the ethnographic observations, this is reflected in fuzzy boundaries between what is marketing for clients, and what is marketing for the PR firm itself. It seems like an optimal “event” for *Prod PR* is one that can fill at least two aims simultaneously, marketing clients while marketing *Prod PR* itself. Making a drink-control campaign that also produces new products, dishes and contacts is another example of multiple aims. Statoil’s coffee wagon in Almedalen was another such example of multiplicity of aims; using the Free Trade insignia while giving away free coffee could be interpreted as many things simultaneously; showing Statoil as a innovative organization (inventing a new concept), a generous one (giving away coffee), a witty one (playing word games), caring about CSR (showing the Free Trade insignia) and a political one (conveying messages against thwarted competition for diesel).

These insights are all highly compatible with the results of the discourse analysis in Chapter 6. However, there were several insights that I would not have been able to retrieve without participating in the denim workshop myself. One such observation was how *time* was handled. I have already mentioned how the unpredictability of PR consultancies’ planning has puzzled me. In fact, entering the world of PR practice was for me as an academic an experience equivalent to stepping into the magic wardrobe of in the C.S. Lewis books of Narnia; when I came back to my office at the university, I realized that in just a few hours or days, more things happened than would happen in a normal month. The short deadlines and floods of these good-looking material outcomes (invitations, scenery, people’s participation) were especially impressive as they came about so quickly, as if they were produced out of thin air. On the other hand, each task lasted for only a tiny share of the normal time that I am used to putting into a task. Also, the level of robustness of plans was radically different from what I was used to; things would be called off or produced with little time, and a promise was more a letter of intent than an actual promise.

Another theme impossible to distill from reading texts only was the *emphasis on personal contacts*. In the texts, I saw how metaphors were drawn from discourses of personal or private life. After entering the practice of PR consultancy, I saw how the personal meshed with the public very quickly. Despite my feeling so unreservedly alien to the environment at the denim workshop, and the audience being so small, a personal link or contact emerged with almost everyone involved. All consultants are aware that they are managing contacts, and selling them: between clients and the media, clients and partners, between clients and other clients. The way Magnus with such ease re-established his own decade-old connection to the former minister of agriculture, whom he considered a “good person” was telling of this dynamic.

The *difficulty of evaluation* was also a new mystery that was not discernible in the interviews; the formal version in texts and interviews was that PR projects were evaluated in a rationalistic, commensurable way. By participating myself, I could contrast these versions with what I saw: interactions where neither client nor producer counted clips, or sales increases. In the cases I observed, other values were considered priorities, such as legitimacy, credibility and network contacts.

Finally, a conspicuous theme was the *effects of PR agencies' initiatives on other markets*, going beyond the mere PR of the clients' products. These effects ranged from highly expected to highly unexpected. Media training, for example, has a highly visible influence on corporate behavior, guiding representatives' talk in interaction with the mass media. But that the production of PR services should result in the invention and production of other commercial products (sponsoring the developing Sweden's most prestigious glassworks sell a new schnaps glass) was an unforeseeable effect of the glassworks market. And by pooling brands in showrooms, and arranging market-configuring events for several players on the Swedish “denim market,” *Prod PR* also helps to define the Swedish denim market. *Strat PR's* plans to come up with a draft of a new pension fund system, and to sell it to a large mutual pension fund, is another example of interference in the market for pension funds. The list could go on.

Consequences for Categorization

In summary, PR consultancy products consist of many things: beauty, guidance, contacts, and texts. The reasons for buying services seem to vary greatly. As such, PR consultancy services differ little from earlier findings that professional service firms are “ambiguity-intense” organizations which, in the absence of “real” products become more dependent on image management, personal contacts and rhetoric (Clark and Salaman, 1998, Alvesson and Johansson, 2002a). However, there are reasons

to believe that “PR consultancy” is potentially even more prone to ambiguity than other types of consultancy, such as management consultants, or HR consultants – reasons that may cause difficulties for legitimization, which in turn will amplify the complex relationship between ambiguity and categorization.

