Appeals to ‘the Public Interest’: How Public Relations and Lobbying Create a Social License to Operate

Preprint of Ihlen, Ø., & Raknes, K. (2020). Appeals to ‘the public interest’: How public relations and lobbying create a social license to operate. *Public Relations Review, 46*(5). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2020.101976

Abstract

An organization’s social license to operate depends on how it acts according to social norms, engages with stakeholders, and meets some kind of *public interest.* As will be discussed, the notion of the public interest is complex. Still, our analysis focuses on the process whereby the notion is communicatively constructed through negotiations where public relations plays an important role. The paper analyzes 58 qualitative interviews with public relations practitioners and lobbyists. We unpack the rhetorical strategies they use when they talk about the public interest and its relation to their organization. The practitioners primarily refer to positive economic consequences created by their employer. Frequently, they conflate the core activity of their organization with the public interest. The theoretical contribution of the paper is in demonstrating the versatility and dynamic aspect of ‘the public interest’ as a tool to create a social license to operate. Beyond the material topic of economy, the practitioners highlighted contributions in areas such as public health, democracy and the environment.

1. Introduction

Organizations are embedded in a society that can provide or withdraw a “social license to operate”. This license is often predicated on how organizations act according to social norms and engage with stakeholders (see e.g., Ihlen, Bartlett, & May, 2011b; K. A. Johnston & Taylor, 2018). One way of obtaining a social license to operate, is by meeting some kind of *public interest*. There is a long standing debate across both political science and public relations relating to this concept (e.g., Cochran, 1974; Douglass, 1980; J. Johnston, 2016; J. Johnston & Pieczka, 2018b). Among the early writers were Walter Lippmann (1955) who suggested that the public interest is “what men would choose if they saw clearly, thought rationally, acted disinterestedly and benevolently” (p. 50). Some have argued that the public interest is “those outcomes [that] best serving the long-run survival and well-being of a social collective construed as a ‘public’” (Bozeman, 2007, p. 17). This again, is contingent on public debate and can also be linked to procedural approaches: “the public interest is what emerges from deliberative processes that occur within democratically legitimated institutions” (Anthony, 2013, p. 128). Hence, debates and attempts to define the public interest is part and parcel of “the democratic game itself” (Bitonti, 2017, p. 161).

Jane Johnston (2016, 2017) has provided a historical and cross-disciplinary overview of the notion of the public interest. Looking at fields such as politics/public policy, law, media, anthropology, and planning, she urges public relations to engage with the complexity of the notion to reflect the “diversity and plurality” of the concept, its “process-orientation, discursive discovery, [and] community participation” (J. Johnston, 2017, p. 16). Crucially, public relations practitioners “should *engage* with the public interest in a way that society will accept” [original italics] (J. Johnston, 2017, p. 17). As already pointed out, herein, we argue, lies a link to the social license to operate. If organizations do not provide society something it values, they stand to lose their social license to operate.

The *merits* of the notion of the public interest have been discussed extensively in public relations (Bivins, 1993; Brunner & Smallwood, 2019; J. Johnston, 2016; Messina, 2007). Many have also pointed out that public relations do not *necessarily* work for the public interest or the community (Heath, 2006; Hobbs, 2020). Recently, attention has also been given to the communicative dimension of the public interest (Ihlen et al., 2018; J. Johnston & Pieczka, 2018b; Raknes & Ihlen, 2020). This paper elaborates on the latter by providing an *rhetorical* analysis of how a range of different organization types anchor their claims to be working in the public interest. That is, we go beyond pointing out that practitioners should or do talk about the public interest, and explore what it means for them in the sense of what *topics* do they use when they want to make the claim that their organizations are contributing to the public interest.

The following section briefly reviews some of the literature on the public interest, before turning attention to the communicative dimension of the public interest. We present our research questions and follow up with sections presenting first our rhetorical framework, and second our methodological approach. We have conducted 58 semi-structured qualitative interviews with public relations practitioners and lobbyists from businesses, work life organizations, NGOs, and public organizations. The section on methodology is followed by an analysis and a conclusion section where we demonstrate and discuss the flexibility of the notion of the public interest and call for closer scrutiny of how organizations lay claim to be working in the public interest.

2. The public interest notion

The public interest has been dismissed by some public relations scholars as being too elusive for practical purposes (Messina, 2007), while others have seen it as crucial to increase professionalism in public relations by defining it "in a way that society will accept" (Bivins, 1993, p. 126). In asking what it would take for public relations practitioners to serve the public interest, Stoker and Stoker (2012) put forward the following normative definition and implied program for action:

> The public interest is … defined as the process and the outcome of public relations professionals, acting with intelligent good will, to serve the individual and community interests that promote individual freedom, growth and development and strengthen harmonious interconnections among individuals, groups and publics. (p. 42)

In an overview of different approaches to the public interest, Johnston and Magda Pieczka (2018a) mention, for instance, the abolitionist, the normative, and the process approach (for a more detailed overview, please also see J. Johnston, 2016). In addition, Johnston (2016, 2017) and others (e.g., Weaver, Motion, & Roper, 2006) have also singled out the critical approach that investigates the notion in relation to self-interest and issues of power.

Regarding the attention to self-interest: It should be remembered that the public interest and the private interest are not antithetical by necessity, they might in fact be compatible (J. Johnston & Pieczka, 2018a; Mansbridge, 1998). Still, a number of studies have found that organizations downplay their immediate self-interests when arguing in public (Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Kimball, & Leech, 2009; Godwin, Ainsworth, & Godwin, 2013; Naurin, 2004; Oberman, 2017; Uhre & Rommetvedt, 2019). In a study of 172 sides tied to a range of different policy issues, Baumgartner and colleagues (2009) found that 62,8 percent "used an argument that the policy at hand promoted a widely shared goal, or, alternatively, stood in the way of achieving some broad appealing goal (e.g., public safety, improving the economy, improving rural health care)" (p. 133). It seems to be a reasonable assumption that this strategy is especially important when organizations engage in lobbying and political public relations that seeks to “maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with key publics and stakeholders” (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2019, p. 11). In short, in such settings, actors must be “dressed for politics”; arguments must be developed “with consideration of the perspectives and preferences of others” (Naurin, 2007, p. 117). Put differently, “self-interested socio-political claims of the organization” must be aligned “with a view of the public interest held by at least some influential segments of society” (Oberman, 2017, p. 484). Some researchers also point to an *increased* tendency to what they call “generalization of interests” (Rommetvedt, 2005, p. 757; Uhre & Rommetvedt, 2019, p. 233). The latter is defined as presenting “policy positions as matters of public interest, safeguarding not only their self-interest, but also the common good” (Uhre & Rommetvedt, 2019, p. 238).

In relation to the common good, it should be remarked that some scholars treat this term as interchangeably with the public interest (Cochran, 1974), while others have problematized the epistemological and moral difference between *good* and *interest* (Douglass, 1980). It is highly problematic to elevate interests as objective goods. Instead it is argued for a consensualist perspective, that is, a reliance on how what is “good for the whole people “ should be “interpreted by the people” [original italics] (p. 114). In one sense, the use of “the common good” draws on a paternalistic tradition where the notion is understood as “permanent and universal” (Simm, 2011, p. 560). Some have even labeled the term as “politically dangerous and manipulable” (Mansbridge, 2013, p. 9). It could, however, be contended that the notion of the public interest is just as susceptible in this regard. The latter concept is frequently *invoked,* but seldom defined in practical discourse. Thus, it has been portrayed as “an empty vessel, waiting to be filled with whatever values the user wishes. This lack of definition renders the concept vulnerable to capture by interest groups” (Feintuck, 2004, p. 2). Thus, there is good reason to attempt to evaluate public interest claims and provide a better understanding of how organizations argue.

3. The communicative construction of the public interest

With the publication of the edited volume *Public Interest Communication: Critical Debates and Global Contexts* (J. Johnston & Pieczka, 2018b), the public relations literature moved much further to analyze the role played by communication: “public interest is communicative, i.e. it comes into being through acts of communication that allow for the idea to circulate, to be used, to be argued and challenged, and incorporated into laws, regulation, policies and practices” (p. 23). To this end, the volume includes case studies showing, for instance, how faith and “God’s will” enters the climate change debate in the US and influences the wrangle over the public interest (Heath & Waymer, 2018). Similarly, another chapter shows how engagement and dialogue in the name of the public interest typically serve the agendas of elites (Dutta, 2018). The aim of the present study, however, is to analyze the root of the public interest arguments employed across a whole range of different organization types and cases.

Based on the above, it is assumed here that organizations will strive to define the public interest according to their own interests and use public relations to negotiate its meaning. When an organization is working on health issues, it might emphasize how it is contributing to *public* health improvement and that this is of paramount importance for society (Binderkrantz, 2019; Boräng & Naurin, 2015; Klüver, Mahoney, & Opper, 2015). With the expression communicative construction, we want to draw attention to the communicative *means* used to make such claims. More specifically, we want to understand “where” the practitioners find the arguments or reasoning used to bolster their claims. Thus, our first research question is as follows:

(1) What different rhetorical *topics* do the organizations employ when discussing the

public interest?

Some researchers have suggested that the arguments lobbyists pursue is just an effect of the kind of organization they represent and not so much a strategic choice (Daugbjerg, Fraussen, & Halpin, 2018; De Bruycker, 2016b). In this line of thinking, the arguments or rather, *frames*, are endogenous, meaning that an environmental organization will use environmental arguments/frames, a local authority will rely on regionalist arguments/frames, and so forth. As already pointed out, however, other studies have argued that there are commonalities that cut across organization types. These studies point to a strategic potential and confirm empirically the assumption that "all types of [interest groups and civil associations] increasingly argue their interest and policy positions in more generalised ways" (Uhre & Rommetvedt, 2019, p. 238). Other studies seem to point in the same direction (Raknes & Ihlen, 2020), also in different national contexts (Ihlen et al., 2018). This gives rise to our second research question:

(2) What explanatory power does organization type have for categories of public interest argumentation?

To answer these questions we rely on a framework of rhetorical theory (presented in the next section), and the mentioned 58 semi-structured qualitative interviews (the methodological approach is discussed in section 5).

4. A rhetorical approach to topics for argumentation

The theory of topics or *topos* (Greek plural *topoi*) or *commonplaces* (Latin *locus,* plural *loci)* is used in this analysis. These notions were offered to help a rhetor to structure arguments (Miller, 2000; Söderberg, 2012). The dimension of sharing underlined by the Latin term, indicates the importance of knowing which arguments others will accept and what values they appreciate. An analogy used in ancient Latin rhetoric pointed to how the skilled hunter who knows the terrain is likely to have the greatest success (Quintilian, trans. 1920/1996).

One way of approaching topics is to use the division between the material and the inferential operation (Gabrielsen, 2008). The rhetor must choose an angle (a material topic) and then search for a persuasive argument within that angle (inferential topic). The rhetor decides what he or she thinks is the most useful theme, be it economy, politics, or morals, and then whether or not it is advantageous to argue from definition, comparison, causal relationship, circumstance, or testimony (Corbett & Connors, 1999). This is not necessarily done sequentially, but the model holds promise for analytical purposes and can be used as a heuristic tool. When performing a topic analysis, it is recommended that "critics should start the criticism where persuaders start their persuasion" (Hart, 1990, p. 102). Thus, we argue, the critical potential of topic analysis lies, in the first instance, in helping to explore how rhetors choose and develop their arguments (Gabrielsen, 2008). Next, critical value is added by discussing why certain topics are chosen at the expense of others, and how they create meaning. Through the use of particular topics, a rhetor will create a particular understanding of the public interest. The rhetors will assess what they think is possible or what is fitting the situation they find themselves in (Söderberg, 2017). Here, the notion of *identification* becomes crucial, understood as what beget persuasion (Burke, 1945/1969, 1950/1969). This is based on a specific understanding of a basic human drive for identification, cooperation, and communication. The implication is the postulate that everyone wants to identify with someone and/or something and thus, that persuasion is predicated on whether the rhetor can create such identification.