Studies of management consultants have shown how PSF commodification has come to center on management concepts; Balance Score Cards, Total Quality Management, Lean or New Public Management. However cumbersome the process of commodification, these are concepts that externalize knowledge from and codify professional knowledge (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001, Zbaracki, 1998, Heusinkveld and Benders, 2005). In PR consultancy, no such concepts are available. Instead, the common denominators of PR consultancy products, I will argue, are two: *amalgamation* and *visibilization*. These are patterns or forces so dominant, repeated and prescriptive of action that they actually resemble product-level *mechanisms*, sets of interacting social processes that together produce a foreseeable, and repeated effect on market dynamics (Hernes, 1998).

Amalgamation. At the core of both texts and practices is amalgamation, a process by which consultancies strive to mesh previously disparate things into one. In Chapter 6, non-economic and economic vocabularies were blended to form a new unity. In the observational data, this same pattern is reflected in the constant mix between types of actors, partners, clients and activities. Combining elements, people, organizations and even words from various spheres of activity seems to be an ever-desirable outcome. To connect producers of schnapps with chefs and glass designers was a chosen example of good PR consultancy. In the Public Affairs departments, consultants from a right-wing political background are consciously set to work with consultants with a left-wing background, to make a more competitive PR consultancy offer. PR agencies are providing the link between the media and corporations. By this dynamic, amalgamation is a goal in itself, and constructing that amalgam is the position of the PR consultancy.

In network theory, such advantageous positions have been called structural holes (Burt 1992 [2009]), and it is suggested that actors that provide connections between two networks will profit greatly from being the link (Raider and Burt 1996). The philosopher Carol Steiner (1999) argues that conformity, with bounded theoretical and jurisdictional frames, is incompatible with the PR industry, an industry she describes a heterogeneous, dynamic, and thriving on influences from other fields.

But this amalgamation is not merely a function of *mediation* between separate spheres of activity (Deephouse and Heugens, 2009). PR consultants are not only *carriers* (Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002b), *dip-*

lomats (L'Etang, 2006), or *brokers* (cf. Alvesson and Johansson, 2002b, Fleming and Waguespack, 2007). I will argue that PR consultancies are actor organizations, in the theatrical sense of the word. What is sold is not only their skill to promote the clients, but also the skill of *acting* in the theatrical sense of the word, taking on temporary roles of other organizations. A consultant should be able to take on the role of a journalist if this is needed, the role of a fashion blogger, the role of an advertising agency, the role of an in-house communication officer, or the role of a politician. Diversity is hence not external to the product; it is at the heart of it. Through the mechanism of amalgamation, such diversity is commodified and stabilized into products of "PR consultancy."

Visibilization. Visibilization is the second mechanism characteristic of PR consultancy. Borrowing the term from computer work studies (Engeström, 1999), I here let *visibilization* signify the purposive action of rendering things or practices visible. This mechanism has two dimensions: the visibility of the clients, and visibility of the PR consultancy itself. The visibility of clients is the end goal of many PR services, achieving credibility and legitimacy by mass media coverage. But in certain situations invisibility is preferred; non-disclosure policies of clients is standard practice among most large PR firms. PR consultant informants say that the need for corporate transparency is what drives demand for their products but also point out that such transparency must be carefully constructed and bounded.

The relationship between PR consultancy and visibility is equally complex. In certain situations their visibility seems to be superior to that of their clients; *Prod PR's* invitation to the Denim Workshop promoted the consultancy itself more than anything, and Strat PR's arranging the de facto party in Almedalen suggests the same. But visibility is not always desirable, as the ignominious situation of the T-com broadcast in Almedalen, revealed; we presented ourselves as T-com representatives to the *actual* T-com representatives, who did not recognize us. Moreover, the senior consultant that I followed in Almedalen gave an impression of full openness; sharing information, logins and his time with me. But he only told me of five client projects during the week, omitting three (or more?). In the denim case, I found that evaluation procedures that sounded rationalistic and institutionalized were not carried out in practice; in the specific case I observed, a number of reasons were invoked to justify why this specific process, along with other PR projects, were impossible to evaluate metrically. To write about the state of the world but omit the financial crisis, as in the perspective texts of 2008, is also symptomatic of such management of visibility.