> A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is *identified* with B. Or he [sic] may *identify himself* with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes they are, or is persuaded to believe so. . . . In being identified

with B, A is ‘substantially one’ with a person other than himself . . . To identify A with B is to make A ‘consubstantial’ with B. [italics in original] (Burke, 1950/1969, pp. 20-21)

To achieve “consubstantiality,” both the rhetor and his or her audience have to “die” and be “reborn” a little. For this to happen, a rhetor must sometimes yields to the audience’s values and opinions (Burke, 1937/1984, 1950/1969). Hence, the meaning of what the public interest is, is the result of a negotiation between the rhetor and the audience. The starting point for the rhetor, however, is in the attempt to pick a material topic that he or she thinks is advantageous to the cause of the organization.

5. Methodology

To get a good sample of public relations practitioners and lobbyists from different organizations, we focused on an annual democracy festival in Norway – Arendalsuka. In 2019, 1200 organizations participated here, the festival had 1244 events, and the political establishment was present, alongside 438 accredited journalists. The organizers estimate that over 75 000 visitors attended (https://arendalsuka.no/6240). Democracy festivals like this constitute an interesting laboratory for research as a high proportion of relevant lobbyists regardless of sector are gathered in one place. Over the years, Arendalsuka has succeeded in establishing itself as an important arena for lobbying (Raknes & Wollebæk, 2018, 2019).

We obtained the list of participating organizations and divided this into four categories: 1) private, for-profit companies (excluding public relations agencies and media houses), 2) non-governmental organizations (public interest organizations like Red Cross, and also patient organizations), 3) work-life organizations (unions and employer organizations), and 4) public sector (including ministries and directorates, public universities and research institutions). Only organizations with a national presence were included in the final sample. We assigned each organization a number and used www.random.org to pull 40 organizations in each category. We then approached the organizations in chronological order with interview requests aiming to get 15 informants in each category. The end sample consisted of a total of 58 organizations: 22 % businesses (13), 33 % NGOs (19), 24 % work-life organizations (14), and 21 % public sector organizations (12). The informants from the organizations were mostly female (52 %), many were members of a political party (57 %), and they had a much higher education level than the rest of the population (95 % versus 34 % at the university/university college level) (https://www.ssb.no/utdanning/statistikker/utniv). Quite a few had held positions in political parties (38 %) and indicated that their organizations had been part of public committees or the like (58 %). Thus, while Norwegian corporatism might be declining (Rommetvedt, 2017b), the informants and the organizations in this study were well integrated in the political sphere. Thus it is also likely that they had insider knowledge of what topics would be advantageous to create a social license to operate.

An interview guide for semi-structured interviews (see appendices) was developed and tested with one organization. We asked the interviewees to talk about a particular case were they were trying to influence politicians, which the arguments they used in this regard and what counterarguments they would meet. In anticipation of the latter, we then probed how they would respond to the particular accusation of only acting out of self-interest. Granted, this means that only the first type of answers (which argument are used) can be used to establish the existence or non-existence of public interest argumentation. We maintain, however, that our prime interest lies in *how* public interest arguments are made.

Four research assistants were trained in interviewing (for instance conducting role play portraying informant and interviewer) and discussing strategies mentioned in the methods literature (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017; Kvale, 1996).

During the five days of the democracy festival itself, the two authors and the research assistants conducted 53 interviews of approximately one hour. The team met for daily debrief sessions discussing practical challenges. Five interviews had to be postponed and were conducted at a later stage by a research assistant. All interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy by the informants. Some minor requests for changes were made, mostly concerning clarification of facts or removal of negative personal characteristics. All quotes that are used in the final analysis have been translated by the lead author.

Since the interview material was so large, we decided to code the transcribed interviews in NVivo. First, we marked the instances where the informants referred to the public interest (defined as "pointing to some common good as a basis for lobbying/a particular proposal; operationalized as what falls outside this scope, e.g., the interest of our members; common good vs. private good"). Granted, this coding yielded a wide range of statements that would be classified as public interest argumentation, but it does reflect the wide nature of this particular concept. As shown, and like another of the mentioned Norwegian studies (Uhre & Rommetvedt, 2019), the term "the common good" was used in the operationalization of the public interest. The corresponding Norwegian term used in the interviews was "det felles beste", rather than wqhat would have been the literal translation of the public interest – "offentlig interesse." In Norwegian, the latter term is typically used when the mass media expose personal relationships between elite figures. The claim is that this is literally of interest to the public. More importantly, we are not applying "the common good" in the mentioned tradition that sees it as something permanent or universal, rather we are focusing on the communicative construction of the notion.

Following an inductive approach, we grouped statements together thematically in code groups. This inductive round was first conducted by the lead author, then the second author read through the same statements, before the research assistant checked them again. Through this inductive approach we were then able to construct a thematic list mentioning for instance livable wages and the perseverance of the welfare state. Four major broad thematic categories were discerned: 1) Economy: job creation, etc., 2) Health: Public health issues, etc., 3) Democracy: disseminating knowledge, strengthening the public sphere, etc., 4) The Environment: Cutting emissions, etc.

Another research assistant then focused on the interviews assigned the eight highest numbers (14 %) to perform an intercoder test on the coding of material topics. Intercoder agreement was 87,5 percent, which is consider to be sufficient (Gwet, 2014). It could be argued that this approach from content analysis was necessitated by the large number of interviews. It certainly strengthened the more traditional, rhetorical analysis based on hermeneutical principles and qualitative interpretation, and allowed to quantitatively pinpoint some of the tendencies in the material.

6. Analysis

Meeting the public interest, rather than only looking out for its own interests can be seen as a prime organizational strategy to obtain a social license to operate. As mentioned, Rommetvedt and colleagues (2005, 2017a; Uhre & Rommetvedt, 2019) pointed to an increased use of arguments related to the public interest among Norwegian organizations, In our interview material, we found versions of the following line of thinking:

> The argument is that this is for the best of society, the mission from society, this is not something we want out of concern for our own goals, but because we as a community can

> contribute to a positive change. So, we have changed our focus away from us as a business to highlight that we are one [business] among many that are working to improve and digitalize the real estate market for you and for me, but also for our business partners. (Ambita, a technology company)

Unsurprisingly, given the structure of our interview guide, the idea that you have to think beyond your own interests and identify some common ground is articulated by many of the informants. The Head of Department of Policy and Academic Affairs of the economist organization Econa, states that, in general, "the public interest is an argument that resonates well" (Econa). The similar sentiment is expressed explicitly by both unions (Fagforbundet) and businesses (Orkla):

> When you are arguing in lobbying it is beneficial if you can show your counterpart or those that you are talking with, that you share some interest. Find a common ground that you can work towards, something that lets your counterpart think there is reason to what you are saying since he or she has an own interest in [seeing the proposal] come through. (Orkla, business conglomerate)

This then, can be seen as a crucial way to create identification, which is the most crucial rhetorical operation to achieve persuasion (Burke, 1945/1969, 1950/1969). Finding a common ground is highlighted, but where more precisely is this common ground located? This is the topic for the first research question.

RQ1: Rhetorical topics in public interest arguments

Asked about good arguments for lobbyists and accusations about pursing self-interest, the interviewees presented arguments that an inductive coding and analysis placed in four broad categories of topics (see Figure 1) .

PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

By far the largest of these is the material topic of **economy** which is used by over half of the organizations (53 %) when they rely on public interest argumentation. The oil company Equinor points to how the company creates jobs:

> The most important thing for this industry has probably been the social contract we have and our contribution to this. That is, we create a lot of jobs and contribute a lot of money to the national community and to the Norwegian welfare society. (Equinor, oil company)

A union highlights the vast economic value their members create for the Norwegian society, and, furthermore, that these members do not use the welfare services to the same extent as others since many of them work or live abroad most of the time (Sjøoffiserforbundet, the union for naval officers).

Some of the NGOs argue that through prevention or better use of human resources, society will save a lot of money.

> It is really costly for society if it does not care for children when they are small. … It costs billions, many are falling outside society. Or youth crime, we aim for prevention. Children become criminals, and then they have to sign up for welfare or they end in the prison system. (SOS Children, NGO)

The association for young people with disabilities maintains that “if you cannot make use of the resource among those with disabilities or chronic diagnoses, you will be presented with a huge bill in the future” (UngeFunksjonshemmede). Hjernerådet (NGO working to improve brain health) says it quizzes the politicians on how many work and school days are lost each year due to migraine.

At least one of the businesses argues that its service, in this example a digitalization process, can "save society for X billion NOK and save X number of human lives or hospital stays" (Accenture, consultant company). But also, considerations for how different markets can be improved and thus contribute to the overall economy, are aired. A real estate organization stresses how its market is embedded in society:

> This is larger than us, because it concerns the efficiency in the real estate market, in house building … Without a well-functioning society, no well function real estate market, and no business for us. The concern is regarding the entire system. (Eiendom Norge, real estate company)

The second largest topic category is **health** (33 %), which is not surprising given the number of health organizations in the sample. The nurses' association, for instance, points to the need for qualified health personnel, while Hopsiceforum argues that it provides people a chance to die at peace in their homes:

> This does not only concern offering a good service for those that are ill and are going to die. … This is an important event in people's lives and there are so many that are affected … married partner, parents, own children, neighbors, …. So, people are affected. They live on with the memories of how this happened or not. So, if we had grasped the importance, we had done this differently, no doubt. (Hopsiceforum, NGO)

Some of the organizations in this category also use the material topic of economy, highlighting the potential for savings for society if certain health issues are dealt with efficiently. In this category, we also include a public sector research organization that argues that it contributes to a type of crisis preparedness that is of national importance and should not be outsourced (Nibio, public sector research).

The third major type of material topics is **democracy (**32 %), which also includes how organizations underline that they help enlightening the public debate (the Holocaust Center, the organization Matprat that works to increase use of egg and meat, and The Norwegian Artificial Intelligence Research Consortium). The informant from The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV), puts it this way: "[Participating at Arendalsuka] is a very big part. ... to solve our social mission, [and serve] the democracy perspective I mentioned, to get the knowledge across" (NAV, public sector). In one instance, we also find what seems to be a reference to the research literature and the particular notion of "generalization of interests" (Rommetvedt, 2005): "So we are talking about the need to let more people into democracy, … You use the argument of generalization of interests and say that this is good for democracy. And it is" (LNU, umbrella NGO for child and youth organizations). The latter research publication has been on the reading list of several cohorts of students of political science in Norway, which may go some way to explain the informant's familiarity with this concept.

The fourth, relatively large category is related to **the environment (**23 %). A working-life organization emphasizes how they lobby politicians to introduce legislation concerning the reuse of plastic (KS-Bedrift, organization for public sector businesses). And, some of the businesses also mention particular environmental aspects:

> We are supposed to earn money, but we do see that the resources of the planet have already been spent this year and business and other commercial actors have to think differently for the future. … We have to find new business model than can help us earn money, but that will be more sustainable for people as well. Particularly the rental model, subscriptions for park suits, tents that can be rented and so forth. (Bergans, hiking clothes

manufacturer)

In addition to the above categories we find some smaller clusters of topics, including education (11 %) and childcare (9 %). Among the most interesting of the smaller topics is “Norwegian interests abroad.” An NGO identify how it is successful if it is able to argue that a proposal also provides “opportunities for Norway to take on a leading role internationally” (Utviklingsfondet, development NGO).

Taken together, we think the above points to the flexibility of the public interest argumentation – it is possible to argue from a whole range of different topics. We see that many of the organizations one way or another conflate the public interest with their core business, be it related to improving health, democracy or the environment. Most pronounced, however, we find the use of the material topic of economy, which in turn might be reflected by the view that this will carry most weight with politicians that have to prioritize between several worthy causes.

RQ2: Organization type and public interest argumentation

Next, we wanted to research how organization type could influence the choice of material topics. Granted, the numbers in each category are low so we will show caution when interpreting Figure 2. Still, we think it does illustrate some interesting tendencies in the material (the categories were not mutually exclusive, that is, an organization might argue for the public interest drawing on several different topics).

PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

The businesses in this particular sample typically argue using the material topic of economy (46 %), but the environment is also an important topic (38 %). As for the former, several businesses point to creation and perseverance of jobs:

> [We are frequently using] the argument about jobs. With all the dealers, and the whole network around, we are pointing to how 150 000 jobs are threatened. And this is important in the regional districts. (The National Association of Car Importers)

The largest material topic for the NGOs is health (63 %). This is also expected given the number of health NGOs in the sample and the propensity to conflate the core area of the organization with the public interest. Still, as indicated previously, many of the NGOs also use economic and democracy topics – both (47 %). As for economy topics, one NGO argues this way:

> We maintain that its profitable for individuals, for workplaces and society to prevent and handle the issue [of substance abuse] in a good way. (Akan, NGO working to prevent addiction issues)

The work life organizations, however, almost exclusively (79 %) favor the material topic of economy. The association for technical personal in Norwegian municipalities highlighted *efficiency* in this regard:

> Most [politicians] are preoccupied with savings, if it is possible to save money, that is interesting, and then, either through measures for efficiency or changes of working methods … that can make it less exhausting to work in a municipality which in turn secures that they are using less time on this and more time on other tasks. (Norsk kommunalteknisk forening, working life organization)

The public sector organizations, however, have a relatively even use of the four major types of material topics. Still, quite a few of them argued based on the material topic of democracy (42 %). As already mentioned, the Holocaust Center, among others, argues along these lines:

> I think it is important for society to know this [mentions facts from a report], this is the most important thing, that we can provide this knowledge; qualified, professional knowledge is important [for democracy]. (Holocaust Center)

On a whole then, we think these results further illustrate how the material topic of economy is crucial in lobbying when addressing the public interest also across different organization types. Equally important, we find that the different organizations seek to build public interest arguments pointing to the organization’s very core activity, for instance health for health organizations and contributing to democratic purposes for public sector organizations.

7. Conclusion

In using the rhetorical notion of topics as an analytical heuristic (Gabrielsen, 2008), we illustrated how the organizational actors in this sample relied on particular themes which they thought would provide them with an advantage in their lobbying efforts. As mentioned in the methods section, most of the interviews and their organizations were tightly interwoven in the political sphere, either as member of parties or participants in public committees. In other words, these practitioners were able to pick and tailor their arguments to what their target audience presumably would appreciate. Picking such familiar topics, the organizational rhetoric also contribute to create identification (Burke, 1945/1969, 1950/1969) and provide a fitting rhetoric for the situation (Söderberg, 2017). The strong role of the Ministry of Finance in the Norwegian political decision making process (Lie & Venneslan, 2010; Slagstad, 1998) is likely reflected in the choice of the economy topics. All organizations are seeking a topic that can make their proposals survive the state budget process where the Ministry of Finance has a key role. Given this, they frequently preferred the topic of economy, efficiency, savings or profits.

The second largest topic category was health, with democracy issues and the environment trailing behind. All these topics could be said to belong to areas related to common good and with values and goals that are widely shared. In addition, however, the material includes quotes relating to other issues of public interest, including infrastructure, working life, education, human rights, and Norwegian interests abroad. This, we argue, goes to show how flexible the notion of the public interest is (Feintuck, 2004).

Earlier studies have indicated that the choice of topics is dependent on group type, for example, economic groups will rely more on member-regarding argumentation while public interest groups rely more on public interest argumentation (Binderkrantz, 2019; Boräng & Naurin, 2015; Daugbjerg et al., 2018; De Bruycker, 2016a, 2016b; Klüver et al., 2015; Raknes & Ihlen, 2020). Thus, according to this perspective, organizations have a constituency which severely restricts their ability to argue from another material topos than the specific constituency they represent. However, our study underlines that the topic of public interest can be seen as a strategic choice that groups use in order to adapt to the circumstances of modern lobbying. A private company in our sample, seems most likely to choose the material topic of economy when arguing the public interest. However, the company can also choose the material topic of democracy, health or the environment instead if it deem this to be to its advantage. To this end, organizations might argue that *their very existence* contributes to the public interest or that a *particular proposal* is based on what is in the public interest.

In our sample, we find oil companies who claim to save the welfare state, unions who create economic value, businesses who save lives with new technology and NGOs who reduces the expenditure on welfare. Thus, one could easily come to the conclusion that strategic communication in modern lobbying campaigns violates the Habermasian norms of truthfulness and rationality and instead “disguise the interests it represents — cloaking them in appeals such as ‘public welfare’ and the ‘national interest’ — thus making contemporary debate a faked version" (Webster, 2014, p. 103). However, how one evaluate the result of the lobbying process is closely related to what kind of model of liberal democracy one adheres to (Bitonti, 2019). One way of using a Habermasian perspective is to see lobbying as a distortion of the norms of good deliberation and that strategic communication undermines true deliberation. From a more procedural or Rawlsian perspective, our findings could be interpreted in a more positive light. According to (Rawls, 2005) “political liberalism … does not try to fix public reason once and for all in the form of one favored political conception of justice (p. 451). Thus, the public interest is represented by the “rules of the game” (Bitonti, 2019) and the public interest grows out of the peaceful power struggle between different groups.

As formulated by Heath and Waymer (2018): “Deliberation, the essence of public interest communication, consists of individual statements that employ the power and suffer the weaknesses of language” (p. 32). In their discussion of how to create a more open and transparent lobbying system in the U.S., Drutman and Mahoney (2017) conclude that “the best we can hope for is that out of a vibrant public discussion, only the most convincing and well-supported claims are left standing. Whatever the ‘real reasons’ might be, what should matter at the end of the day is whether or not the policy can be justified of public interest grounds” (p. 307).

The question then arises, if the concept of the public interest is so flexible, does that not make it vulnerable for capture by powerful organizations who are pursuing their special interests? Even though “everybody” claims to be working in the public interest, a lot of studies indicate that only the loudest and most powerful voices are heard (Drutman, 2015; Gilens &

Page, 2014). Schattschneider (1960) noted that "the flaw in pluralist heaven is that heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent" (pp. 34-35). Mancur Olson's *Logic of Collective Action* (1965) argued that special interests will mobilize at a much faster rate than the collective interests. Olson's work inspired a string of studies arguing that lobbyists will "push government officials away from making decisions in the public interest" (Baumgartner & Leech, 1998, p. 86). In the Scandinavian context, the situation is described as "privileged pluralism" where the most resourceful interest groups dominate decision making and politicians need to be acutely aware of the interests that are excluded from influence (Binderkrantz, Christiansen, & Pedersen, 2014, 2015). Even at a democracy festival like Arendalsuka, financial resources and the number of political employees have a strong impact on the success of the organizations lobbying efforts (Raknes & Wollebæk, 2018, 2019).