A Semiotic Analysis of Mechanisms

The Alvesson quotation states that the fluid nature of professional service products will render fixed identities constructions unlikely:

...identity constructions are being backed up by rhetoric and images, at the same time as the fluid and fluctuating nature of persuasive talk, appearance and adapting to the whims and wants of clients undermine the prospect of, as well as the usefulness of, fixed identity constructions.

(Alvesson, 2001, p.883)

Perhaps such stability is not even useful, or even less desirable. A semiotic analysis of the two mechanisms characterizing PR consultancy, *amalgamation* and *visibilization*, supports this hypothesis.

Amalgamation is the logic of meshing disparate things into one, and is by definition a boundary-spanning process. Amalgamation strives to dissolve boundaries and to repeal separation. If crisp boundaries are a prerequisite for categorization in accordance with theory in Chapter 2, the mapping of cultural base values yields that *amalgamation* is anathema to *categorizable* (Figure 7.1).

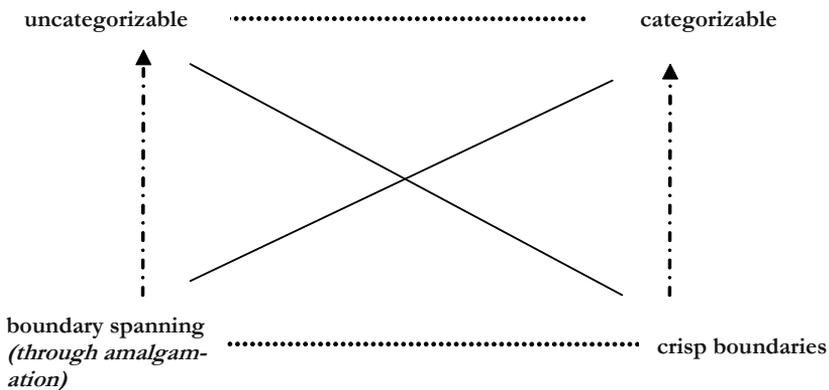


Figure 7.1 Semiotic Meaning Structure of Amalgamation

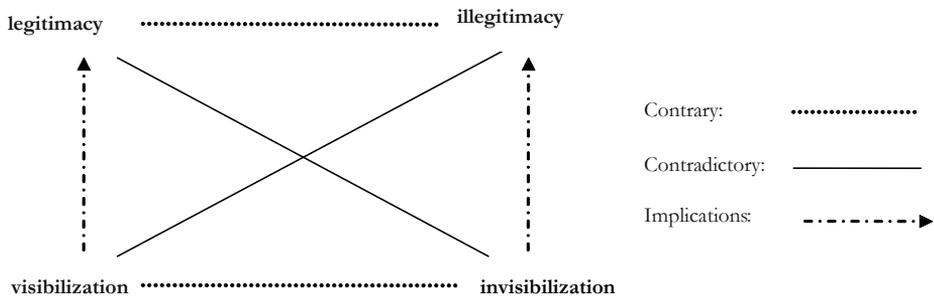


Figure 7.2 Semiotic Meaning Structure of Visibilization

Similarly, cultural assumptions, along with extant theory, stipulate a relation of implication between visibility and legitimation. Visibilization is the act of rendering something visible, but the logical consequence of this is that something is also rendered invisible; there is an ongoing parallel process of *invisibilization*. Critics of PR consultancy accuse it of being clandestine, carried out in secret. A structural mapping of the semiotic relations shows that invisibility, which is the semiotic “residue” of visibility, is contradictorily related to legitimacy.

As long as *amalgamation* and *visibilization* remain two central market mechanisms, these will continually push the market away from clear categorization, and away from legitimacy.

Consequently, full categorization, a process aiming at clear boundaries, and stabilized meaning across audiences and over time, will be difficult to achieve in such a market context. As Durand and Paoletta (2011) state, ambiguity is inherent in such categories.