Public relations scholars have argued that the public interest is a contested concept and public deliberation is necessary to decide what the public interest is and how it should be interpreted (Johnston, 2016). Bozeman (2007) argues that Dewey's idea of an open deliberative democracy could "expose private interests masquerading as public ones, and through this process of debate and deliberation the community could test alternatives, ascertain social consequences, and identify the most widely shared good among citizens" (p. 105). The problem is that the ideal of deliberative democracy and the practice of lobbying do not fit well together. Most lobbying campaigns does not get any media coverage at all and particularly business lobbyists prefer to keep their lobbying campaign out of the public sphere (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Culpepper, 2010). Thus, lobbying is a form of political public relations that easily can avoid public deliberation and is not given that capture or corruption of the public interest is exposed. Consequently, the question for public relations scholars should be to shed more light on how the public interest is communicated and put organizational claims of working towards the public interest under serious critical scrutiny.

In this paper, however, we have not answered the question of how effective the public interest strategy is or who wins or loses in the struggle to define the public interest thus providing the social license to operate. Further research should shed more light not only on how the public interest is constructed, but also how decision makers interpret and evaluate these claims. Furthermore, many of the instances of public interest augmentation raise the question of whether or not use of this type of argument is part and parcel of the self-identity of the organization or “just” a strategic move. Here, however, we see a parallel with the discussion regarding corporate motives for taking social responsibility (e.g., Ihlen, Bartlett, & May, 2011a). It is really hard to get at pure motives in empirical terms and confessions should not be taken at face value. In the end, the social license to operate will hinge on whether or not important stakeholders believe an organization to be a legitimate social actor that is beneficial for society.

Figure 1 ***Types of material topics (percentage; N=57)***

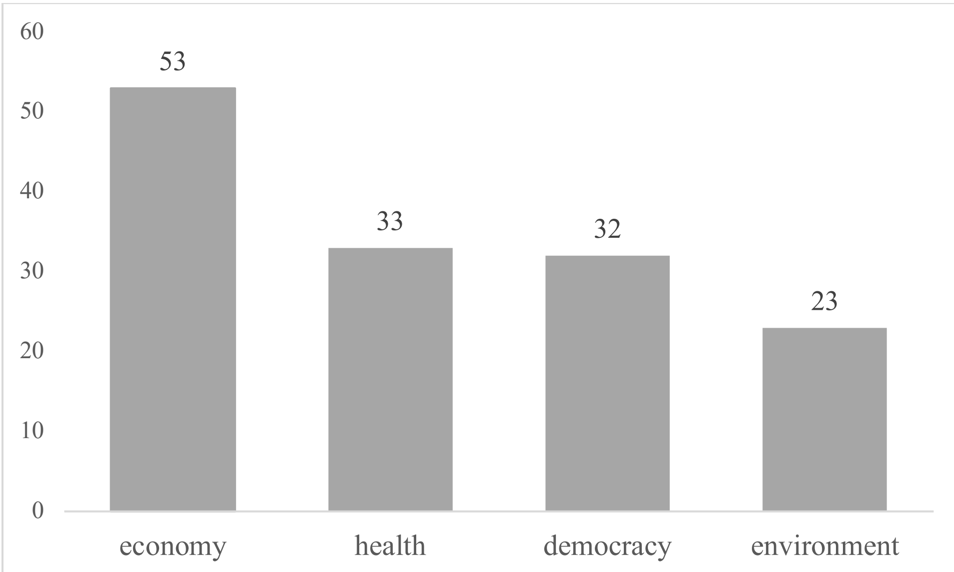
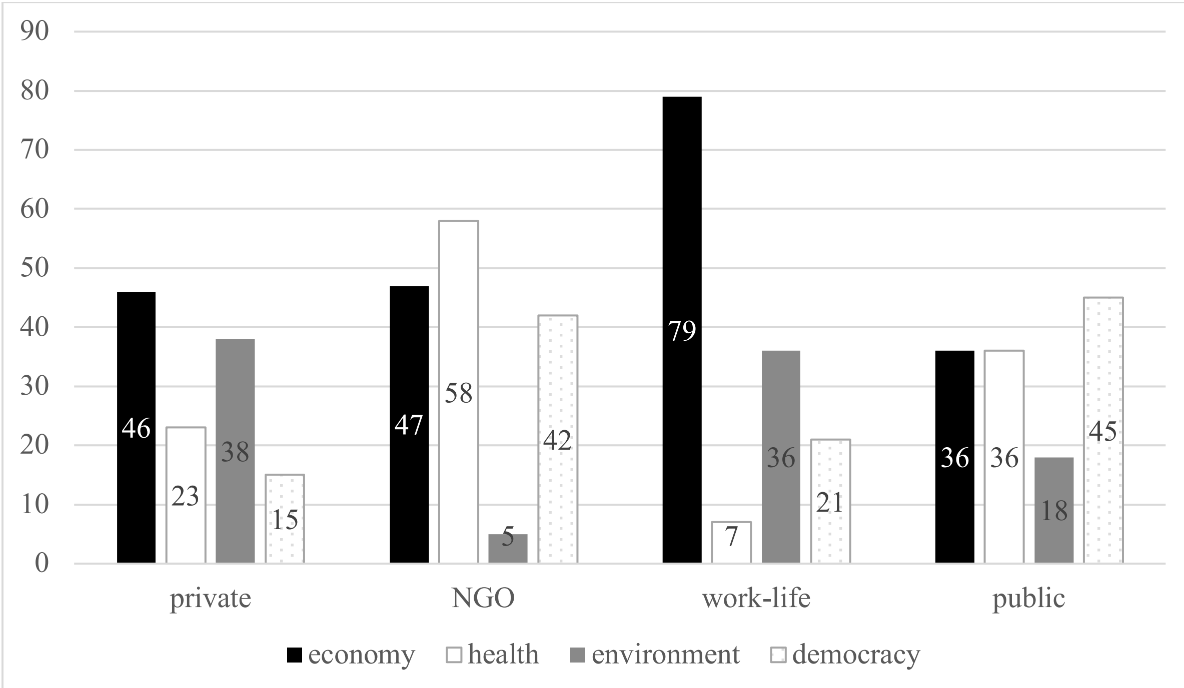


Figure 2 ***Organization type and material topics (percentage)****



* N = private: 13, NGOs: 19, work-life organizations: 14, public sector organizations: 11 (full list available upon request)

Appendix – Abbreviated Interview Guide

1. Could you mention a specific case that you are working with, what is it you want to achieve and what do you do to make this happen? It does not have to me something related to media coverage, but an issue that you have spent time on and that involved attempts to influence politicians.
2. –Recap—which other parts are involved in this issue? (allies, counterparts)
3. When you talk with these different people about why this issue should be perceived this way or that way. What is your most important argument?
4. What obstacles to you meet? What is the most important counterargument?
5. How do you handle potential accusations that you are only acting out of self-interest?
6. What is your most successful lobbying attempt?
7. When have you failed?
8. In general, what do you think are good arguments for lobbyists?

References

Alvesson, M., & Sköldberg, K. (2017). *Reflexive methodology: New vistas for qualitative research*: Sage.

Anthony, G. (2013). Public interest and three dimensions of judicial review. *Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly, 64*(2), 125-142.

Baumgartner, F. R., Berry, J. M., Hojnacki, M., Kimball, D. C., & Leech, B. L. (2009). *Lobbying and policy change: Who wins, who loses, and why*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Binderkrantz, A. S. (2019). Interest group framing in Denmark and the UK: Membership representation or public appeal? *Journal of European Public Policy*, 1-21. doi:10.1080/13501763.2019.1599041

Binderkrantz, A. S., Christiansen, P. M., & Pedersen, H. H. (2014). A privileged position? The influence of business interests in government consultations. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 24*(4), 879-896.

Binderkrantz, A. S., Christiansen, P. M., & Pedersen, H. H. (2015). Interest group access to the bureaucracy, parliament, and the media. *Governance, 28*(1), 95-112.

Bitonti, A. (2017). Public affairs and political philosophy. In P. Harris & C. S. Fleischer (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of International corporate and public affairs* (pp. 151-164). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.

Bitonti, A. (2019). Where it all starts: Lobbying, democracy and the Public Interest. *Journal of Public Affairs*.

Public relations, professionalism, and the public interest. 117-126 (1993).

Boräng, F., & Naurin, D. (2015). ‘Try to see it my way!’Frame congruence between lobbyists and European Commission officials. *Journal of European Public Policy, 22*(4), 499-515.

Bozeman, B. (2007). *Public values and public interest: Counterbalancing economic individualism*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

Brunner, B. R., & Smallwood, A. M. K. (2019). Prioritizing public interest in public relations: Public interest relations. *Public Relations Inquiry, 8*(3), 245-264.

Burke, K. (1937/1984). *Attitudes towards history* (3 ed.). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Burke, K. (1945/1969). *A grammar of motives*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Burke, K. (1950/1969). *A rhetoric of motives*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Cochran, C. E. (1974). Political science and "The Public Interest". *The Journal of Politics, 36*(2), 327-355. doi:10.2307/2129473

Corbett, E. P. J., & Connors, R. J. (1999). *Classical rhetoric for the modern student* (4 ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.

Culpepper, P. D. (2010). *Quiet politics and business power: Corporate control in Europe and Japan*: Cambridge University Press.

Daugbjerg, C., Fraussen, B., & Halpin, D. (2018). Interest groups and policy capacity: Modes of engagement, policy goods and networks. In X. Wu, M. Howlett, & M. Ramesh (Eds.), *Policy capacity and governance* (pp. 243-261). Cham, Switzerland: Springer.

De Bruycker, I. (2016a). Framing and advocacy: a research agenda for interest group studies. *Journal of European Public Policy, 24*(5), 775-787. doi:10.1080/13501763.2016.1149208

De Bruycker, I. (2016b). Pressure and Expertise: Explaining the Information Supply of Interest Groups in EU Legislative Lobbying. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies, 54*(3), 599-616. doi:10.1111/jcms.12298

Douglass, B. (1980). The common good and the public interest. *Political Theory, 8*(1), 103-117.

Drutman, L. (2015). *The business of America is lobbying: How corporations became politicized and politics became more corporate*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Drutman, L., & Mahoney, C. (2017). On the advantages of a well-constructed lobbying system: toward a more democratic, modern lobbying process. *Interest Groups & Advocacy, 6*(3), 290-310. doi:10.1057/s41309-017-0020-2

Dutta, M. J. (2018). Communicating public engagement, public interest and participation: Culturally centring community voices. In J. Johnston & M. Pieczka (Eds.), *Public interest communication: Critical debates and global contexts* (pp. 52-71). London: Routledge.

Feintuck, M. (2004). *'The Public Interest' in regulation*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gabrielsen, J. (2008). *Topik: Ekskursioner i den retoriske toposlære [Topos: Excursions in the rhetorical teaching of topos]*. Ödåkra, Sverige: Retorikforlaget.

Gilens, M., & Page, B. I. (2014). Testing theories of American politics: Elites, interest groups, and average citizens. *Perspectives on Politics, 12*(03), 564-581. doi:10.1017/s1537592714001595

Godwin, R. K., Ainsworth, S. H., & Godwin, E. K. (2013). *Lobbying and policymaking: The public pursuit of private interests*. London, England: CQ Press.

Gwet, K. L. (2014). *Handbook of inter-rater reliability: The definitive guide to measuring the extent of agreement among raters*. Gaithersburg, MD: Advanced Analytics, LLC.

Hart, R. P. (1990). *Modern rhetorical criticism*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman/Little, Brown Higher Education.

Heath, R. L. (2006). Onward into more fog: Thoughts on public relations' research directions. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 18*(2), 93-114.

Heath, R. L., & Waymer, D. (2018). Terministic dialectics of individual and community agency: Co-creating and co-enacting public interest. In J. Johnston & M. Pieczka (Eds.), *Public interest communication: Critical debates and global contexts* (pp. 32-51). London: Routledge.

Hobbs, M. J. (2020). Conflict ecology: Examining the strategies and rationales of lobbyists in the mining and energy industries in Australia. *Public Relations Review, 46*(2). doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2019.101868

Ihlen, Ø., Bartlett, J., & May, S. (2011a). Conclusions and take away points. In Ø. Ihlen, J. Bartlett, & S. May (Eds.), *Handbook of communication and corporate social responsibility* (pp. 550-571). Oxford, UK: Wiley Blackwell.

Ihlen, Ø., Bartlett, J., & May, S. (Eds.). (2011b). *Handbook of communication and corporate social responsibility*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Ihlen, Ø., Raknes, K., Somerville, I., Valentini, C., Stachel, C., Lock, I., . . . Seele, P. (2018). Framing "the Public Interest": Comparing public lobbying campaigns in four European states. *Journal of Public Interest Communications, 2*(1).

Johnston, J. (2016). *Public relations and the public interest*. New York: Routledge.

Johnston, J. (2017). The public interest: A new way of thinking for public relations? *Public Relations Inquiry, 6*(1), 5-22.

Johnston, J., & Pieczka, M. (2018a). Public interest communication: A framework for systemic inquiry. In J. Johnston & M. Pieczka (Eds.), *Public interest communication: Critical debates and global contexts* (pp. 9-31). London: Routledge.

Johnston, J., & Pieczka, M. (Eds.). (2018b). *Public interest communication: Critical debates and global contexts*. London: Routledge.

Johnston, K. A., & Taylor, M. (Eds.). (2018). *Handbook of communication engagement*. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell.

Klüver, H., Mahoney, C., & Opper, M. (2015). Framing in context: How interest groups employ framing to lobby the European Commission. *Journal of European Public Policy, 22*(4), 481-498. doi:10.1080/13501763.2015.1008550

Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousands Oak, CA: Sage.

Lie, E., & Venneslan, C. (2010). *Over Evne: Finansdepartementet 1965-1992*: Pax.

Lippmann, W. (1955). *Essays in the public philosophy*. London: Transaction Publishers.

Mansbridge, J. (1998). On the contested nature of the public good. In W. Powell & E. Clemens (Eds.), *Private action and the public good* (pp. 3-19).

Mansbridge, J. (2013). Common Good. *International Encyclopedia of Ethics*. doi:doi:10.1002/9781444367072.wbiee608

10.1002/9781444367072.wbiee608

Messina, A. (2007). Public relations, the public interest and persuasion: An ethical approach. *Journal of Communication Management, 11*(1), 29-52. doi:10.1108/13632540710725978

Miller, C. R. (2000). The Aristotelian topos: Hunting for novelty. In A. G. Gross & A. E. Walzer (Eds.), *Rereading Aristotle’s rhetoric* (pp. 130-146). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinios University Press.

Naurin, D. (2004). *Dressed for Politics: Why increasing transparency in the European Union will not make lobbyists behave any better than they already do* (PhD), University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden.

Oberman, W. D. (2017). Lobbying resources and strategies. In P. Harris & C. S. Fleischer (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of International corporate and public affairs* (pp. 483-497). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.

Olson, M. (1965). *The logic of collective action: Public goods and the theory of groups*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Quintilian. (trans. 1920/1996). *Institutio oratoria: Books I-XII* (H. E. Butler, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Raknes, K., & Ihlen, Ø. (2020). Self-interest in new wrapping: “Appeal to the public interest” as a topos in lobbying. *Journal of Public Affairs, 20*(2), e2059. doi:10.1002/pa.2059

Raknes, K., & Wollebæk, D. (2018). *Deltakelse teller, ressurser avgjør – Hvem vinner og hvem taper på Arendalsuka? [Participation counts, resources decide – Who wins and who looses at Arendalsuka]*. Retrieved from Oslo, Norway:

Raknes, K., & Wollebæk, D. (2019). *Arendals-undersøkelsen 2018: Dagsorden og innflytelse på Norges største demokratifestival [The Arendal Report 2018: Agenda and influence on the largest democracy festival in Norway]*. Retrieved from Oslo, Norway:

Rawls, J. (2005). *Political liberalism*: Columbia University Press.

Rommetvedt, H. (2005). Norway: Resources count, but votes decide? From neo-corporatist representation to neo-pluralist parliamentarism. *West European Politics, 28*(4), 740-763. doi:10.1080/01402380500216674

Rommetvedt, H. (2017a). *Politikkens allmenngjøring: Stortinget, regjeringen og de organiserte interessene i et nypluralistisk demokrati [The generalization of interests: The Storting, the government and the organized interests in a neo-pluralistic democracy]* (3 ed.). Bergen: Fagbokforlaget.

Rommetvedt, H. (2017b). Scandinavian corporatism in decline. In O. Knutsen (Ed.), *The Nordic Models in Political Science* (pp. 171-192). Stavanger, Norway.

Schattschneider, E. E. (1960). *The semisovereign people: A realist's view of democracy in America*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Simm, K. (2011). The concepts of common good and public Iinterest: From Plato to biobanking. *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics, 20*(4), 554-562. doi:10.1017/S0963180111000296

Slagstad, R. (1998). *De nasjonale strateger*: Pax.

Söderberg, M. W. (2012). *Topos som meningsskapare [Topos as meaning creator]*. Ödåkra, Sverige: Retorikforlaget.

Söderberg, M. W. (2017). *Aristotles retoriska topolära: En verktygsrepertoar för fronesis [The Aristotelian rhetorical perspective on topoi: A tool box for phronesis]*. Huddinge: Södertörns högskola.

Stoker, K., & Stoker, M. (2012). The Paradox of Public Interest: How Serving Individual Superior Interests Fulfill Public Relations' Obligation to the Public Interest. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics, 27*(1), 31-45. doi:10.1080/08900523.2012.636242

Strömbäck, J., & Kiousis, S. (2019). Defining and mapping the field of theory and research on political public relations In J. Strömbäck & S. Kiousis (Eds.), *Political public relations: Principles and applications* (2 ed.). New York: Routledge.

Uhre, A. N., & Rommetvedt, H. (2019). Civil associations and interest groups in the policy-making process: pluralisation and generalisation of interests. *Interest Groups & Advocacy, 8*(2), 233-253. doi:10.1057/s41309-019-00049-w

Weaver, K., Motion, J., & Roper, J. (2006). From propaganda to discourse (and back again): Truth, power, the public interest and public relations. In J. L'Etang & M. Pieczka (Eds.), *Public relations: Critical debates and contemporary practice* (pp. 7-21). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Webster, F. (2014). *Theories of the information society*: Routledge.